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Research Report

The Gendered Price of Precarity: Voicing and Challenging Workplace Sexual Harassment

Volume 2022 Number 88

**Marjoke Oosterom, Lopita Huq, Victoria Flavia Namuggala,
Sohela Nazneen, Prosperous Nankindu, Maheen Sultan,
Asifa Sultana and Firdous Azim**

June 2022

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Summary

There is a strong belief that employment is a crucial avenue for the empowerment of young women, through income, greater autonomy, and bargaining power within the family. However, experiences of workplace sexual harassment undermine these potential gains. This qualitative study among agro-processing factory workers and domestic workers in Uganda and Bangladesh demonstrates that sexual harassment is widespread in both formal and informal workplaces, while domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to its most severe forms. Women's agency to challenge harassment is severely constrained by social and gender norms. Most find that the best possible strategy is to avoid and prevent physical forms of sexual harassment from happening. Language is essential for voicing and challenging sexual harassment, but the study shows that social and gender norms constrain young women in articulating transgressive and inappropriate behaviour by men. Many women hide detail, deliberately use euphemisms, and even lack a vocabulary to explain what happened to them, ultimately limiting opportunities for redressal. At the same time, formal institutions are failing young female workers. Local authorities in both countries reproduced prejudice about women 'inviting' sexual attention, whereas the police are generally distrusted because of corruption and the need for bribes. To tackle sexual harassment in the workplace, multipronged strategies are needed that target employers and government actors. The right policies and adequate safeguarding and reporting mechanisms need to be implemented, whereas programmes need to support women to help them gain the confidence to speak about sexual harassment and support (collective) action. Longer-term strategies need to address gender norms that condone sexual harassment.

Keywords

gender; sexual harassment; agro-processing; factory workers; domestic workers; women's empowerment; informality; Uganda; Bangladesh.

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Executive summary

There is a strong belief that employment is a crucial avenue for the empowerment of young women, through income, greater autonomy, and bargaining power within the family. However, experiences of workplace sexual harassment undermine these potential gains. Sexual harassment in the world of work undermines women's confidence and sense of dignity; has severe negative psychological and health impacts; and for many it results in losses related to job opportunities, promotions, or reputation. This report presents the analysis of experiences of and responses to workplace sexual harassment among young, female domestic workers and factory workers in urban areas of Uganda and Bangladesh.

This qualitative study focused on how **language, gender norms, and informality** in work arrangements influence young women's voice and agency in response to workplace sexual harassment. The study contributes to understanding variation in the forms of harassment and the barriers and opportunities for voicing across formal and informal workplaces; and to a deeper understanding of the limiting role of gender norms on young women's expressions and actions when confronted with sexual harassment.

The findings show that sexual harassment is widespread in both formal and informal workplaces, while domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to its most severe forms, assault and rape, due to their lone working conditions. The findings also show that women are not passive victims, but that their agency is severely constrained by social and gender norms. Most find that the best possible strategy is to avoid and prevent physical forms of sexual harassment from happening, while having to put up with its less severe forms. Social and gender norms invoke concerns of shame and family honour, whereas societal actors blame women when they are confronted with sexual harassment and thus sustain impunity for men.

Concerning the role of informality, the findings contradict the existing idea that formal jobs will offer more protection and security. In Uganda, firm-based mechanisms were dysfunctional and did not adequately protect or support women. In Bangladesh, however, factories and managers were concerned about their reputation. Patriarchy and gender norms concerned with protecting the honour of young women infused the implementation of firm policies, for instance by having gender-segregated workspaces and canteens. This discouraged sexual harassment within factories to some extent, and supervisors and managers had reprimanded harassers. In both countries, the fact that women worked in groups offered some protection too, as lone working situations were limited.

The study concludes that language is essential for voicing and challenging sexual harassment, but that social and gender norms constrain young women in articulating transgressive and inappropriate behaviour by men. Many women hide detail, deliberately use euphemisms, and even lack a vocabulary to explain what happened to them, ultimately limiting opportunities for redressal.

At the same time, formal institutions are failing young female workers. In general, feelings of shame deter young women from reporting incidents of sexual harassment to authorities and employers. Those who had the courage to formally report an incident had always had the support of others: trusted family members or friends. In both countries, local authorities reproduced prejudice about women 'inviting' sexual attention, whereas the police are generally distrusted because of corruption and officials demanding bribes. Most women and their families are reluctant to report instances of harassment to the police. In Uganda, female local government representatives had mediated between domestic workers and employers, but they too may not take any further action to seek justice or redressal.

Approaches to youth employment and women's economic empowerment therefore need multipronged strategies that target employers and government actors and offer support to women. Companies need to implement safeguarding and adequate reporting mechanisms. Government actors need to implement policies that prohibit sexual harassment and strengthen gender awareness within the police and legal systems. Programmes need to support women to help them gain the confidence to speak about sexual harassment and support (collective) action. Finally, longer-term strategies need to address restrictive gender norms that condone sexual harassment and undermine women's bodily integrity in public spaces, including the world of work.

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Acronyms

BAPA	Bangladesh Agro-Processors' Association
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies
BIGD	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
BILS	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies
CBO	community-based organisation
CDL	child domestic labour
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
DWPWP	Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy
DWRN	Domestic Workers' Rights Network
GCRF	Global Challenges Research Fund
GDP	gross domestic product
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
GoU	Government of Uganda
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
ILO	International Labour Organization
IST	Institute for Social Transformation
LC	local council
LFS	Labour Force Survey
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PLA	Platform for Labour Action
RMG	ready-made garment
SARTFP	South Asia Regional Trade Facilitation Program
SOF	Sobujer Obhijan Foundation
SWGS	School of Women and Gender Studies
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VAW	violence against women
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

1. Introduction

There is a strong belief that employment is a crucial avenue for the empowerment of young women, through income, greater autonomy, and bargaining power within the family (Kabeer 2013). However, experiences of workplace sexual harassment undermine these potential gains. Sexual harassment in the world of work undermines women's confidence and sense of dignity; has severe negative psychological and health impacts; and for many it results in losses related to job opportunities, promotions, or reputation (ILO 2018; Osmani and Hossen 2018; Rahaman and Jahan 2015; Węziak-Białowolska, Białowolski and McNeely 2020). When voicing incidents to family or in their communities, women might face stigmatisation and further marginalisation. Where cases of rape result in pregnancy, this can deepen stigmatisation and add to the economic burden carried by the mother.

National assessments of gender-based violence do not systematically cover all aspects of workplace sexual harassment and few large-scale studies on workplace sexual harassment exist. Actual figures are likely to be far higher than the reported incidents, considering that many women are afraid of the police and/or fear stigmatisation and other repercussions. Existing studies suggest that workplace sexual harassment is widespread in formal sectors that absorb large numbers of low-skilled, female workers, with younger and migrant workers being particularly vulnerable (Jacobs, Brahic and Olaiya 2015; Kabeer, Haq and Sulaiman 2019). Studies of informal workers suggest that they are likely to be at greater risk of sexual harassment due to the intersection of their gender and their insecure work conditions (ILO 2017; WIEGO 2018).

The prevalence of workplace sexual harassment and the range and severity of its impact should make it an important policy priority. In 2019, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted the Convention on Violence and Harassment No. 190 (ILO 2019a) and its Recommendation R206 (ILO 2019b). The resolution is considered progressive as it applies to both formal and informal workers and recognises a wide range of acts as sexual harassment. The ILO Convention is thus a major step in promoting the decent work agenda. However, in many countries workplace sexual harassment policies and laws are seldom and weakly implemented and it has been increasingly recognised that supporting the empowerment of female workers needs more attention (Henry and Adams 2018; ILO 2016).

In this report we present the analysis of experiences of and responses to workplace sexual harassment among young, female domestic

workers and factory workers in urban areas of Uganda and Bangladesh. Specifically, the research asked how **language, gender norms, and informality** in work arrangements influenced young women's voice and agency in response to sexual harassment at work, which in several cases involved assault and rape. With workplaces being strongly gendered, precarity at work interacts with sociocultural and gender norms, and patriarchal structures and gender norms influence women's understandings of sexual harassment, their voice, and agency (Nazneen, Darkwah and Sultan 2014; Nazneen, Hossain and Chopra 2019).

The study aimed to fill two major gaps. Firstly, due to the conventional focus on firms and workplace sexual harassment **policies** as the main avenue for tackling the problem, comparative research across formal and informal employment relations is lacking. This has resulted in a weak understanding of variation in the types and severity of harassment for formal and informal workers, and whether there are differences in risks to exposure to sexual harassment. While the ILO resolution comprises both formal and informal work, national policies may need to target specific dynamics in different productive sectors of the economy. Secondly, there is a limited understanding of the interaction between workplace sexual harassment and empowerment, and in particular regarding the role of language. Young women need to be able to express themselves about sexual harassment in order to have 'voice' for reporting and seeking support.

However, social and gender norms limit the ways in which women articulate themselves concerning a taboo issue such as sexual harassment. This provided the rationale for involving linguists in this interdisciplinary project, working alongside gender scholars, political scientists, and youth teams in both countries. Data were collected in 2020 and 2021 in suburbs of Kampala and Dhaka. In both countries, the study involved group discussions, making use of participatory methods, and 40 individual interviews with young female firm workers and domestic workers. With the exception of some of the firm workers in Uganda, the majority of the workers had limited education and were from relatively poor economic backgrounds, which compounded their vulnerability to harassment. As part of the research, teams of youth researchers were involved in a cooperative inquiry.

The findings show that there is still much work to do to fight sexual harassment in the world of work. While this is a qualitative study, the fact that almost all 80 interview respondents have experienced some form of sexual harassment is indicative of how widespread it is in both formal and informal work. Moreover, several domestic workers had experienced severe forms of harassment, including rape, which is why this report also uses the term sexual violence. While governments and international donors

invest heavily in building young people's employability skills (Fox *et al.* 2020; Fox and Kaul 2018), interventions ignore the need to incorporate measures for safeguarding and strengthening young women's civic and political capacities, which are essential for negotiating labour conditions, safety, and wellbeing at work (Cheema 2017; Oosterom 2018). Many young women, while 'getting by', are ill-equipped to challenge unsafe working conditions and rights violations after completing mainstream skill-building programmes. The findings underline the need for integrating programme strategies that target the design and implementation of better labour policies and sexual harassment policies, and improve the responsiveness of the police, alongside strategies that build women's confidence and (collective) capacities to report sexual harassment.

The report is structured as follows. Section 2 presents existing scholarship on the prevalence and dynamics of workplace sexual harassment, and the role of social and gender norms in challenging incidents. Section 3 presents the research design, and Section 4 the qualitative methodology. The background to the case studies, factory workers, and domestic workers in Uganda and Bangladesh is presented in Section 5. The empirical analysis starts in Section 6, explaining the specific gender and social norms found in the case studies. Section 7 outlines the forms of sexual harassment and violence experienced by the female workers that were part of this study. In Section 8, the findings demonstrate how most women lack a vocabulary to articulate experiences with sexual harassment, or avoid using explicit language due to restrictive norms on sexuality and expression. Section 9 deepens the analysis of the role of social and gender norms for voicing and reporting experiences of sexual harassment, demonstrating how norms limit young women's voice and their possibilities for agency, even if workplace measures were to be in place. The report analyses various formal and informal avenues for reporting sexual harassment and how these, too, are influenced by gender norms. Section 10 concludes.

2. Workplace sexual harassment: factors influencing exposure, risk, and empowerment

Workplace sexual harassment has serious detrimental physical and mental health effects on women (McLaughlin, Uggen and Blackstone 2012; Naved *et al.* 2018; Regis *et al.* 2019; Yasmin and Jabeen 2017). While health impacts for women ought to be a primary concern, there is growing evidence that demonstrates that sexual harassment negatively affects productivity, firm performance, and profits – which could be an additional incentive for employers to take measures to prevent harassment (Lin, Babbitt and Brown 2014; Węziak-Białowolska *et al.* 2020). Various development agencies have explored the negative economic impact of workplace sexual harassment as it acted as a barrier to women's entry and participation in the labour market (Campbell and Chinnery 2018; ILO 2019c). The #MeToo movement has thrown a spotlight on workplace sexual harassment experienced by women in different occupations and the ubiquitous nature of this form of violence.

In June 2019, the ILO approved the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment No. 190 (ILO 2019a) and its Recommendation R206 (ILO 2019b). The Convention identifies violence and harassment in the workplace as a violation of human rights and defines it as 'a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices' that 'aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm' (Olney 2019). This includes physical and verbal abuse, bullying and mobbing, sexual harassment, threats, and stalking. The Convention applies to the public and private sectors and, importantly, to formal and informal work. Until the ILO Convention, there was no single definition of sexual harassment. Also, the scope of 'workplace' continues to be unclear across countries: national legal frameworks do not necessarily define the workplace, which has implications for whether incidents constitute **workplace** sexual harassment and require preventive and mitigating action by employers. Some countries expand the workplace to include work retreats, after-work events, or when commuting to work (ILO 2017; Lippel 2018). In addition, cyberbullying has become a new arena of psychological and sexual violence and harassment in work relationships, but in national legislations the link with the work sphere remains unclear (ILO 2017).

The term 'workplace sexual harassment' was coined in the 1970s (Farley 1978). The term covers a range of behaviour by perpetrators – both verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature – which interferes with

the victim's work performance and contributes towards creating a hostile work environment. Feminist debates on workplace sexual harassment are influenced by MacKinnon's (1979) ground-breaking work *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, which draws attention to sexual harassment as a product of a biased gender system, maintained by male power and dominance that contributes to sex inequality in the workplace. While MacKinnon's theory and analysis focuses on how the law can be used to address workplace sexual harassment, it also allows a situating of workplace sexual harassment within broader debate on gender-based violence and how it is connected to broader patterns of expressions of patriarchal power and gender socialisation. It needs to be acknowledged that not all men are perpetrators of workplace sexual harassment, and some men are victims of workplace sexual harassment. However, it is generally women who are targets of workplace sexual harassment.

MacKinnon's (1979) analysis draws attention to how ideas and notions about masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are closely connected. Following MacKinnon, feminist scholars have argued that workplace sexual harassment reinforces male power and helps maintain the gender order or hierarchies (Connell 1987). Sexual harassment that consists of verbal comments, sexual jokes, and inappropriate touching allows men at the workplace to perform social practices of masculinity (i.e. behaviour associated with 'boys will be boys'). The audience of these forms of behaviour are other men, and it allows perpetrators to exercise their power to evaluate **any** women sexually (Quinn 2002). More aggressive forms of sexual harassment at the workplace, such as groping, assault, stalking, and threats to job security, are expressions of male power to discipline a particular woman, who is perceived to have violated gender norms. Hence, workplace sexual harassment is an expression of coercive power exercised by men that maintains gender power hierarchies.

