

Policy Briefing

Tackling Workplace Sexual Harassment

Employment is believed to be a crucial avenue for women's empowerment, yet widespread workplace sexual harassment undermines this in many countries. Young and unmarried women from poor backgrounds are particularly at risk, but workplace sexual harassment is often overlooked in debates on decent jobs for youth. Based on case study research with factory and domestic workers in Bangladesh and Uganda, this briefing explains how social and gender norms constrain young women's voices and agency in response to sexual harassment. It offers recommendations towards developing the laws, mechanisms and culture needed to reduce workplace sexual harassment and empower young women in their work.

Key messages

Language is essential for challenging sexual harassment, but social and gender norms prevent young women from articulating transgressive behaviour by men.

- Jobs in factories are precarious and unsafe for many young women. Factories rarely have effective sexual harassment policies or reporting mechanisms.
- Informal workers in isolated conditions, such as domestic workers, are highly vulnerable. They may lack support networks and often distrust or have no avenues to report sexual harassment.
- Governments must take action to encourage female representation and involvement at all levels. This can be achieved by extending labour laws to informal workers, training police forces, and supporting private firms to implement sexual harassment policies and complaint mechanisms.
- Strategies to mitigate sexual harassment need to include campaigns to tackle social and gender norms.

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While agro-processing factories are formal, most jobs are informal and precarious. Workers lack contracts and security and workplace sexual harassment policies are ineffective.

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Manifestations of workplace sexual harassment

Workplace sexual harassment refers to a range of inappropriate practices with implicit or explicit sexual undertones regarding women's bodies, usually done by men, which happen as the result of power and gender hierarchies. Practices range from comments and jokes to touching, sexual advances and groping, to severe forms like assault and rape. Workplace sexual harassment has serious detrimental physical and mental health effects on women and negatively affects firm productivity.

Our study examined how job informality, language and social norms influence women's voice and agency in response to workplace sexual harassment. The study involved over 100 young factory workers in agro-processing firms and informal domestic workers in Uganda and Bangladesh. All women interviewed had experienced sexual harassment at work. Co-workers harassed women because they are unlikely to face repercussions. In Uganda, employers, supervisors and managers used their power over job retention, promotion, salaries, production quota, and shifts to harass young women. Our research with domestic workers showed that their isolated working conditions exacerbate risks to severe forms of sexual harassment, including rape. They were also more vulnerable due to starker class differences and their limited education.

Sexual harassment in formal and informal jobs

Findings from our research contradict the existing idea that formal employers offer more protection and security. Agro-processing firms can drive economic growth and promote job creation for large numbers of unskilled workers. While agro-processing factories are formal, most jobs are informal and precarious: workers lack contracts and security, earn little and are paid infrequently.

A key difference between the two countries was that factories were safer in Bangladesh than in Uganda. In Uganda, factories lacked

functioning workplace sexual harassment policies and mechanisms to report incidents. Transgressive behaviour by men was rarely discouraged or punished. The best women can do is devise their own strategies to avoid sexual harassment: they adjust their dress, the way they talk and behave in the presence of men, and avoid working alone. It was the collective nature of factory work that offered some protection against harassment, not measures from the employer.

In Bangladesh, social norms restricting interactions between men and women have infused the organisational policies and culture that prevent sexual harassment to some extent. Factories were concerned about their reputation and gender norms influenced supervisors to protect the honour of young women. Some firms had policies on gender-segregated workspaces and canteens, and prohibited socialising between women and men. Women had learnt about reporting harassment in their induction. Male managers and older female workers advised young women how to prevent harassment and report to them, and supervisors had reprimanded men. However, many women still experienced harassment, especially in outdoor spaces.

Informal workers are not just more vulnerable to harassment, they are also unaware of avenues for reporting sexual harassment and seeking redressal, or distrust such institutions. Domestic workers often lack support networks and access to information and services. In Uganda, some domestic workers were not allowed to own phones and migrant workers lived far away from their families.