The presence of asymmetric power relations between female workers and their male co-workers, supervisors, and employers has been at the core of later research. Sexual harassment can be used to control and/or moderate women's access to employment, and their progress to higher-level positions (Campbell and Chinnery 2018; ILO 2019c; McLaughlin *et al.* 2012; Regis *et al.* 2019). The asymmetric relationships between employers/supervisors and the workers tends to be multifaceted, with supervisors having various forms of control over, for instance, recruitment, working hours, production quota, and promotion (Lin *et al.* 2014; Siddiqi 2003). In Bangladesh, it was found that sexual harassment among garment factory workers is linked to pay incentives, particularly if they have a daily production target set by supervisors (ILO 2019c). In apparel factories in Haiti, Jordan, and Indonesia, workplace sexual harassment was more likely if supervisors assess individual work performance to determine their pay

incentives (Truskinovsky, Rubin and Brown 2014). Certain groups of workers experience sexual harassment from customers, which can complicate a recognition of this as workplace sexual harassment, even though employers are responsible for creating a safe work environment. Studies of the hospitality sector in the United States found that workers who rely on tips for their income, are more likely to experience sexual harassment (*ibid.*).

Several factors can increase the risk to exposure to sexual harassment for certain groups of women. Generally, it is reported that younger and unmarried women, and those belonging to low-income groups, are more likely to experience harassment, and especially when new to the job. According to the ILO, migrant workers are 11 per cent more likely to have concerns over sexual harassment (ILO 2019c). They may be isolated without the protection of their original social networks, may not speak the language of the host community, and they usually occupy lower positions (*ibid.*).

Job informality has been widely recognised as a key factor increasing the risk of exposure to harassment, because job insecurity may result in relatively more power for employers, while women may have little access to reporting mechanisms. Tijdens *et al.* (2015) investigated violence against women at the workplace in Honduras, Indonesia, Moldova, and Benin, and find how informality in employment increases the risk of violence for women in the workplace. Also, research by Henry and Adams (2018) on commercial agriculture in four lower- and middle-income countries (Kenya, Ecuador, Mexico, and Sri Lanka) find that temporary and informal work creates strong power differentials and thus increases the risk to harassment. Further, a study by Jacobs *et al.* (2015) in the horticultural industry in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda finds that female casual and temporary workers are most likely to be targeted.

Studies have also underscored that (the lack of) policies contribute to the enduring pervasiveness of sexual harassment and underlying power asymmetries. Jacobs *et al.* (2015: 9) point to discriminatory employment policy; mechanisms of recruitment and promotion; inadequate reporting and complaint mechanisms; and the time-consuming nature of such reporting. Policies and laws prohibiting workplace sexual harassment, where they exist, are seldom or weakly implemented. There is also a lack of communication and awareness of existing policies, and materials for awareness raising may not be available in local languages (*ibid.*). Referrals to police and justice actors are hampered by weaknesses in the functioning of these institutions.

Fear of 'double victimisation', when a complaint does not lead to a result, undermines the likelihood of reporting (Jacobs *et al.* 2015; McDonald 2012). Examples of good institutional practice associated with a reduction of sexual harassment, identified in some East African horticultural firms, included

Women Worker Committees receiving and handling cases, sanctions against perpetrators (not transferral, which was considered particularly ineffective for managers), and intensive awareness raising (Jacobs *et al.* 2015). Having more women in leadership positions was identified as having the potential for reducing the actual prevalence of harassment and increased opportunities for reporting cases. However, female managers may be under pressure not to report, may lack time, and some abuse power in other ways (*ibid.*).

Several 'material' factors can contribute to the risk of experiencing harassment, such as working late, lone or isolated working, the spatial layout of workspaces that create conditions where women work alone, unlit areas, and the location and security of facilities such as showers, toilets, and dormitories (Jacobs *et al.* 2015; Shaw *et al.* 2018). Isolation leaves women vulnerable due to the absence of witnesses; and certain types of workers that typically work alone, such as domestic workers and cleaners, are especially vulnerable because of the low status and pay of this work (Shaw *et al.* 2018).

The literature review suggests that laws and also state- and firm-level policies have been the primary focus for addressing sexual harassment at work. While policies are important, it has been increasingly recognised that supporting the empowerment of female workers needs more attention (Henry and Adams 2018; ILO 2016). However, scholarship on the interaction of workplace sexual harassment and women's empowerment is lacking (Nazneen *et al.* 2019). This leads us to a discussion of social and gender norms.

2.1 Unpacking gender norms

Norms are a part of gender systems. Gender systems also include gender roles (who does what), gender power relations (differential position and access to resources that men and women have), and gender socialisation processes (how one learns about what is masculine and feminine) (Cislaghi and Heise 2019). Gender norms are social norms defining acceptable and appropriate action for men and women in a given group or society (*ibid.*). These norms are learnt in childhood through socialisation processes when notions of masculinity and femininity are internalised. They are embedded in various formal and informal social and economic institutions (workplace, school, media, religion, and so forth). These norms are produced and reproduced through everyday social interactions. Gender norms are embedded in the way institutions function; that is, how rules, procedures, and policies of institutions are gendered and influence the resources and freedoms men and women can access. These norms, in turn, shape the kind of power, voice, and agency that people possess and the sense of self that men and women develop.

In other words, gender norms exist outside the individual in the world and are reproduced through how people act, and enforced through sanctions by powerholders (elders in the family, teachers, community leaders, employers, and so forth). Changing gender norms requires a change in power and institutions, not just in the attitudes and misconceptions that people hold.

For this study, gender norms shape notions of masculinity and femininity and what the appropriate behaviours for men and women are around sexuality and their 'sense of sexual self'. Norms, then, shape how men and women embody sexuality (i.e. how sexuality is performed) (Butler 1990) in the workplace, their comportment (i.e. dress, bearing, behaviour), and attitudes about the body (i.e. how bodies are discussed and talked about). These attitudes and beliefs are reinforced by how men and women act every day at the workplace and 'perform their gender' (*ibid.*). These interactions include the performance of masculinity and femininity that shapes the boundaries of what is considered appropriate behaviour by men and women.

In many instances, these 'performances' – for example, joking about women's bodies with other men, leering at female workers, teasing female workers – normalise sexually offensive behaviour. Social and gender norms, endorsed and reproduced through performances and everyday interactions, may influence how women react when confronted with incidents of sexual harassment. They influence the ideas of both women and men concerning what forms of behaviour **constitute** workplace sexual harassment; and for women, these influence whether they can articulate their experiences of sexual harassment, whom would they speak to, and whether they would seek redressal and how.

Scholarship on workplace sexual harassment has drawn attention to the importance of the wider social context and the need to understand what kinds of behaviour men and women identify as sexually offensive. Regressive social and gender norms in society may normalise and/or condone such behaviour. Norms that govern women's mobility, their presence in public space, and their sexual purity and chastity in society at large, all influence what kinds of behaviour are deemed to be appropriate in the workplace. What complicates matters further are the blurry boundaries that exist between what counts as 'consent' in a workplace context, where male managers/employers and workers possess more power than the female workers.

Consent to have sexual relations, even if it is given freely by subordinate female workers, is open to question if power differentials exist. This debate on the power differential in a 'consensual relationship' between senior male workers and subordinate female workers has animated conversations on sexual harassment in universities and #MeToo discussions. With respect to

our study, the issue of consent by female workers remains highly complex, in particular in relation to domestic workers who generally are from much poorer backgrounds than their employers. While some may have consented to a sexual relationship with the promise of romance and marriage, the immense power differentials between male employers and domestic workers calls into question whether the sexual relationship is free from exploitation.

Scholars highlight that perceptions on workplace sexual harassment and how to deal with this form of violence vary from one culture to another (Węziak-Białowolska *et al.* 2020). Depending on the kinds of gender norms in practice in a specific context, women and men may fail to recognise sexual harassment and treat it as trivial and routine (Rahaman and Jahan 2015). With respect to our study, in the South Asian context, women going to work and entering formal workplaces (factories or service sector) are perceived to violate gender norms around female mobility and norms around interaction with unrelated males (Kabeer 1994; Kandiyoti 1988), even though women's participation in the workforce is now accepted by many. In East African contexts, however, such control over women's labour, mobility, and presence in market space is less strong (Cornwall and Edwards 2014). In Bangladesh, women's sexual purity and chastity is considered a premium in the marriage market (Siddiqui 2003).

As this report will detail, these concepts are closely linked to ideas of shame and honour. While control over female mobility, and perhaps sexuality, has loosened in urban areas in both contexts, it does not mean traditional control over women's labour, movement, and bodies has disappeared (Nazneen *et al.* 2019; Ahikire and Mwiine 2019). This control is facilitated through the maintenance of the masculine privilege over women's bodies through sexual harassment and violence, against those who are deemed to violate gender norms (Nazneen *et al.* 2019).

The fact that gender norms are internalised through socialisation processes, embedded in institutional rules and processes, and reinforced through everyday interactions make gender norms 'sticky' and slow to change (West and Zimmerman 1987). Changing gender norms that shape people's ideas and actions around workplace sexual harassment implies: (a) shifting attitudes and beliefs about the female and male body and sexuality at the individual and community levels; and (b) altering procedures and policies that govern the workplace to influence everyday interactions between individual male and female workers and between female workers and management. The latter indicates that for our study, analysis of routine everyday interactions is important to unpack how workplace sexual harassment is perceived and experienced by female workers. Moreover, the analysis of workplace formal rules and procedures

and informal practices is important for understanding how female workers may or may not exert agency to contest workplace sexual harassment.

2.2 Voice and agency to contest workplace sexual harassment

Section 2.1 highlights the influence that gender norms have in shaping attitudes and perceptions of workplace sexual harassment and normalisation of sexually offensive behaviour. The discussion reveals how workplace sexual harassment is connected to gender systems in each context, and why the norms that trivialise and normalise workplace sexual harassment may be difficult to change. While this discussion enables us to understand why incidents of sexual harassment are difficult to identify and articulate, it does not shed light on what empowers women to exercise voice and agency to contest workplace sexual harassment.

One of the aims of this research is to explore what enables individual and collective agency to contest workplace sexual harassment. In feminist literature, voice is defined as an act where one articulates one's preferences, views, and opinions (Agarwal 2010; Goetz and Nyamu-Musembi 2008; Nazneen *et al.* 2014). This act can be individual or collective. In contesting power relations, voice can also be used to bargain, negotiate, and defend one's interests. Voice, as articulated by these writers, has two components: substantive and performative (Goetz and Nyamu-Musembi 2008). The substantive aspect includes content or what is said by the actor. The performative aspect includes how one voices content (Goetz 2003). Both aspects are influenced by formal rules on voicing, gender norms, and power relations. For example, content or **what may be** said is influenced by gendered rules and norms around **what is acceptable for women and men** to articulate. The performative aspect or **how women voice their opinions and concerns** is mediated by gender and social norms on what the expected gendered patterns of behaviour are. For women's public voice to be effective, it needs to be **heard by others and acted on**.

With respect to workplace sexual harassment, the act of voicing involves female workers being able to articulate incidents of violation, make their case, protest, and seek redressal. Whether female workers can articulate an incident of workplace sexual harassment depends on how gender norms influence what is deemed as appropriate for them to openly discuss at the workplace. Ideas and notions about shame, sexual purity, and honour influence what is voiced by female workers. In fact, studies show that cultural norms, fear, or shame limit what women workers may say about their experiences of sexual

harassment (Goel 2018; ILO 2019c; Lima *et al.* 2020; Loukaitou-Sideris 2014; Mazumder and Pokharel 2019; Yasmin and Jabeen 2017).

There are other factors that influence female workers' decision to exercise voice. Power differentials between the perpetrator and the victim may lead subordinate female workers to remain silent. Studies found that unwillingness to voice, especially to lodge formal complaints, is linked to the risk of job loss and the economic need to continue working, but also to a lack of trust in formal complaint mechanisms and justice institutions. Women in informal sector work are particularly vulnerable to these pressures as they are generally crowded into poorly paid and precarious work and have few resources to fall back on should they lose this work (Méndez 2005; Narayan and Chikarmane 2013). These pressures may lead women to choose to remain silent when facing workplace sexual harassment and other forms of injustice (Regis *et al.* 2019). Studies also find that, in general, women continue working and do not report sexual harassment, although some choose to leave the factories or domestic employment (Lippel 2018; Naved *et al.* 2018; Yasmin and Jabeen 2017).

The rules, procedures, and culture of the workplace can influence the act of voicing and the content of what is voiced. Many places lack formal procedures on how to file complaints. In workplaces, where formal rules exist, whether information on these rules is accessible and support is provided to facilitate access may determine whether individual agency is exercised or not. Many organisational studies on, for example, the justice sector or police reform point out that the presence of female leadership, and the creation of safe spaces, are critical determinants of whether or not women come forward with complaints. The gender-biased nature of organisational culture may not be enabling for victims voicing their experiences and seeking redressal (Goetz 1997).

Studies show that the culture of silence at the workplace around workplace sexual harassment, victim shaming and blaming, and pressure on female workers not to denounce colleagues prevents individuals from voicing (Fernando and Prasad 2019; Sangwan and Thakre 2018). The performative aspect of voicing involves the following aspects: (a) whom the female workers talk to; (b) which formal or informal avenues or forums they use; and (c) how they raise the issue (privately, organise collectively, strategies they use). These actions depend on how female workers perceive the risk of disclosure: the material and social cost of the incident becoming public knowledge, such as losing their job, one's reputation, and/or risk of further pressure and violence from the perpetrator; and the kinds of support systems, both formal and informal, that are in place for them.

As stated earlier, the ability to voice is a form of individual and collective agency. In development literature, agency is the ability to make strategic life choices and take actions to attain desired outcomes (Agarwal 2010; Kabeer 1999). Agency or the ability to make choices and act on them is shaped by individual circumstances and constraints imposed by structures that distribute power and privilege unequally among different groups in society, including on men and women (Kabeer 2016). Agency is central to the social justice agenda because the capacity for agency drives the process of structural change in gender power hierarchies (Kabeer 2021).

Feminist and gender and development scholarship shows that patriarchal structures constrain women's agency relative to those of men. These structures of constraint (Kabeer 2016) are linked to inequalities in accessing material and other forms of resources, gender division of labour that is socially ascribed creating disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work for women, and hegemonic gender ideologies that construct women as inferior – undermining their sense of self. Challenging these three aspects of structural constraint through exercising agency is critical for change. This also implies that exercising agency for women to challenge workplace sexual harassment involves the following three facets of agency: (a) consciousness (awareness about one's rights and questioning notions that blame or shame the victims); (b) voice (articulating one's experiences and views about workplace sexual harassment and best options that are needed to secure protection/redressal/support); and (c) action (taking steps to turn things to their advantage, reduce vulnerability, and gain support).

Empowerment literature points out that agency is about being able to exercise agency and act in ways that enable the subordinate group to shift power in their advantage (McGee and Pettit 2019). A key issue in the debate on agency concerns how individual choices are interpreted. Kabeer (2021) points out that whether a particular choice (decision to act or not act) is empowering or not needs to take into account the following. First, as structural constraints vary across contexts, the weight of a choice varies for women depending on their class, caste, religious, and other positions, and the kind of choice being made (i.e. to buy a dress, to decide to marry someone). Second, what are the costs and consequences of a particular choice? The perception of costs and consequences are influenced by the actual consequences of a decision and what kinds of alternatives are available to the actor (Kabeer 2021).

These two caveats on choice draw attention to the following. The kinds of material and social resources available to women determine the range of possibilities or options available for exercising agency (Scott 1990). For our study on workplace sexual harassment, the kinds of resources

that may facilitate action could be a range of alternative employment available to women, support received from family/community and within the organisation, social networks, and so forth. Otherwise, women may recognise the injustice of workplace sexual harassment and how it maintains gender power hierarchies, but the costs of exercising voice may be too high. Absence of material and social support may mean that women may also resort to using informal strategies that are covert forms of agency rather than directly confronting the perpetrator. For example, women may informally warn other women about the perpetrator, strategically avoid specific locations, restrict their movement, ensure the presence of another person when interacting with the perpetrator, and so forth.

As stated earlier, consciousness is a key aspect of agency. The process of being able to act or exercise agency requires a form of 'power within' (Rowlands 1997) that challenges the internalisation of inequalities, gender norms, and gender power hierarchies that normalise sexual harassment. For this study, the issues to explore in relation to individual agency are whether the failure to act reflects women's internalisation of gender norms, where women accept the unequal order and become implicit accomplices (Sen and Fukuda-Parr 2003), and what factors may facilitate a development of critical consciousness.

Scholarly work on women's empowerment highlights that individual agency, however, rarely changes institutions or destabilises wider structural inequalities (Kabeer 2021). Changing institutionalised gender injustice requires collective action (Hayward 1998). Collective agency requires women to mobilise around a specific group interest to attain gender-transformative changes (Agarwal 2010). The nature and kind of employment women are engaged in plays a critical role in influencing how women organise. Studies have shown that work in the informal sector economy, particularly domestic work, where women work in isolation inside the home makes it difficult for domestic workers to exercise collective agency. As Kabeer (2021: 5) points out,

the dispersed nature of their activities, the irregularity of their earnings, their location at the intersection of multiple inequalities, the social and self-devaluation of their work and, very frequently, their lack of awareness of any rights they might enjoy, make the spontaneous emergence of self-organised collective action unlikely.

For our study, how the informal nature of domestic work influences women's ability to collectively organise against workplace sexual harassment will be a key area to explore.

Where a strong trade union presence exists, this may make it easier for women to organise collective action against workplace sexual harassment; however, trade unions are male-dominated in many countries and sexual harassment is not always on the union agenda. In many contexts, women have set up their own autonomous organisations (Méndez 2005) and sought support from a range of external organisations such as women's groups, development non-governmental organisations, legal and human rights organisations, church groups, and national and international advocacy networks to mobilise for rights, including against workplace sexual harassment. Scholarly work on collective action also finds that autonomous organisations and other support organisations engage in 'building the power within' by raising the awareness of members about the value of the work they do, building their sense of self-worth and educating them about their rights as women, as workers, and as citizens (Kabeer 2021: 6).

For our study, exploring the potential for collective agency will mean an analysis of the kinds of organised structures that exist at the workplace to facilitate women's claims and voice around workplace sexual harassment. We will also focus on whether other kinds of organisations exist in the community that may facilitate an awareness about rights, a space to reflect, and support in handling the formal process and collectively coming together.

3. Research design

The research aimed to contribute to debates on how young female workers develop voice and agency to challenge workplace sexual harassment. Using a multidisciplinary approach that involved political scientists, gender scholars, and linguists, the research focused specifically on the everyday language that young women use and acquire for discussing and reporting incidents of sexual harassment and violence at work; and on the role of gender and social norms in reporting and challenging harassment. This study therefore offers insights into the perspectives and agency of young women, whereas the strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of existing laws and policies remained outside of the scope of this study.

The overall question this research addressed is: 'How do young women in different (formal and informal) employment relations experience and respond to workplace sexual harassment?' To answer this question, we focused our analysis on:

1. how the dynamics and risks of exposure varied across formal and informal employment relations;
2. how gender norms influence experiences, voice, and agency in response to workplace sexual harassment; and
3. how language and linguistics enable and/or constrain young women's ability to respond effectively to incidents of harassment.

The research was designed as a comparative research project that compared formal and informal workers in contexts marked by restrictive (Uganda) and highly restrictive gender norms (Bangladesh), as is elaborated in detail in Section 6. Both countries have a high prevalence of gender-based violence, including workplace sexual harassment, and both governments have taken some steps to address it in formal work settings. Uganda adopted the Employment (Sexual Harassment) Regulations in 2012 (GoU 2012), requiring firms with more than 15 employees to have a harassment policy. In Bangladesh, a High Court Guideline against sexual harassment (Writ Petition No. 5916 of 2008) mandates all private and public bodies to ensure prevention and protection against sexual harassment in the workplace (GoB 2008).

In each country, we selected informal domestic workers and firm workers employed in agro-processing firms as our case studies, thus resulting in four cases in total (Table 3.1). The workforce for all four cases is predominantly female.

Table 3.1 Four case studies of workers exposed to workplace sexual harassment

	Formal workers	Informal workers
Restrictive gender norms	Firm workers Uganda, Kampala Kawempe	Domestic workers Uganda, Kampala Kawempe
Highly restrictive gender norms	Firm workers Bangladesh, Krishnapur, Dhamrai	Domestic workers Bangladesh

Source: Authors' own.

Large numbers of domestic workers exist in both countries and they are likely to be exposed to exploitation and abuse (Ashraf *et al.* 2019; Namuggala 2015). The case study of formal workers comprised firm workers in national agro-processing firms, located in suburbs and peri-urban areas of the capital cities Dhaka and Kampala. In both countries, employment in farming and agriculture employment is likely to shift towards more commercialised agro-processing (Fowler and Rauschendorfer 2019; Raihan, Bidisha and Jahan 2018; World Bank 2018). While relatively understudied, agro-processing firms are considered important for employment creation and economic growth and the government of both countries invest in their expansion (Jha *et al.* 2014; Ullah 2017). Therefore, with the agro-processing sectors expanding in both countries, a discussion about safe working conditions for women is urgent. We will now elaborate the two axes of comparison: gender norms and informality.

The way young women decide to voice and act is influenced by their subjective understanding of gender and social norms, including what is good or inappropriate behaviour, and forms of voice and agency that are considered appropriate for young females. We chose to compare Uganda and Bangladesh to capture variation in the level of restriction imposed by gender norms. In both countries, sociocultural norms compound workplace sexual harassment and limit women's voice (BBS 2016: 47; Siddiqi 2003; UBOS 2019). However, Bangladesh can be considered more restrictive concerning women's mobility, their access to resources, and social relationships beyond family relationships, than Uganda. The study explored how social and gender norms undermined women's ability to challenge sexual violence and harassment, and whether this played a stronger role in Bangladesh compared to Uganda.

Informality increases the risk that woman will experience harassment and violence in the workplace (Henry and Adams 2018; Tijdens *et al.* 2015).

Informal workers have less access to protective legal frameworks and formal mechanisms to report incidents on the job. Depending on the type of work, they are less likely to be part of unions and worker associations. We thus assumed that informal workers are less likely to mobilise collectively and have few options for reporting workplace sexual harassment incidents. As later sections will show, even firm workers experience a degree of informality: they often lacked contracts, job security, and access to benefits. Yet, in principle, firm workers should have access to formal complaint structures that are unavailable to domestic workers. Domestic workers are likely to come from poorer backgrounds than firm workers, enabling us to investigate class difference, and how this affects the language used to discuss sexual harassment, and knowledge of relevant laws.

We identified neighbourhoods of similar socioeconomic status, where firms are located. Firm workers live concentrated in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods nearby. Variation in firms matters for the potential nature and levels of harassment (Siddiqi 2003) and we therefore identified similar-sized national agro-processing firms in Bangladesh and Uganda. Especially in Bangladesh, international firms and those located in international export zones are more frequently subjected to checks of labour conditions. Therefore, for suitable comparison with Uganda, we chose national firms that operate outside of these zones.

Site selection in Bangladesh was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the ensuing lockdowns, and increasing infection rates. Since slum areas of Dhaka are densely populated with limited open space, the research shifted to a relatively rural area outside of Dhaka where agro-processing firms are located and where open spaces can be found to maintain social distancing. Visual methods and group discussions were held in a primary school building in Krishnapur, Dhamrai, which offered easy access to female workers living nearby. In both countries, research activities could only be scheduled when Covid-19 measures allowed it.

4. Research methodology and approach to analysis

Our qualitative research approach comprised a desk review of academic studies and grey literature, a cooperative inquiry with youth researchers, and qualitative and visual methods. While the UN definition of youth is 15–24 years old, we only worked with female workers in the age range 18–24 as discussing sexual harassment with minors would create additional sensitivities and ethical risks. For the desk research, we reviewed scholarship on workplace sexual harassment and gender-based violence globally, and for Bangladesh and Uganda specifically; women's empowerment, voice, and agency; and the existing policy and regulatory frameworks in both countries.

Central to the project was a cooperative inquiry with a youth team of five to six young females and males in each country. We integrated the cooperative inquiry as a well-established approach for bringing in different voices and perspectives (Heron and Reason 2008). Members of the youth teams were all volunteers of community-based organisations (CBOs) that were partners in the project and who had some knowledge of sexual harassment through their volunteering for these organisations. The youth teams played a crucial role in helping to understand everyday language on workplace sexual harassment from a youth perspective, given that the other researchers were adults. The youth teams also pursued their own inquiry into workplace sexual harassment after training in research methods and ethics, with the Uganda youth team focusing on fruit and vegetable markets and the Bangladesh youth team concentrating on the role of male family members of domestic workers with regard to harassment. They were supported by BIGD and SWGS researchers throughout the process and developed their own outputs.

The research team involved researchers from different disciplines: political scientists, gender scholars, and linguists. Due to the central role of **language** in the development of voice, this study used an interdisciplinary approach that integrates linguistics, language, and culture studies. These disciplinary approaches informed the design of the qualitative methodology.

To understand the dynamics and risks to exposure to workplace sexual harassment and to become familiar with the language used by the female workers, we used two sets of methods (Table 4.1). One was the 'safety audits': an innovative method developed by the Indian women's organisation Jagori, involving participatory mapping exercises by groups of young workers to map places, timings, the nature of workplace sexual harassment, and who is vulnerable (Viswanath and Basu 2015). Groups

of participants were invited to draw maps of their workspaces and used symbols and colour codes to express where they feel safe or uncomfortable, and which types of harassment occur when and where. The second method we used was 'body mapping' in groups: this method is used to discuss abstract concepts such as harassment as well as issues such as dignity and honour in relation to different body parts (Coetzee *et al.* 2019). By drawing the shape of a body and various body parts and using colour coding, this visual method lowers the threshold to discuss the body, making it suitable when working with young women, and enabled both participants and researchers to explore the language used around sexual harassment. These visual methods were conducted in groups of five to eight women, with separate groups for firm workers and domestic workers.

Table 4.1 Overview of research methods

Research methods	Number of participants
Participatory safety audit	Two groups with firm workers Bangladesh Two groups with domestic workers Bangladesh Two groups with firm workers Uganda Two groups with domestic workers Uganda
Participatory body mapping	Two groups with firm workers Bangladesh Two groups with domestic workers Bangladesh Two groups with firm workers Uganda Two groups with domestic workers Uganda
Interviews with domestic workers	20 interviews Bangladesh 20 interviews Uganda
Interviews with firm workers	20 interviews Bangladesh 20 interviews Uganda

Source: Authors' own.

After piloting five interviews in Uganda, we subsequently conducted 20 in-depth, individual interviews with domestic workers and 20 with firm workers in each country (a total of 80 interviews). Conducted in a private setting outside of work, these interviews focused on individual experiences of and agency in response to sexual harassment at work. We aimed for a 'case-within-case' approach: drawing on the safety audits and body mappings, we wanted to identify individuals that had voiced instances of sexual harassment with employers and external actors, which enabled us to investigate the factors influencing the processes of gaining voice and agency. The findings indicate that most workers experienced sexual harassment, whereas firm workers in Bangladesh did

not report having experienced the most severe forms. However, given the strong influence of social norms prohibiting discussions on sexuality and harassment, we cannot rule out that cases of sexual harassment were under-reported even in a confidential research setting.

4.1 Sample

For Bangladesh, BIGD had existing connections to CBOs in the selected neighbourhoods and facilitated access to both firm workers and domestic workers. However, participants included young women who had not been part of their interventions. Those who had been part of women's empowerment interventions were asked how this may have contributed to their understanding of harassment and avenues for redress. In Uganda, participants were identified through the women's representative in the local council in Kawempe neighbourhood.

Among the Ugandan research participants were many migrants who came from different regions of Uganda and who had migrated to Kampala to search for employment. The participants had varying levels of education and belonged to various ethnic groups. There was also variation in how much time they had been in the job and the salary they earned, but all had spent at least one year in their current position. The domestic workers who participated in the study were live-in domestic workers, and hence shared a residence with their employers.

4.2 Analysis

The comparative analysis focused on the role of gender norms and informality and how these influenced the dynamics of workplace sexual harassment and the voice and empowerment of young female workers. NVivo software was used to process and analyse the transcripts. The coding structure followed the key concepts of the study (risks, types of harassment, everyday language, social and gender norms, voice, and agency). Further coding of data was done inductively, for instance for the different ways in which women responded to and voiced incidence of harassments, and different codes for language used when discussing harassment with peers, family, co-workers, and employers. We also explored how differences in educational backgrounds and age mattered for voice and agency.

Section 5 presents existing data on our cases in both countries: domestic workers and agro-processing workers, including prevalence of sexual harassment. It demonstrates how both categories of workers are in vulnerable employment, despite firm workers being employed by formal companies.