The role of social and gender norms

Social and gender norms shape existing ideas about what are the appropriate behaviours for men and women around sexuality and interacting with the opposite sex. They also influence ideas about what forms of behaviour constitute workplace sexual harassment. The findings show that many young women believe that only rape will be

recognised as an act of sexual harassment. Less severe forms are experienced as 'bad acts', threatening and unpleasant, but harder to act against as they are impossible to prove. Most definitions describe sexual harassment as unwanted and unacceptable practices, but our study shows that less severe forms of harassment like jokes and comments have been 'naturalised' as part of everyday life. Existing social and gender norms normalise transgressive behaviours by men. While uncomfortable, young women sometimes find it hard to describe what is going on, especially if they are unmarried and very young.

Social and gender norms also influence women's voice and agency: whether women articulate their experiences of sexual harassment and how, and whether they take any further action to seek redress. Social norms around purity and honour in Bangladesh, for instance, restricted women's freedom to speak about their bodies and male attention. In Uganda, norms concerning marriage prevented women from taking action. The study encountered one case of a young domestic worker who experienced attempted rape by her employer. While a severe case of sexual harassment, she decided not to report him because it would be considered inappropriate to 'disturb his marriage'.

Language, voice and action

Language is essential for voicing and challenging sexual harassment. Our study shows how social and gender norms constrain young women from articulating transgressive and inappropriate behaviour by men:

- Young women with limited education and life experience lack a vocabulary to talk about their bodies, sex, and acts like sexual harassment.
- Most young women do not use explicit language or deliberately use euphemisms when explaining their experiences to employers, police and authorities. This can result in the trivialising of certain acts if actors are unwilling to understand

and respond. However, authorities and employers may guess what women mean if they are willing to 'hear' what has been said.

- Young women with more awareness about sexual harassment – due to education or exposure to media – used relatively more explicit language when among peers. They may use slang or euphemisms that are understood. This suggests it may be possible to create safe spaces in which sexual harassment can be discussed in accessible language.

Given the major barriers to speaking about sexual harassment, it is not surprising that few young women take further action and report incidents. Most young women will tell someone about an incident but mainly for moral support rather than taking action on the perpetrator.

- In all cases where women reported incidents to seek redress, they had first received support from friends, family members or women they trust. Moral support was essential for their self-confidence.
- For women working in isolated working conditions – like domestic workers – reporting sexual harassment would greatly depend on the opportunities for having contact outside of the household.
- Young women and their families distrust the police. Anticipating they need to pay informal fees and bribes to file a case, most women will not take this step. Women felt that police and authorities are unwilling to respond. Local authorities are often men who reproduce existing social norms, often dismissing their cases, blaming women, or telling them to be 'forgiving'.
- Due to the lack of understanding and responsiveness of formal institutions, young women relied on family members to settle matters informally with employers. Even when reporting to community actors and firms, sexual harassment is 'resolved' informally.

Policy recommendations

Effective workplace policies are as important as supporting the voice and empowerment of female workers to engage with firms and policy actors. Current employment and private sector interventions ignore the need to influence private and government actors to improve safeguarding measures. They fail to strengthen young women's civic and political capacities, which are essential for negotiating safety at work. Governments should:

- **Ratify the International Labour Organization's Convention on Eliminating Violence and Harassment** No. 190 and Recommendation R206, which apply to both formal and informal workers.
- **Train police forces** to handle cases in a gender-sensitive manner with particular emphasis on the age of complainants.
- **Organise more inter-departmental coordination** between labour and gender ministries to design and implement sexual harassment policies and enforce them through labour inspections.
- **Extend labour laws to informal workers** and strengthen provisions for ensuring workplace safety, including avenues for

reporting cases of sexual harassment.

- **Offer support to firms** to design and implement sexual harassment policies and safe complaint mechanisms, encourage female leadership, and organise women workers committees or female representation in various workplace committees. This is particularly important in sectors likely to generate jobs.
- **Involve youth and women organisations** in social dialogues between private firms, employees and worker organisations, and government actors, ensuring workplace sexual harassment is on the agenda.
- **Integrate strategies for building knowledge** of labour laws and civic skills into employment programmes. This can include building self-confidence and negotiation skills, and training employees in collective action.
- **Develop ways to overcome taboos** and promote talking about sexual harassment in accessible language.
- **Work with civil society** to devise long-term campaigns tackling gender norms that normalise sexual harassment, involving both men and women. ■

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Further reading

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