5. Background to case studies

5.1 Firm workers and domestic workers in Bangladesh and Uganda

While it is obvious that large numbers of domestic workers exist in Bangladesh, exact numbers are lacking due to the lack of any systematic survey of this group and also due to the informality of their status (Ashraf *et al.* 2019). In 2006, the ILO estimated that Bangladesh had 4 million domestic workers (ILO 2006); the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics estimated there were 1.3 million domestic workers in 2017, of whom 80 per cent were female (BBS 2018). According to an estimation of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS 2015), there are 3 million domestic workers in the country, of which around 1.7 million are in the capital. The two main categories are live-in and out-living with varying terms of employment.

The vast majority come from a poor background, and most have migrated from rural areas in response to the dearth of employment opportunities. A survey of domestic workers in Dhaka (97 per cent female respondents, of whom 26.2 per cent were girls) found that all experienced low wages, long working hours, and physical and mental abuses. The findings suggest that young and live-in domestic workers are more likely to be sexually harassed (Ashraf *et al.* 2019). The study acknowledges that victims of sexual harassment rarely speak about their experiences, and that domestic workers barely have agency and power to negotiate their rights (*ibid.*). Bangladesh has signed but not ratified ILO Convention No. 189 (ILO 2011) on decent work for domestic workers. A Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy (GoB 2015) is in place, but Bangladesh has not addressed domestic workers in the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006, revised 2013)¹ and they remain very vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (*ibid.*). There is ongoing advocacy by the DWRN, their trade unions, and BILS to formalise domestic work and bring it under the purview of the labour law.

The agro-processing sector in Bangladesh has grown at an average of 7.7 per cent per annum between fiscal years 2004 and 2011 at US\$2.2bn (Katalyst 2016). The Bangladesh Agro-Processors' Association (BAPA) reports that export of agro-processed products from Bangladesh increased from US\$60m in 2010 to US\$224m in 2015 and is expected to grow (*ibid.*). The agro-food processing industry now contributes about 8 per cent to manufacturing output and

1 **Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006.**

1.7 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), with its share of total exports at around 1.5 per cent (Mahmood 2019).

In 2017, women constituted 21 per cent of Bangladesh's total employment in the processing and preserving of fruit and vegetables, 16 per cent of production workers, and 44 per cent of temporary workers. Some of the larger agro-processing companies such as PRAN and Square, which employ a workforce where women form a majority at floor level, offer better pay and working conditions (World Bank 2018). However, this study finds that female workers in most agro-processing firms are lacking contract letters and job security, and have low wages; therefore, their work arrangements are partly informal and insecure. The precarity of women and girls working in the agro-processing sector has been highlighted by the case of a fire in Narayanganj at the Hashem Foods factory where 52 workers burnt to death, while the government was aware of safety issues at the firm.

Although formal sector workers would technically fall under the labour law, even the formal industrial or service sector is characterised by varying degrees of informality. While firms may be formally registered, the unevenness of government monitoring means that laws and regulations are often enforced in a lenient manner. In addition, even the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) provides for various categories of workers with different types of entitlements. Employers may recruit non-regular or casual workers and can utilise the loophole in the law to avoid providing the workers with the benefits of a full-time or formal employment contract (Moazzem and Ahmed 2021).

For Uganda, the Platform for Labour Action estimated that 6 million people were employed as domestic workers in 2007, of whom half were in the age group 20 to 21; and 44 per cent aged below 20 years (PLA 2017). More recent figures on the number of domestic workers, here often referred to as 'housemaids', do not exist. The Uganda National Employment Policy recognises that they are among the most vulnerable and are poorly protected, and notes that survey research is required (GoU 2011: 20, 27). With more women from the growing working- and middle-class households finding employment, the demand for domestic workers has increased. Existing studies show that they are vulnerable to exploitation, including physical, psychological, and sexual abuse (Namuggala 2015).

In our study contexts, trade unions for female workers are few. Kabeer *et al.* (2019) state that Bangladeshi trade unions do not offer adequate protection of workers' rights in the garment industry. This is partly because only 10 per cent of factories in Bangladesh have trade unions (Human Rights Watch 2016, in Dey and Basak 2017); but also because female union leaders operate in hostile environments (see also Karim 2014; HRW 2015) and women are not willing to enrol in trade union activities (see also Dey and Basak 2017).

Similarly, in the African context, a study implemented in eight countries found that the lack of women's representation in workers' groups helped to explain the absence of gender equality issues in the collective bargaining around workplace violence (Shindondola-Mote and Kalusop 2011, in ILO 2017).

5.2 Sexual harassment in Bangladesh and Uganda

The diverse studies that exist on sexual harassment in Bangladesh and Uganda suggest that it is widespread and pervasive, and experienced in different spheres of life.

For Bangladesh, sexual harassment of women is prevalent in both formal and informal sectors and is considered one of the reasons why families hold women back from entering work, and a major reason for women dropping out of work. Among the 60.8 million employed, an estimated 5.5 per cent have experienced sexual abuse (for urban women, this was 7.4 per cent) and sexual abuse was particularly prevalent in the industries (BBS 2018). The 'husband's house' is the most common place for both physical (76.8 per cent) and sexual violence (45.5 per cent), and the workplace is the second most common place where sexual violence is experienced (32.8 per cent) (BBS 2016).

Precarious informal workers such as seasonal, casual, and migrant workers, and domestic workers are more vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment (Ashraf *et al.* 2019; Rahaman and Jahan 2015). For Bangladesh, Siddiqi (2003: 7) states: 'The more precarious is a worker's job, the more likely she is to be harassed'. Further, Mazumder and Pokharel (2019) state that 84 per cent of Bangladeshi women experienced staring, deliberate touching, groping, and sexual comments while travelling, and that 60–80 per cent of sexual assault has never been reported to the police due to fear of subsequent victimisation by police or society (Loukaitou-Sideris 2014).

For Uganda, the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016 reported that more than half (51 per cent) of the women aged 15–49 years had experienced physical violence, and 87 per cent of rural and 84 per cent of urban women reported to have experienced sexual harassment or violence (UBOS 2018: 17). However, a later survey presents different numbers. A 2019 report states that sexual violence of women in urban areas has declined from 24.4 per cent in 2011 to 18.9 per cent in 2016, which the government attributes to an increase in women joining the labour market as entrepreneurs, and the increased awareness as the result of campaigns (UBOS 2019: 9). Figures on **workplace** sexual harassment do not exist.

6. Social and gender norms

In this report, we address the role of social and gender norms in voice and agency through the linguistic analysis of how norms are reflected in the language of the domestic and factory workers. Building on existing studies on social and gender norms in these countries, this section elaborates on the social and gender norms that were found to be most significant and prevalent in the lives of the domestic and factory workers, and how they manifested. Social and gender norms were found to be more restrictive in Bangladesh than in Uganda, as expected, but clearly norms around marriage and sexuality were strongly influencing women's voice and agency in response to sexual harassment in both countries. Furthermore, in both countries, norms governing the interactions between adults (especially elders and those in positions of authority) intersect with norms around marriage and sexuality, compounding challenges for young females to speak to adult actors about sexual harassment.

6.1 Marriage and sexuality in Uganda

The capital city of Uganda, Kampala is geographically part of the region where the Buganda people form a majority and Buganda cultural norms have an important influence in public life, despite the overall ethnically mixed population in the capital. Strong social norms about women, marriage, and reproduction exist.

Sexual conduct is a private affair that cannot be discussed in public. Further, norms around masculinity expect women to have a submissive attitude to men (Ninsiima *et al.* 2018). Girls are raised and taught to demonstrate this attitude, and to fulfil their roles primarily in the domestic space, while the boys are socialised to become assertive and outgoing. Popular phrases like '*Abasajja nkoba zambogo zejja zokka mubunnya*' ('a man should struggle in life to be independent'), and '*omukazi akaza lujja*' ('a woman is meant to stay home and serve her husband') illustrate these conventional divisions, which still prevail even though many urban women have joined the labour force (UBOS 2019).

Gendered notions of submission involve secrecy when it comes to sex and sexual relations, which dictates that it is culturally inappropriate to openly talk about sex and sexual harassment, and this is compounded by young age and if one is from a low socioeconomic class. On the other hand, notions of manhood, maleness, and masculinity grant men the freedom to express their sexual desires, comment about female bodies,

and utter sexually indicative statements towards girls and women, in ways that would be considered entirely inappropriate for women.

The Uganda Demographic and Health Survey of 2016 clearly showed how norms around marriage and discussing sex influence the reporting of harassment: 67 per cent of the women who experienced violence agreed that 'if a girl or woman is raped, it is better for her to keep it to herself' (UBOS 2018: 21); 60 per cent of women tolerate violence to keep their families together; of the women who experienced violence, 59 per cent agreed that women and girls should stay in abusive relationships because of fear of further violence by the perpetrator; and 59 per cent of urban women and 53 per cent of rural women agreed that women and girls should stay in abusive relationships because divorce is shameful. Instances of sexual violence and harassment are therefore believed to be under-reported (*ibid.*).

That gender norms were considered less restrictive in Uganda was evidenced by the ability of young Ugandan females to express themselves about body parts associated with sexuality, and also female beauty and enjoying positive comments about their bodies even if these could have a suggestive sexual undertone. They could also joke about men's sexuality. Men's appreciation then supported their confidence. For instance, one woman said:

I felt good because they were saying I have a big bum [buttocks]. You know, I felt they loved my butt and I gained a lot of confidence. I even started wearing tight clothing so that I could show off my butt very well.²

6.2 Purity and shame in Bangladesh

Precariousness interacts with sociocultural and gender norms concerning women's behaviour. Bangladeshi society is generally characterised by discriminatory and restrictive gender norms. Throughout childhood, girls are brought up to be obedient, submissive, domestic, and seen but not heard (Kalam 2014). The norms of heterosexuality, the dominance of marriage, and sexuality only being sanctioned within marriage make it a matter of shame for a woman or girl to experience any kind of sexual interest, advance, or relationship outside marriage. Women and girls are not expected to understand or speak about sexuality outside their marriage. They are also expected to uphold their families' honour by remaining 'pure' (Fattah and Camellia 2020). In Bangladesh, women and girls are considered as sexual beings who can provoke lust and undesirable thoughts and feelings in men and boys and are therefore responsible for veiling and covering themselves.

² All interviews in Uganda were conducted between June and August 2021 in Kawempe division of Kampala. All interviews in Bangladesh were conducted between July and November 2021 in Dhaka.

This is closely tied to notions of *purdah*, where stepping outside of *purdah* is a risk in itself. *Purdah* is again tied to notions of purity. Although in earlier times *purdah* meant not being seen by males outside the immediate family, in recent times, it has come to mean the practice of protecting one's 'honour' by 'modest' behaviour and clothing. The definitions and understanding of covering differ and have evolved from the sari covering the head and the body to wearing a hijab that covers the hair, face, hands, and feet (as well as the body). While men will not be responsible for their feelings and urges, women and girls have to ensure that nothing in their appearance, speech, action, or even looking a man in the eye will give the slightest sign of encouragement. Not covering her breasts with her scarf is immodest and asking for attention. A boy or man pulling at a girl's scarf or '*orna*' is considered to be an attack on her honour ('*izzat*').

Women working outside the home have to be careful in protecting their 'honour' as well as the 'honour' of their families. They have gone against the traditional norms in choosing to work outside the home and have to prove that they are able to maintain *purdah* while being exposed to men and the outside world (Kabeer 2000). It is important for women to protect their honour and also the family honour by not attracting attention or blame and maintaining their 'goodness' and purity. The sexual purity of the women and girls are among the most emotional aspects of the family's and individual's honour ('*shomman*' and '*izzat*'). In the case of unmarried girls, this would mean virginity and in the case of married women, this would mean 'faithfulness' to the married partner. While any slurs or attacks on their chastity might not be the responsibility of the girls, society will blame them first and hold their families responsible for allowing this to happen. Therefore, in the case of sexual assault or in the worst-case scenario of rape, it is the victim who is considered to be dishonoured.

While norms around dress were somewhat more relaxed in Uganda, women certainly made comments about needing to dress properly and 'uninvitingly' – though often this was as much a coping strategy to avoid harassment as about dress code. Among those who were Muslim, dress codes appeared to be stricter, as this female domestic worker in Uganda indicates:

There is a lot of immorality. At least for us Muslims we dress decently but you can see a girl almost moving around naked, and they call it 'modernity' but it ends up costing them... People don't get to see my body shape to attract them to me, maybe to ask me for sex or to touch me because of my type of dress code. For us Muslims, for religious reasons we are not supposed to show our body shape to strangers. Only your husband can see and admire you. To fulfil this virtue, we always advised to wear big, baggy dresses which are expected to be

long, not to show the legs or even the thighs. So it's hard for someone to really tell whether you have a big bum, or breasts or nice legs, those things that normally attract the attention of the men. So I get blessings from Allah and at the same time keep safe from such uncertainties.

Most women have internalised these norms and also reproduce them. For instance, one firm worker in Bangladesh said she needs to avoid a fan in one room as it might blow her *orna* (headscarf) from her head, which might attract male attention. Another woman commented about this: 'If the *orna* flies away, that's her problem. You have to keep working. If she cannot keep her *orna* from flying away, that's her issue. No one else is at fault.' And another woman said: 'Men should not be blamed unilaterally; women have faults also. If a woman gives a man a chance, he will definitely avail the chance.' This was observed in Uganda too, where a domestic worker said: 'Most times women say that there is no woman who can be harassed without consenting it'.

Such norms are carried into the workplace which explains how sexual harassment persists, but also why voicing and resisting sexual harassment is a challenge. Bangladeshi young women were less articulate when discussing sexual harassment, often refusing to use explicit language. In later sections, we demonstrate how this also limited their agency.

7. Forms and prevalence of workplace sexual harassment and dynamics of risk

This section explains the different forms of workplace sexual harassment experienced by the women who participated in our study. It draws on the data generated in the focus group discussions, in which safety audits and body mappings were conducted. Early on in the study it became clear that workplace sexual harassment is not the only form of abuse of power that young women are exposed to. Closely connected to the precarity of their jobs, most young workers reported that they are being yelled at and punished verbally and physically, are addressed with disrespect, and generally treated badly. While this was particularly the case for domestic workers, also factory workers reported being treated inhumanely when, for instance, needing to use the bathroom, arriving late, or making mistakes. This treatment compounds other aspects of precarious work such as low and infrequent pay, job insecurity, and lack of social security.

The live-in domestic workers in Uganda reported having working days of 15 hours on average and hardly getting time off. In Bangladesh, social hierarchies are emphasised by not allowing the domestic workers to wear shoes, sit on the chairs, or eat from the same dishes. Domestic workers reported being constantly criticised by the female employers, while in some households they are verbally abused in obscene language, or by invoking the worthlessness, illiteracy, or bad character of their parents, which domestic workers find the most offensive. The majority of domestic workers in both countries had experienced physical abuse at least once, which often meant being slapped or pushed. More severe cases of physical abuse were also reported, such as the pouring of hot water on the domestic worker's body for breaking a glass, or scorching them with a hot spatula for making a mistake in their cooking. Firm workers in Bangladesh did not report any physical abuse, while several domestic workers who had previously worked in garment factories did report slapping and hitting by their supervisors or 'in-charge'.

The data from the focus group discussions with visual methods demonstrated a wide range of forms of sexual harassment, with the acts that are easy to do and easily go unnoticed being the most common. Non-physical forms of sexual harassment include verbal harassment and inappropriate sounds and looks (most frequently experienced in both countries and for both types of workers), followed by gestures. Physical forms of harassment included men touching a woman, from 'accidentally' to very

directly groping her breasts or other parts of the body, or pressing themselves against her. This also includes men touching their own body and/or showing their body parts. Verbal harassment and touches were experienced by all domestic workers and factory workers in Uganda, whereas factory workers in Bangladesh reported less experiences of being touched.

For both countries, it was observed that domestic workers are more likely to experience forms of sexual harassment and in its most severe forms: sexual assault and rape. Domestic workers are far more vulnerable to sexual harassment because of the isolated nature of their work, as they often find themselves in the presence of a man without witnesses. They are also more vulnerable because they belong to relatively poorer families than firm workers, often having few years of education. In a few cases, domestic workers experienced sustained sexual harassment, which developed into sexual exploitation by male members of the household until they were able to leave the household.

The most important difference between the two countries was that firm workers in Bangladesh reported less instances of sexual harassment than in Uganda. Further, if and when it happened, the harassers were more likely to be co-workers rather than supervisors or managers. Assault, rape, and exploitation were not reported by the Bangladeshi factory workers in this study. The Ugandan firm workers reported on this in implicit terms, without mentioning the words rape or sex. Some of the firm workers said how they had been called to the supervisor's office. Two quotes, from different women, allude to threat of rape but whether it did happen remained unclear:

Both times, I talked to my friend about it and for the supervisor she told me not to go back to his office when he sends [for] me.

I joined the company permanently when I was 17 years old. The supervisor wanted to use me and I would see the way he looked at me and tried to ask this and that. He wanted me to see him in his office. I talked to my Bakiga friends, tribe mates and they advised me not to. I have realised it was good for me to stay away from home, self-respect and peer support which assisted in that case.

This report will address this difference between Bangladesh and Uganda in later sections, which appeared to be the result of three factors: (a) the labour force of the selected firms in Bangladesh was largely recruited from the area in which the firm was based, with various social networks extending into the firms; (b) regulations appeared to be more strictly implemented; and (c) patriarchy and gender norms influenced the role of senior male supervisors, who felt responsible for the honour of female

workers in lieu of parents and guardians. In some factories, gender segregation policies – again informed by social norms that prohibit interaction between genders – meant that women do not work in close proximity to male co-workers. Many factories have segregated work floors and canteens, and some firms have rules that prohibit men and women talking. Both limit the opportunities for harassment to some extent.

7.1 Romance and ambiguity

One firm in Bangladesh had strict rules about men and women talking or meeting, but a few factories seemed to have a reputation as a place for dating. Respondents from one particular factory called the factory a 'love go-down (warehouse)'. A few of the respondents from this factory had met their partners and got married while working together. Although these love affairs were mostly between the workers, there were a few stories about 'love' between the supervisor and the worker. For unmarried firm workers especially, the line between romance and harassment could be ambiguous, but if a girl refused attention, then love interest could develop into harassment. The description of one firm worker concerning how a boy approaches a girl could be interpreted as stalking if the girl is not willing:

The guy keeps asking for it [phone number] for several days. The girl cannot understand so the guy needs to show his presence. For example, walking along with the girl from a distance or keeping standing in front of the factory gate are ways he does that.

For domestic workers, however, power dynamics in relationships with employers and male household members were more apparent. In Bangladesh, few domestic workers mentioned instances of '*bhalobasha*' (love) between a male employer and domestic worker and, even in their own analysis, it was not clear whether the relationship was out of their free will or coerced. Many domestic workers believe that, irrespective of whether it is love or not, there are domestic workers who willingly engage in relationships for gifts and money. Some gave examples of domestic workers in the community who provide sexual favours in exchange for money; and one quarter of the domestic workers interviewed reported that they were offered money for sex, but they refused. Whatever the arrangement, one domestic worker eloquently put the dynamics into perspective: 'But these things aren't triggered from our side. Mostly they [employers] trigger these things' (body mapping, Kallyanpur).

Some Ugandan domestic workers reported that sons of the household had shown a love interest in them, which did not necessarily lead to

harassment. One of them had an actual relationship with the son of her employers and said they were in love and happy. But when she got pregnant, she was sent away by her employer. Plenty of rumours about potential (extra-marital) love affairs circulated among Ugandan firm workers, without needing to be harassment or exploitative relationships. However, they also indicated that some relationships do not start out of love: 'Most of the workers who get in relationships with male workers do it because they are promised a salary increment,' said one.

In Uganda, young women elaborated that men use 'gradual' and 'persuasive' approaches, starting off **as if** they are romantically interested in them. Men offer gifts, promise marriage, and indicate a desire to have children with them. They admitted they had sometimes smiled and entertained such acts, but that it would be hard for women to detect serious and genuine men from harassers. Many young women thus accommodate and accept it. 'If they don't touch us, how shall we get partners?', some young women wondered. Especially for domestic workers, 'being approached to have sex' in unaggressive ways would precede acts that could be considered more blatant forms of harassment, making it sometimes very hard for young women to see such acts as harassment. Many had a hard time understanding what was going on, especially if they were unmarried and very young. In Bangladesh, where class differences between workers and their households are starker, such approaches and proposals were more quickly assessed as inappropriate. The Ugandan women also referred to family pressures concerning marriage, whereby parents encourage and persuade daughters to find partners:

Some parents keep asking their daughters when they are getting married, which creates pressure on these girls. When these men approach them, many tend to think these men are serious and will marry them, start a family and thus answer their parents' unending demands.

Findings suggested that some young Ugandan women may accept or tolerate men's gestures because of family (and societal) pressure, against their best interest. They may also stay in harmful relationships as a proof to society that they are married and can maintain their marriages.

These findings demonstrate the ambiguity in understanding sexual harassment at work. Conventional understandings have focused on the employer/supervisor relationship to the worker where the abuse of power involved, for instance, meeting production quota, or keeping a job or promotion. While these types of incidents were found in this study, the findings also show that many women experience sexual harassment by male co-workers who can abuse power because of being men whose sexually

offensive behaviour is likely to be forgiven and because young women cannot place the meaning of their 'polite approaches' for sex. Finally, being approached for romance or with the promise of marriage, women from poor backgrounds may consent and thus demonstrate agency. However, the validity of this consent remains highly questionable due to the conditions under which consent was given and the stark power differentials between the two parties, in particular, whereby women may also feel they need to consent because of society's social and gender norms concerning marriage.

7.2 Non-physical forms of sexual harassment

In Bangladesh, where gender norms limit possible social interactions between men and women outside of marriage and family relationships, particular conversations quickly transgress such norms, and even subtle and seemingly innocent verbal expressions can suggest that men approach and address women with the wrong intentions. Physical proximity can play a role. For instance, one domestic worker explained how her employer's husband asked her to sit next to him:

He said: 'You are married but you are living here on your own? Don't you feel bad being on your own?' I didn't like that conversation. At first, I thought they were innocent queries. Then I didn't quite like the direction he was going in and left [the room]. He used to make up excuses about [asking for] drinking water and trying to strike up a conversation with me.

Plenty of such examples refer to seemingly innocent questions, from asking for a glass of water to an apparently friendly gesture to talk about her life. More directly, men have asked for massages. The domestic workers would always be highly alert and suspicious when such requests were made and would make up various excuses to refuse. They sometimes feel angry and sometimes scared and they search for ways of getting out of the situation, for example by responding loudly so that others may hear them, going to a room with other people, or a room from where they can run out more easily.

Comments could appear to be compliments, like comments about beauty, but were experienced as harassment because of the tone and facial expression of the men or because of the age and relationship to the worker. For instance, male peers might express similar compliments when genuinely interested in romance, while in Bangladesh even romantic expressions would be considered inappropriate but not (yet) harassment. Some comments were downright sexually offensive such as 'I want to enter you' and 'I want to have sex with you'. Other comments had sexual undertones and were deeply derogatory and disrespectful, which one domestic worker illustrated:

That man who wanted to have sex with me always says 'ndi gaali ekozeko' – I am like a used bike. That actually means a lot of things. It can mean you are not 'fresh', not original, etc., all of which imply that I am of less value compared to other girls. One time I didn't want to sleep with him and I feared and he said my breasts 'were all down like pawpaws'.

With the reference to the 'used bike', the man implies that the woman is not a virgin and has had (or has been used for) sex previously and she is thus old. This is intentionally used to undermine the young woman's self-esteem and to intimidate her to accept his proposal. Table 7.1 shows the phrases commonly used in Luganda,³ many of which appear to be appreciative but were abusive and types of verbal sexual harassment.

³ The Bantu language of the Baganda people, widely used in Uganda and having over 2 million speakers.

Table 7.1 Verbal forms of sexual harassment in Luganda

Words in Luganda	Translation in English
<i>Olina ennyindo endaalo</i>	You have a nice pointed nose
<i>Figure print ya muzigo</i>	Well-shaped body like a self-contained room
<i>Oli maali</i>	You are money
<i>Ekitumbwe</i>	Nice legs
<i>Amafiga</i>	Nice figure
<i>Ebiiso</i>	Nice eyes
<i>Ettutu</i>	Pointed breasts
<i>Ka hips ko kakikuba</i>	Your hips look stunning
<i>Wayawula wato</i>	She has a smartly separated waistline
<i>Mwana deemu omkuba</i>	You attract me
<i>Oliko ebiseera</i>	You are endowed with neck beauty marks
<i>Njagala kukulya</i>	I want to eat you up
<i>Onzita/onkuba</i>	You kill me
<i>Ontemaatema</i>	You make me boneless
<i>Ondi mu misuwa</i>	You are in my veins
<i>Njagala ku kuba munda</i>	I want to enter you
<i>Wabula mwana ggwe wabala</i>	Girl you are gifted with a nice body shape
<i>Ng'oliko FACO</i>	You have a big butt as if it is from FACO (FACO is a Uganda company which sells body products)
<i>Eeh!! ng'oli mulungi njagala tubeere ffenna</i>	Wow! As you are very beautiful, I want to marry you
<i>Kino kirina ebbere</i>	This one has big breasts
<i>Laba akabina</i>	See the butt
<i>Nze nga bwondabila wano nja gala ku kola</i>	As you see me here, I want to have sex with you
<i>Size yange</i>	My size/my level
<i>Ontambulira mu mutima</i>	She walks in his heart
<i>Wabula omwana yakula bulungi!</i>	Haaa! That girl has a good shape
<i>Ompaako ddi?</i>	When will you give me sex?
<i>Wakula bulungi</i>	Nice body shape
<i>Esther onompaako ddi?</i>	Esther, when shall we have sex?
<i>Wabula Onyirira, oli mulungi, wabula nkwegala njagala kuwasa</i>	Oh my! You're so hot, you're very beautiful, and I would like to marry you
<i>Gundi naawe tugenda ddi ne tulya ku ssente?</i>	When shall we go for an outing?
<i>Maaso glory</i>	Beautiful big eyes

Source: Authors' own.

Table 7.2 Verbal forms of sexual harassment in Bangladesh

Words in Bengali	Translation in English
<i>Kochi daab chai, paka daab chai na</i>	Want green coconuts not ripe coconuts
<i>Chheri'r ki obostha. Agei mone hoi chhelerata hataisse, mataisse</i>	Look at her (breasts)! Looks like they have already been fondled and squeezed by men
<i>Maal tah toh bhalo</i>	The goods look good
<i>Na re, maal ta jeh jaitasse, bhaloi toh lage. Arek din dekhle mon da bhore jaito</i>	Look at the goods going – nice! I would be happy to see it another day
<i>Ei chheri re ei kaam koira bia korum na! Fau khamu!</i>	I will do this with her! I won't marry her! I'll eat her for free
<i>[At the bus stand] Ei gari ta khali acchhe apa! Chhole ashen! Bhara dia dimu</i>	<i>[At the bus stand] This bus is empty! Come on board! I'll pay for your ticket!</i>
<i>Pachhata oi rokom!</i>	That's called an ass!
<i>Koto number size?</i>	What's the size number?
<i>Jhule jhule</i>	Hanging, hanging
<i>Gari, machine</i>	Car, machine – words for women
<i>Oi begun tai toh ogo lagbo. Lomba begun na gol begun</i>	That's the eggplant she needs! Long ones or round ones?
<i>Tui amare ador jotno koira dey</i>	Take care of me/give me love
<i>Uthai niya jabo</i>	I will kidnap you
Hey darling!	Hey darling!
<i>Koto shundor ekta maal jaitasse. Chol niya jai!</i>	Look at the beautiful goods! Let's take her away
<i>Dekor maiya! Shundor! Dhoka lagbe</i>	Ripe woman! Beautiful! Have to enter (fuck)!
<i>Kache ai! Dudh check di!</i>	Come close! Let's check out the milk (breasts)
<i>Boro boro dudh</i>	Big breasts
<i>Ore nichher dik ta eksom pitha'r moton. Ki pitha kinte ascho keno?</i>	Her lower portion is just like a <i>pitha</i> (handmade sweets)! Why have you come to buy <i>pitha</i> ?
<i>Dekh ki shundor</i>	Look how beautiful she is
<i>Dekh! Oigula ki bhari! Size koto?</i>	Look at her! Look how heavy they are! What's your size?
<i>Dekh tor bou/darling jaitasse</i>	Look at your wife/darling going!
<i>Tui eto shundor! Manusher barite kaj korish ken?</i>	You are so beautiful! Why do you work in peoples' houses?
<i>Maal ta bhaloi! Khaite parle bhalo hoito!</i>	The goods look pretty good! Wish I could eat it!
<i>Tor figure ta ki shundor</i>	Your figure [understood as breasts] is nice!

Source: Authors' own.

In the case of factory workers, the Ugandan workers reported instances of verbal abuse from both co-workers and supervisors. Bangladeshi firm workers reported that co-workers were more likely to express such comments than supervisors, but that comments were mostly uttered outside of the work floor and out of sight of the supervisors. Here, the most explicit words of harassment were shared by the young women working in the dairy sections of firms. As the Bangla word 'dudh' (milk) is one of the words used for 'breasts', sexual insinuations were easily expressed. One of the workers said:

In the milk section, we check the litre of the milk packets. So boys from different sections tell the young girls, 'Come close, and let's check out the milk'. They use this kind of bad language.

Ugandan participants noted that gestures were very common, like winking, pointing the middle finger, and scratching the palm among others. Here, the firm workers said that since employees do not have much time to talk, men used gestures to deliver their message. In Bangladesh, all workers were able to narrate detailed examples of bad and nasty looks. However, the expression of 'stares' is also used to express that other forms of sexual harassment have occurred, as Section 7.3 will show.

It was clear that 'milder' forms of harassment can create a deeply uncertain and uncomfortable work situation for the women. One of the Ugandan firm workers said:

I do feel unsafe more especially with that supervisor, who persuaded me for an affair and I refused. Sometimes I don't want to find him anywhere just the two of us because I think he is capable of hurting me, maybe by raping. He has a lot of anger on me even when he is talking to me, I see it in his eyes. The language he uses when talking with me is threatening. He shows a lot of authority and it makes me feel unwelcome. One time he said he would make sure I lose the job because I think I am so unique and beautiful, and proud.

7.3 Touching and rubbing

In Bangladesh, only the domestic workers reported more blatant forms of sexual harassment such as touching or men touching themselves, which in most cases was done by the male head of the household, but also their guests – particularly elderly relatives who would propose the worker for

'companionship'. Also, sons of the household were named. A 23-year-old married worker spoke of the time when she was a new worker in a household:

In a house where I worked, the male head of that house talked very little. He talked very little but when I went to mop their floor, he [husband] always looked at me. He looked at me with very bad intention... He did the same thing for two or three more days. He would come after his bath and while I cleaned the floor or cut the onions, and slowly drop his towel so that I could see all his stuff.

One day when she wasn't home, her son stayed and I did my work. He worked silently in his room and I was alone working in the room. I had to sweep and clean the floor. He slapped on his penis and hip and made a weird sound so that he might get my attention. But I didn't look at him.

Three or four of the domestic workers also talked about how the men of the household would creep into their beds at night or when their wife was not at home. Asking for massages is also a common ploy instead of directly asking for sex, mentioned by four of the Bangladeshi respondents.

In the beginning, I used to sit in kitchen and eat my meal. He would sit on a chair in front of me. He would sit in a way that you could see everything. Then he would flick aside the lower part of his lungi [wrapper/skirt for men] and lift up the upper portion. Then he would call me to massage his feet. I would press his feet. Then he would say, I have had a long day, press my head.

In Uganda, both domestic and factory workers gave accounts of unwanted touching, and in the case of firm workers this included both co-workers and supervisors, who tend to be older males. Some indicated that supervisors can summon anyone to their offices any time, and they linked physical forms of harassment to opportunities for promotion and retention and doing more convenient shifts. Participants noted that even gatemen harass new female applicants on receiving their application documents.

Yes, there is a supervisor who targets when I am really busy and concentrating and he comes trying to squeeze himself in those small corridors between boxes. Definitely if one doesn't move out, then the two of you end up rubbing your bodies together. The other time the supervisor touched my waist and then my breast which led me to report to my mother. Both times I felt very unsafe and very angry and that's why I reported.

The firm workers indicated that sexual harassment was more likely to target new employees compared to the ones who had been working for longer. On the map in Figure 7.1, from the safety audit with firm workers, they explained that within the factory premises every space can be risky, but they highlighted the kitchen area on the left side, because that is where men get the time to mingle and be with the women and girls and can do 'all sorts of things': verbal, facial expressions, signs, and even touching female bodies when food was distributed. In addition, other common spaces were the boss's and supervisor's offices, the toilets, the corridors within the firm, and the parking lot.

Figure 7.1 Map produced in safety audit with firm workers, Uganda



Photographer: © Victoria Flavia Namuggala.

7.4 Sexual assault and (attempted) rape

Only domestic workers reported severe forms of sexual harassment such as sexual assault and (attempted) rape, which is most likely explained by their isolated working conditions. In Bangladesh, few domestic workers reported to have experienced assault or rape themselves while all said it was 'very common' and were able to share stories of rape in their neighbourhood. In Uganda, domestic workers reported about other domestic workers having experienced rape, while several reported to have experienced assault and attempted rape. One participant elaborated how she felt unsafe in the household due to several rape attempts by her male boss:

Madam, this man tried two times to rape me! Okay he did several attempts but these two were so serious. It was a battle and even my muscles hurt and my blouse's buttons fell off. I think he came ready to eat me! It was on that second time that I decided that I had to leave that home and opted to look for another household to work in. I knew I wouldn't survive the third time. It all started easy and he was asking gently [asking for sex], and at times begging but when I refused several times, his attitude totally changed.

8. Expressing sexual harassment

In both countries, findings show that an adequate vocabulary or language with which to **report** incidents of workplace sexual harassment, or sexual harassment in general, is lacking. The explicitness of, for instance, the English language used to describe the various acts committed is not in line with the gender and social norms frameworks in Bangladesh and Uganda; and words like 'sexuality' and 'harassment' are difficult to translate (Muhanguzi 2011). In both countries, women would use language that concealed what had actually happened, which significantly undermines their claims to an offence or crime when they would report it. The findings furthermore clearly showed that many women do not recognise certain forms of sexual harassment as such, unless it is sexual assault or rape. The existing taboo and lack of language for sexual comments, gestures, and touching, or when men push their bodies against women's bodies, are felt as unpleasant and scary, but not recognised as harassment in the meaning of transgressive or criminal behaviour.

In Bangladesh, the discourse on sexual harassment presented by both categories of workers were heavily marked with terms relating to 'honour' and 'shame'. Shame ('*lajja*' or '*shorom*') is supposed to be felt by women when they are looked at or commented on, and this was mentioned by many of our interviewees. They identified sexual assault as something that 'taints' them for life, and it is something that can never be reversed. Bangla expressions of being raped often use words relating to a woman's honour that has been taken or gone (ইজ্জত নেয়া/ ইজ্জত যাওয়া). Participants often mentioned their family members who warned them about not 'losing their honour' at work. A 26-year-old married domestic worker mentioned that her husband told her to always be careful of keeping her honour (মান-সম্মান বাচায় চলবা). Many participants mentioned that women should maintain their 'honour' and being sexually assaulted is no better than being dead.

A 25-year-old married domestic worker, while referring to an incident of sexual harassment of her cousin, mentioned that 'when we lose our honour, can we get it back?' (আমার যে মানসম্মান গেছে, এটা কি ফেরত পাবো). A similar idea of shame and honour was echoed in the expressions of a 26-year-old domestic worker. While narrating an incident of a neighbour being raped, the participant mentioned that the girl was offered money as an act of appeasement. The girl then refused to take the money because, according to her, her honour was lost for life. She narrated:

Then he said: 'Forget it, you don't need to work in my house. I am giving you some money in return'. I said, 'Will your money regain my dignity [সম্মান]? Take your money back.'

The importance of norms and living by the societal expectations of chastity is reflected in the expressions used by the participants when they identified sexual harassment as an act of shame brought upon them. By repeatedly referring to the ideas of 'honour' and 'shame', most participants clearly stated its value in their lives. The precariousness of a woman working in houses or in factories was captured in the words of a migrant domestic worker: 'It is true that he did wrong, but I have values and honour. If I lose my honour, do I have the right to live? What would people think!'

A common feature in the language of the participants was their use of generic phrases that indicated sexual harassment. Most of these terms did not inherently have any sexual meaning to them. For example, Bangla words such as 'অত্যাচার' and 'নির্যাতন', meaning 'torture' were repeatedly used to mean that a sexual crime was committed on someone. Also, while describing a threat of abducting someone with a sexual intention, a participant used the term 'kidnapping' which did not convey the essence of sexual harassment. Similarly, the use of words such as 'দুর্ঘটনা' (accident) found among both domestic and factory workers was misleading, which conveyed that the perpetrator neither carried the responsibility nor the volition that resulted in the sexual crime.

Within the practice of using generic and unclear expressions to talk about sexual harassment, there was also an awareness of the need to adjust language according to the relationship with the actor the women speak or report to. When the participants were asked whether they would share an incident of sexual harassment with their supervisor, their family, their friends, and/or their co-workers, they clearly identified the people whom they could share this with and why. Most women said that they would describe incidents differently depending on whom they are talking to, with social distance and power often determining their expressions relating to sexual harassment. For example, an 18-year-old married domestic worker reported that she would use different expressions while narrating the incident to different people.

Q: Torture (অত্যাচার), okay. How would you describe or what words would you use to describe it to the people like you, who work as domestic workers?

A: I would tell them that he tortured me and stared at me in a bad manner (আমার উপর অত্যাচার করে, খারাপ ভাবে তাকায়).

Q: And if you were to tell this to your husband, what would you say?

A: I would tell him that the man where I work was bad, he stared at me in a bad manner and behaved strangely.

There were also nuances between the types of workers within countries. The linguistic analysis of interviews showed that firm workers in Bangladesh used **fewer** phrases to describe the crimes and the criminals, and their language was more generic. Also, there were a lot of commonalities in the expressions used by these participants, suggesting that experience at work has created a collective language of expressing sexual harassment. For example, many of them mentioned phrases such as 'বিরক্ত করসে' (disturbed me), 'খারাপ ভাষা' (bad language), and 'খারাপ কাজ' (bad things) to refer to the sexual harassment experienced by them. As opposed to this, it was noted that the expressions used by the domestic workers were more graphic and elaborate. Since domestic workers work in an isolated and private setting, this may have led to individuals creating a variety of expressions, rather than the development of a shared language as in the case of the factory workers. For example, expressions such as 'থাবড়া থাবড়ি করছে, জাবড়া জাবড়ি করছে' (groped and hugged forcefully), 'প্যান্ট খুলে ফেলে' (takes off pants), 'গাল ধরে টান মারে' (pulled my cheek), and 'দুধের মধ্যে হাত লাগায়' (touches the breasts) were reported by the domestic workers which were infrequent in the factory workers' narratives.

In Uganda, many Lugandan words that are about sexual harassment are considered obscene, which hinders voice and agency. Victims use different words, which do not exactly reflect what has happened to them, because they are afraid to sound vulgar. Hence the language used to report cases to others is usually polished. For example: 'ankutte' is used when they report rape, but its original meaning is 'has touched me'. It is difficult for the victim to express the deed of forced penetrative sex, which is 'okukaka omukwano'. Women feel strongly constrained to utter this phrase in court, to a police officer, or to a local leader.

In Uganda, the everyday language and slang that young women used among peers was richer and more descriptive than the language they felt they could use with adults and formal authorities. When asked how they speak among each other, firm workers were found to use language that is less offending to the victims yet also less implicating for the perpetrators. One firm worker, for instance, said:

I told my friend the next day... We just talked jokingly and I told her 'okimanyi nti ono omusajja yabadde eggulo ayagala kundyawo?', meaning 'do you know that this man wanted to eat me up last night?'

This quote presents clues that only another female peer would be able to place and interpret and contains 'youth-friendly slang' in urban settings. With this phrase, the woman wants to convey that the man (her boss) wanted to rape her without using the word rape. It is comfortable yet clear language directed to the friend. It is also socially acceptable language: she expresses the acts without saying the exact words, which would be considered vulgar and inappropriate. While this enabled the woman to narrate what happened, at the same time she reproduces existing taboos related to talking about sexuality. According to existing gender norms, using decent language demonstrates that she is a 'disciplined' woman and she would be considered 'undisciplined' and as a person who lacks values if she were to use the explicitly (deemed vulgar) language.

Among female co-workers, who are peers, the Ugandan firm workers said they mainly chat and 'joke' on the way home from work, which is when they talk about 'who dates who amongst us the workers, which supervisor loves which worker and why, who was dumped by who, such things because it's the other order of the day at work'. At the same time, they warn one another on known perpetrators within the firm.

The lack of adequate language and use of euphemisms are most profound when workers raise or formally report sexual harassment with employers and authorities. In Uganda, there is a stark contrast between the everyday language and slang used among peers and the vocabulary used for others. Certain matters are unspeakable in public (*'ebitayisibwa mu kamwa'*: unspeakable matters). Consequently, young women use indirect language that masks the actual facts about what happened, which subsequently dilutes the evidence and clarity in the process. One woman explained how she had to adjust her language when reporting to local government: 'The chairman was an old man, so I had to be polite otherwise he would chase me away.' Examples of adjusted language include *'okujula ebitayiide'* (eating half-cooked food) while referring to defilement, *'okuliisa amaanyi'* (eating with force) while referring to rape. While socially acceptable, such language disadvantaged the victims in pursuing justice. Police can understand to some degree but need explicit language to file cases. For instance, *okuliisa amaanyi* can mean 'greed'.

Reporting cases beyond immediate social circles was more likely to meet public attitudes blaming the women, and rejection of their vulnerability and victim status, in particular if cases are not as severe as rape. If a woman was not a virgin before the rape, this is held against them. Some of the women reported receiving reactions such as, 'What did he take from you after all [e.g. virginity]?', 'Do you think you are still young?', 'Are you a

virgin?' These comments trivialise the cases, dismiss the innocence of the victim, and deter the need for filing complaints and searching for justice.

Furthermore, women who report are perceived as 'proud' and even 'backward' ('ekyalo'/'amaalo'). Generally, it is believed that village girls who move to the city lack the life skills and capacity to defend themselves and therefore 'resort' to reporting. One migrant said, 'When you stand up for yourself, people think you are stupid or villagish and you don't know how city girls behave.' Accusations of pride blame women for thinking they are special and different, which was for instance referred to as a reason why firm workers will not find support among female colleagues and find they become the talk of the day at the workplace, reinforcing victimisation.

Inequalities related to class and caste intersected with norms. For domestic workers in Bangladesh, social class hierarchies between employers and workers were the most evident factor constraining making complaints and demanding for alternative work arrangements or behaviours. A Ugandan worker reflected:

It's very hard to get justice because people doubt the stories of the vulnerable. Some might have said I'm a social climber. The police also connive with the perpetrators so basically its better you secure your integrity if you still can.

In Bangladesh, no clear association between formal education and language use was observed. Some of the most elaborate narratives with explicit language came from the women who had little or no formal education. In Uganda, however, those who had talked, challenged sexual harassment, and raised it beyond the circle of immediate friends and family, were those with relatively more education.

To conclude, this section has demonstrated how gender norms around expressing oneself intersect with social norms around hierarchies of class and age. In both countries, older women and men are to be treated with respect, looked up to and obeyed. The following sections analyse how these power hierarchies and norms influence voice and agency in response to workplace sexual harassment.

9. Voice and agency: gender norms and other dynamics in reporting

Before we turn to the analysis of how women voice instances of sexual harassment to others, this section discusses some of the known factors that may enhance women's voice, agency, and empowerment. The conceptual section of this report highlighted that having access to information and structures promoting collective voice and action are important for strengthening awareness about sexual harassment for their capacity to take action. However, such socio-political resources were hardly present in the case studies. The findings in this final empirical section are based on interview data, whereby interviewers focused on actual incidents of harassment experienced and what the women did in response in terms of talking to others. Asking women to explain, in their own words, how they had talked about the incident(s) with different people enabled the analysis of language they used for different types of actors.

9.1 Access to information and collective support structures

It is not surprising that the female workers across the cases had no or limited knowledge on laws and frameworks, and formal procedures for reporting sexual harassment cases, which compounded other challenges related to reporting to the police and employers, as later sections demonstrate. Limited awareness about what constitutes sexual harassment if it is not rape, adds to these challenges. Here, findings show that all women have heard about or know of cases of sexual violence and rape that happened in their neighbourhoods, and have also heard of cases in the media (with the exception of Ugandan domestic workers who are not allowed in rooms when the TV is on). These tend to be 'worst cases' such as rape and defilement, with media highlighting the severity of cases if victims are children and minors. One Ugandan woman, for instance, shared this example:

Yes, when still in the village in Mukono there was a girl in the neighbourhood who got pregnant from a teacher at her school. When she reported to her parents that she was pregnant, they went to speak to the head teacher. The parents thought the head teacher was going to act accordingly, but after a few weeks, the man was back at work. The parents then went to police hoping to get help. The police officer asked them for money to start working on their case, which they did not have. It was bad because

the girl dropped out of school but the man continued with his normal life. Out of this story, I learnt to be content with the little I have, because I think this girl was seduced with the small gifts this teacher used to give her.

This story indicates the moral judgement on the teacher and police, but at the same time conveys how this woman learns a 'lesson' about how to avoid harassment. Furthermore, the story also endorses the perspective that sexual harassment equates to rape, which trivialises less severe forms of sexual harassment. Moreover, the story underlines a popular perception that sexual harassment only needs a response if rape caused pregnancy outside of a likely marriage. The media sources accessed by the workers in this study usually do not discuss more nuanced forms of harassment, which contributes to these perspectives.

Concerning the potential avenues for support and collective action, the data show that unions and associations did not figure at all in the narratives of the participants. This underscores the limited relevance of these institutions to women workers in both countries, which offer no viable avenues for reporting sexual harassment cases or complaints about workplace safety. This meant that all workers needed to rely on personal networks and, in the case of firm workers, on firm-based mechanisms.

As alluded to, domestic workers have limited networks where they reside, in particular when they are 'live-in' workers; and also when they are new to the city, they do not have family or friends nearby. Live-in Ugandan domestic workers noted that, as migrants, they are entirely dependent on their employers and would in most cases not act contrary to the employers' instructions. Some of the Ugandan domestic workers were forbidden to have mobile phones, limiting their interaction with potential support networks. Some households prohibited workers to leave the compound entirely. While several workers acknowledged that this was a safety measure to protect them from harassment in public spaces, this limited their access to information and social contact. Several reported that there was limited access to health-care facilities, which could be an alternative avenue for reporting challenges and abuse at work. The situation of firm workers is different on all accounts because they commute to work and have community networks, but also because of the collective nature of their work. Implications for voice and agency will be analysed in later sections.

In the following sections, we discuss how gender norms influenced the **absence** of voicing as well as the voicing to immediate support networks and reporting of cases to formal institutions. The next section analyses coping mechanisms in the absence of voice, followed by the analysis of

workers seeking support from family and friends, and co-workers. Thereafter, the analysis turns to formally reporting to firms, and local authorities.

9.2 Fending for yourself: avoidance, self-protection, and self-defence

Given the various major barriers to talking about instances of sexual harassment to others, let alone reporting or filing a complaint using formal channels and institutions, and the limited chances of this leading to any redress and/or punishment, it is not surprising that most young women feel that the responsibility of responding to and dealing with sexual harassment at work rests on their shoulders. The findings show that, on the one hand, sexual harassment is 'normalised' as part of working life, while on the other hand, all women who participated in this study will do everything they can to avoid it, and especially all physical forms of sexual harassment. We also encountered women who actively resisted attempts when they occurred, showing 'agency in the act'. For instance, two domestic workers in Uganda told us:

Concerning aunt's brother, the first time he did that, haaaa!! I almost slapped him and shouted at the top of my voice while telling him to stop his stupid behaviours... I have to protect myself showing him that I am not interested. I became rude...

One day the husband to my boss one day found me mopping the house and he touched my waist. When I told him not to do it ever again, he told me he was only joking – it didn't mean anything. He asked me not to tell his wife. But I know how men start and if you are not clear right from the start that you are not interested, then it becomes routine or even worsens. But for the sake of their marriage, I chose to keep quiet.

The quotes show that women can confront a man, while at the same time, the second quote shows that the norm to respect marriage influenced the woman not to take it further. We heard from young women in both countries that screaming and even slapping the perpetrators can be effective if it attracts a crowd to witness the act, as the act will then be condemned as sexual assault. A relatively older domestic worker in Bangladesh explained:

If she [a worker] shouts, ten people may hear this sound, then they will blame the man, not the girl. They [people] will think, something wrong is happening, otherwise why the girl shouted? But if the girl doesn't shout, people will think her bad and think the man is good.

This approach was also taken by a domestic worker who cleaned for a man in a busy building with multiple flats. Upon advice by her stepsister, she screamed and called for the attention of the neighbours (young men sharing a flat) and her harasser was exposed. They told him off, beat him up, and took money from him. The respondent was satisfied with the punishment and did not think of taking more formal measures. When asked whether she had reported to the police: 'No. They have punished him well. The boys, they snatched a good amount of money from him. What they did to him was enough.'

While many women will resist and defend themselves, the study also encountered women who endured sustained harassment, often due to lack of support networks and fall-back livelihood options. The best possible strategy, many agreed, is to avoid and prevent physical forms of sexual harassment from happening, while having to put up with verbal harassment. For both firm workers and domestic workers in the two countries, a major self-protection strategy is to wear the right clothes. In Bangladesh, religious and gender norms intersect and the importance of 'modesty' in appearance and conduct was emphasised frequently, manifesting in particular in the covering of the body and head. A 20-year-old married domestic worker emphasised that 'you always cover your head and body so that nobody looks at your body or say any bad thing towards you'. One of the firm workers noted that she made sure to avoid certain parts of the work floor where fans might blow her headscarf or dress and might expose her.

One Ugandan domestic worker explained how she dressed in long dresses when two brothers of her employer spent nights at the household where she worked, saying: 'They did not get a chance to see my body shape and my legs, or much of my body. When they left, one of them told his sister, that "*nsubidwa okulaba muwala wo bwe yabala*" (he had missed seeing what God gave me, how well shaped I was)'. Other young women in Uganda noted that dressing in ways that are 'less feminine', including trousers, helps to avoid sexual harassment, which is important especially when travelling to or from work very early or late at night. Some even expressed a sense of pride for having been clever and having denied men the opportunity to gaze on their bodies. At the same time, it denies young women the freedom to enjoy particular styles and fashions.

For domestic workers, who are vulnerable when working alone in the house, avoiding the presence of men was the most common tactic in both countries. If they found themselves with one man at home, they would try to avoid those rooms or do chores outside in the compound or yard. One 18-year-old married domestic worker in Bangladesh, who has been working for two years, explained how she works quickly to

be able to leave fast and if she finds there is a man alone in the house where she is supposed to work, she would not work there that day. Another domestic worker, 22 years old with five years of work experience, mentioned how the Madam would help her avoid the Master:

Madam always kept me beside her. She knows what her husband is like. Madam told me, 'Don't go to that place. Stay beside me when your Sir comes to home.' If he [male employer] calls me, I won't go there.

For firm workers, working in groups offered some protection to lone working and associated risk. In the case of firm workers, individual women would try to avoid rooms where they might find themselves alone with a male co-worker. They would go to lavatories in pairs and groups and walk together to and from work. In Bangladesh, it is common for women to be accompanied by male relatives, hence some firm workers are accompanied to work, not just because this is 'proper' but as a preventive strategy.

A relatively older and more senior worker, who had been working in a factory for six years, said she advises younger girls to bring their brothers and fathers to come along because then other men would not 'have the courage to do anything to you'. A newly married 18-year-old girl in Hemayatpur and her husband have negotiated that they do simultaneous day shifts one week and night shifts the next week to go to the factory together, although they work in different sections. If, for some reason, the husband does not go, her father-in-law walks her to the factory for the night shift.

If a male presence was unavoidable, then women would monitor and regulate their social interactions with men in particular ways. They would also do so if the men were not considered a threat, because this is part of norms governing social interactions whereby women should constrain themselves and avoid the wrong kind of attention. In Bangladesh, it is considered immodest or shameful to talk to a man in public. Keeping quiet and not talking back, keeping one's eyes down, and not looking men in the eye are non-provocative and non-confrontational tactics in keeping with the prevalent gender norms.

This is clearly visible in this response of a domestic worker who talks about being a 'good girl': 'Everyone knows me as a good girl from my childhood. But I don't talk much with men and don't mix up with them. If I talk to a man, gradually the man gets a line' (i.e. it creates an opportunity for the man to be familiar with her). In Bangladesh, two domestic workers and two unmarried factory workers mentioned that they would avoid talking to men entirely; and one new firm worker said she would remain silent even if someone said anything to her, so as not to provoke the men to do

anything bad. When speaking to men, addressing them follows prevailing conventions of posture and language, whereas women would avoid any language that could suggest 'inviting' or openness to any contact beyond the employment relationship. One tactic used by some domestic workers was to call the employer 'uncle', implying a non-sexual relationship.

Among the domestic workers who had more work and life experience, who also had the relative autonomy to choose the household they would work for, we encountered strategies to avoid possible 'risky employers' in the first place. One explained how she assessed a home: 'Before starting a job, when we visit first, we greet the family members and at a first glance we can identify who has bad intentions.' She gave the example of a household where she was interviewed, and the man did all the talking and the wife was silent and not allowed to talk. She decided not to join work there. She also said, 'It is easy to understand, you can get the sense just watching the faces of people. The way they talk. They will start paying attention and eventually cross the limit.'

Leaving employment was both a preventive strategy (leave before anything serious happens such as assault or rape, having received signals through looks or gestures) and a response to incidents occurring. While workers may depend on the income and may feel pressured by family and caring obligations to stay in the job, it was clear that the ultimate option was to leave the job if conditions became unbearable or threatening. Leaving employment may be upon the advice of others, as the next sections will show, but is also a choice some made on their own. In Uganda, domestic workers were somewhat more likely to seek informal support and find someone who might talk to the harasser, which was partly explained because they had more opportunities to go outside and interact with others and have the everyday language that exists to discuss harassment with peers.

In particular, domestic workers in Bangladesh, who felt less certain that reporting to the female employer or anyone else would help them, suggested they had only two options: endure harassment, or leave the household. A 27-year-old domestic worker clearly mentioned her preference towards quitting the job over speaking up about any sexual harassment at work. When she was asked whether she would report to the Madam of the house if she was sexually harassed in the house, she said that she would not be able to talk about it, and would rather leave the job:

Q: Could you talk about this incident to your employer Madam?

A: I can't do so.

Q: Why is that? Would she fire you or anything else?

A: No, I wouldn't. I would rather quit before saying.

Q: If she withholds your salary on account of quitting in the middle of the month... then?

A: I still can't say so. I would make up excuses such as I'm sick or I have to go to my village.

9.3 Seeking support

9.3.1 Family and friends

Hard as it is to discuss sexual harassment, the study found that most of the women who had experienced incidents of touching, groping, or worse, did tell someone they trusted. For domestic workers, especially those who live in, this would greatly depend on the opportunities for having contact outside of the household. In Uganda, some domestic workers were not allowed to have phones, further restricting the opportunities for contact with family and friends. Here, migrant workers were hampered by living far away from their families. In Bangladesh, the majority of the domestic workers identified their mothers and husbands as the person to speak to, followed by siblings and neighbours. In Uganda, domestic workers named parents and siblings, and neighbours.

In the firms in the selected research sites in Bangladesh, women and girls working in the factories had wider social and familial networks in and around the firms. Some of the younger women had their mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, and neighbours, as well as male relatives working in the same factories, albeit perhaps in different units. This allowed a certain measure of security and confidence in the workplace, allowing parents and husbands to send their daughters or wives to work in these firms.

Several women reported talking to other women or family members in order to gain some mental support in cases where they faced harassment at work and, in most cases, they received advice on how to deal with their situation. This depended on the nature of the relationship to the woman, but also the severity of the harassment. If it was not rape or sexual assault, then family

and husbands were unlikely to take action towards the perpetrator and would advise on avoidance strategies or have the worker leave the job. Strikingly, the young women often did not speak to their families with the intention to report to the police or authorities, but to find ways of coping and potentially ways to address harassment informally with the help of others.

Complaining to one's male relatives was mentioned by several factory workers in Bangladesh. A 13-year-old firm worker recounted how she had complained about a boy to her older brother who scolded him. When the boy talked back, the brother punished him. As we shall discuss further below, a lack of trust in formal police and justice systems constrains the agency of both workers and their families to take any further action.

However, it was not just distrust in the police that made young women confide in friends and family instead. The following quote illustrates how a Ugandan domestic worker confided in her friend because she wanted to avoid shame and disgrace, but also out of respect for her employers. While this was a severe case (attempted rape), the woman decides to respect their marriage:

Most of the time I talk to this friend of mine who brought me from Mbale to Lugazi. She always listens to my problems at work and she gives me solutions. By the way, she also trusts me a lot. Like for that second job, the man who wanted to rape me was the husband to her sister, but she believed me and never told the sister anything. When you are talking about sensitive issues, it's important for someone to believe and also be confidential because if the information leaks, a lot can be at stake like someone's marriage, respect, and integrity.

Firm workers and domestic workers in both countries also reported challenges to raising sexual harassment with parents and spouses, leaving many to deal with it alone. In both countries, the shame and fear of receiving the blame, as well as being exposed and shamed by the wider community, figured strongly in their answers. Three Bangladeshi domestic workers thought that if women talked about their sexual harassment experiences to anyone, they would gossip, and other people would think that they were harassed because they were 'bad women'. Single women would not get 'good' husbands as a result. Some of the domestic workers who had come from rural areas were afraid of being exposed as their families and neighbours back home would think that they had purposefully come to Dhaka to live a 'loose life'.

A 25-year-old married domestic worker, who was being harassed by an older man in the employer's house, did not share her story nor did she take any action because of what other people may think. She said, 'My

father does not know about this incident. No person from our village knows about this incident. We hide this because if anyone knows then we will lose our honour. They will say that we do *buchkigiri* [prostitution] in Dhaka.' Another reason for not speaking about incidents is the fear that husbands or parents would not allow domestic workers to continue their job after hearing about experiences of harassment by their wives or daughters, which was mentioned by five of the Bangladeshi domestic workers.

9.3.2 Co-workers

Domestic workers tend to lack close bonds with other domestic workers as their workplaces are separate, and they can only share information and experiences with family members that are part of the household, residents in other parts of the buildings they are working in, neighbours, and family – if they have access to them. This is very different for firm workers, who spend the whole day together, working side by side. In Bangladesh, many also travel to work together.

The firm workers in Bangladesh reported more experiences of looking out for each other than those in Uganda. While there were a few firm workers who said that they would keep to themselves and not mix with colleagues, in general, women were staying together for companionship and protection and even speaking out for each other. This was especially the case for the older women workers watching over the younger ones. An older woman with more experience mentioned that she had the responsibility of looking after younger, newer workers: 'The seniors like me and others always tell the juniors to tell us if something happened or if any boy said something to them whenever possible. And they share with us.' Women said that male supervisors and the older women workers have warned them: 'Senior workers, they say... "Never go outside alone at night. If needed, go with another woman." Our Sir (supervisor) also forbids us to go outside alone.' A 19-year-old married firm worker who had just started her job mentioned that older females look out for younger women workers and tell them what to do and what to avoid: 'They also control us. When we do night shift with them, they don't allow us to go outside the factory. They say "Never go outside at night alone." '

Some young women reported that boys who live in the same locality also felt responsible for looking out for them. An unmarried worker in Hemayatpur who has been working for a year said, 'Boys from our locality also work there. They said that we can tell them if someone disturbs us. They said, "If someone says anything bad or inappropriate, do tell us. We will look after it." ' This apparent density of social networks had also enabled collective action on the part of female firm workers. One of them recalled an example of how they

had dealt with a man from outside the factory, who was bothering one of their co-workers. They confronted the man as a group and threatened him:

We said to him that we are not alone and that we will not even complain to the Sir [manager]; we have brothers and fathers outside. Then he apologised saying he misunderstood. After that it didn't happen further. Some boys do understand and stop doing it but some are bad, then we tell it to our male guardians.

This dynamic is likely to be specific to firms where a larger share of the labour force is from the same communities and even family networks, which may not be unique to the firms selected in this study and is certainly not representative of all.

Firm workers in Uganda reported that women would talk about harassment and give each other advice on how to be alert, but they would not necessarily help each other to take further action. The following quote shows how a woman who was approached by a firm supervisor to have sex and is sometimes harassed by co-workers, limits her actions:

My friend advised that I should not go back to that supervisor's office. Concerning the [harassment by the] workmates I am just tough and show the person that I'm not interested. I have also changed my dressing code, so I don't have to show my curves and the big bottom. Besides telling my friend who advised me not to go back to the office of the supervisor, I have not reported the cases anywhere else.

9.4 Reporting sexual harassment to employers and authorities

9.4.1 Employers of domestic workers

Since domestic work is largely an informal employment, any reporting to the immediate employer is by default an informal conversation. Given the relative isolated working conditions of domestic workers, in both Bangladesh and Uganda, the study found that if they do report an incident, they are likely to report to a female employer.

For some instances when the harasser was not part of the household or a relative, female employers reported the incident to their husbands who, in some of these cases, would take action on the perpetrators. One married domestic worker in Bangladesh recalled that she complained to her Madam when the gateman had tried to hold her hand. The Madam told her

husband, a policeman. The man then beat the gateman and threatened to fire him from the job, after which he apologised. A 23-year-old married domestic worker related an incident where she was approached by a man who wanted to have sex, but she managed to escape. The husband of one of her employing households volunteered to beat up the man. However, she decided this might be risky for her because the harasser might want to revenge himself on her, and she let it rest. In these cases, employers felt they were responsible for the safety of the women and willing to take action, even if informally. We encountered no instances of female employers then taking steps to report to third parties such as local authorities or police, even if the harasser was not a member of the household. Many provided guidance to the workers by encouraging them to continue reporting and sharing their challenges, to stand their ground and be assertive, and to focus on work.

The issue of reporting to the employers obviously becomes more complicated if a member of the household, in particular the male head of the household, has harassed the domestic worker. In those instances, the female employers are faced with shame and potential risk to the marriage. In such incidents, honour, status, and norms influence the agency of the female employer of the workers. The study found that some would try to support the worker to leave the household, while others would blame and scold the domestic worker and refuse to take action, or fire them without offering any further support. One domestic worker in Uganda explained her experience when she reported it to her married female boss:

I told my boss, 'I have serious issues I would like to discuss with you and I am kindly requesting you to stay calm.' Then I told her that when I took food for uncle (your husband) I knelt down and served him, but as I was leaving, he patted my butt and that sent a wrong message according to me. Being an adult, I know what is likely going to happen next. Those were my words. The following day she woke up and took me for shopping, bought me a mattress, a bag, and she gave me my monthly salary. Then I left [the job] happy.

The fact that the worker indicates she left 'happy' underlines how young women themselves perceive such incidents and what they consider 'just' response. In the case of one Bangladeshi domestic worker, the husband of the employing household would touch himself in her presence in ways that made her feel uncomfortable. She reported this incident to the woman (*khala*) who had found this position for her, who then approached the wife. The wife told the *khala* that her husband would beat them both if she said anything to her husband. She advised and helped the domestic worker leave. In two other cases in Bangladesh, the wives of the

harassers did not want to (or could not) take any action. In both cases, the domestic workers left their employment. However, in other cases the female employers fired the domestic workers. Women in Uganda who experienced this noted that those women wanted to avoid 'intrusion' in the marriage. Another Ugandan young woman, who was initially promised a scholarship by the employer, lost this opportunity as soon as she reported sexual harassment by the male boss to her female employer.

9.4.2 Reporting in factories

Concerning firm-based mechanisms for reporting, there were noticeable differences between Ugandan and Bangladeshi firms. The findings from firm workers in Bangladeshi firms first of all suggested that sexual harassment was less prevalent than in Ugandan firms (but we cannot rule out that workers feared sharing such experiences with the researchers). The cases reported were mostly about co-workers rather than supervisors. Secondly, the organisational environment in the selected Bangladeshi firms appeared to be more enabling for making complaints about incidents of sexual harassment than in Uganda. This was partly due to firm operations but the findings also show that existing supportive social relationships among workers, and between older female workers and junior workers especially, endorsed the use of such measures. In both countries, it was highly unlikely that a young woman would or could report to the firm directly without first finding support from others.

Bangladeshi firms

The firm workers who participated in the focus group discussion, using the safety audit methodology, talked about the process of complaining formally, which had been learnt through a formal induction. In their factory, they are instructed to file a complaint to their unit 'in-charge' first, then to administration. One of them said, 'We are instructed to report to the Sirs first. If something happens it is better to report from the beginning' (firm workers, Dhamrai). Another participant said, 'In Rose Food (pseudonym) there is one above all. If our Delip Sir (pseudonym) sees this type of things then he will kick the person out' (firm workers, Dhamrai). Furthermore, apart from having segregated workspaces and canteens, the firms had rules on social interactions between men and women, both of which resulted from strict social and gender norms around social interactions:

They [firm authorities] don't want to allow us to talk with other men. We can talk with someone while walking on a path. He is going to his way and I am going to my way, like this. He can just ask me from far: 'How are you?' Done. There is no scope for standing still and talking for a while.

While this may originate from 'policing' improper romantic relationships, it also works to monitor the safety of the workers. In the Bangladeshi factories, the formal rules and messages from management encourage women and girls to protect themselves and to speak out if they feel uncomfortable or threatened. The rules and messaging may be as much to protect the factory reputation as to protect the safety of the workers.

At the same time, the norms around gender and honour infused these formal mechanisms. Norms around families having to protect their women and daughters and safeguarding their honour were transferred to the factories, where certain male supervisors took on the role of guardian *vis-à-vis* the women workers who were under them. The workers knew whom to report to from their induction, and female workers reported that the 'Sirs' (supervisors) seemed approachable. As noted earlier, the work force of these firms was largely living in the same localities, with certain networks extending between firms and residential areas which contributed to 'community monitoring' of how men and women conduct themselves.

Reporting to their unit supervisors or 'Sirs', persons formally charged with dealing with these matters, is a formal action. Having multiple levels of management created the opportunity to complain to 'higher-up' managers about harassment by supervisors. The manner in which managers and supervisors deal with this, however, might be semi-formal: telling people off, slapping them, or even firing them. There were various examples given of how the 'Sir' had taken action after a complaint to the satisfaction of the woman worker, which appeared to have resulted in the stopping of the harassment. A young firm worker who was studying in class 7 and who had just started working during the Covid-19 school closure, gave the example below:

One day, me and my friend were walking along the road. It was 7pm. A forklift was being driven by the driver. That was running. A boy said to Farhana, 'Hey, Farhana. Your figure is beautiful.' Farhana did nothing, just said, 'I will hit you with a shoe you animal.' She scolded him and informed this to Sir. Then Sir called that boy and asked him why he did so and slapped him. After slapping him, Sir said to him, 'Get lost'. After saying this he [boy] didn't come later.

Q: What did you tell your Sir? Did you say that boy said that 'Farhana's figure is beautiful'?

A: No, we didn't say that. Can this be shared? We said that, 'Sir, that boy said negative things to Farhana'. That boy also couldn't say what he said to Farhana. Then Sir slapped him.

This quote illustrates that the factory workers were aware of what expressions they can use when reporting to their supervisors. Also, other statements indicated that not everything could be shared in detail with the supervisor when reporting an instance of sexual harassment.

Further, not everything was noticed and not all women would complain. Two firm workers who were harassed by unwanted touching did not complain, because they thought those boys could take revenge later. A 14-year-old girl who is working in the firm said, 'I don't tell my parents. I have a feeling if I tell my parents things might get worse. What if I tell my parents and the guy becomes more revengeful. So I prefer not telling them.' Two other firm workers stated that many women don't complain because they are not courageous enough. A 19-year-old firm worker said that 'it depends on that woman and not everyone has this courage'. Another 13-year-old firm worker talked about it and said, 'Courage comes from one's own self. If you face a problem and don't complain to Sir or Madam there is a chance someone else is going to face the same problem.'

A few firm workers indicated that other colleagues can help with a complaint if incidents happened to them. A 19-year-old married firm worker, when asked if colleagues can be of any help to complain about sexual harassment, answered, 'Yes, other [sic] can also help her to complain. A woman may not say or complain due to shame or fear, other workers help her to send her complaint or solve this issue. They complain to Sir.'

Ugandan firms

While all female factory workers reported to have experienced sexual harassment at work, nobody could report a case whereby the firm had responded and taken appropriate action. In one case, a young woman had brought her mother to the firm to complain to the supervisor. The mother pressed for action. The man who had harassed her daughter was suspended for two days.

Firm workers in Uganda generally knew to which offices or staff members they could report complaints, but felt these were deeply inadequate, even deterring, for reporting incidents of sexual harassment. The following quotes illustrate this:

There also a lady in charge of handling sexual harassment issues but like I said earlier, she is not helpful at all. She enjoys blaming the girls for what befalls them.

For us the ladies, we can talk to the 'in-charge' about harassment. Employees don't report sexual harassment because nothing much can

be done to help you. One girl reported a certain man. She claimed he had touched her breasts twice and the 'in-charge' told her that that was not a big issue to deal with. She should handle it as a mature girl.

We talk among ourselves us as co-workers, but we have no particular office we can go to, to report in case anything has happened to us. The one we used to have, the lady, she doesn't do anything like counselling. But she is official for the company for sexual harassment issues. The general perception is that we are all adults, above 18, and so we can protect ourselves. But we have one gentleman. He is one of our supervisors. He is nice and very approachable. When you talk to him about such issues, he gives good advice though what he does annoys the lady who is recognised [as the go-to person] by the company. Sometimes he helps you to even go to police but the biggest challenge with our police is corruption. This man helps us because he knows some of the police officers where he tells us to go in case things go out of hand. The challenge with him helping us is that he is also a supervisor, and his other colleagues don't like him for that. He is like an angel in a gang of demons. They hate him for doing the right thing. And it's hard for him especially because it is out of his job description [to receive complaints] so there is only that much he can do. That's why you see he tries to seek help from outside of the company [e.g. police], but the managers don't like it since they want us to keep a positive image for the company.

Overall, Ugandan firm workers felt that their firms disregarded the seriousness of sexual harassment. The staff responsible for receiving complaints concentrated on different complaints like damages on products, other physical health issues, and machine maintenance. These staff were perceived as unapproachable because of their power and status. In the words of one employee: 'I feel supervisors have a lot of power. No one can talk to them and they create a situation of fear among the employees, so that they [employees] fear making such reports to the "in-charge".'

In addition, young women did not want to report incidents because they were scared of losing their jobs. The supervisors were in most cases males. Supervisors would evaluate performance, decide on granting advances on salary, allocate shifts, recruit and decide on promotion when opportunities become available. Young women would certainly not report a case if supervisors were the perpetrators.

9.4.3 Police

None of the firm workers mentioned having reported cases to the police, whereas only some domestic workers said they did. The distrust and fear

of police and justice procedures, as well as the strong belief that reporting would not lead to any satisfactory outcome, were so pervasive in both countries that this would preclude the formal reporting of sexual harassment in most cases. This is further exacerbated by perceptions of corruption, and the perceived and real costs involved in filing cases. Those who did report to the police only did so with the support of others, and indeed did not see any result.

The most important reason for not reporting to the police were the expected fees and bribes women were expected to pay. Although cases are supposed to be handled by the police for free, Ugandan participants noted that they are required to pay fees for opening a file and for any follow-up. Going to the police station costs them fares for transportation. If the case is taken to court, then they would need to pay for the transport and subsistence of witnesses.

Experiences and perceptions were clearly influenced by socioeconomic class. Domestic workers felt that because they are poor and have no influence, local government representatives or the police may not believe them and will ignore them if they have no proof. Three domestic workers in Bangladesh mentioned that poor people do not get justice because they don't have money for it. They also think that their social respectability will be at stake if they file formal cases. A 24-year-old married domestic worker said, 'Rich people have money. Do I have anything except my voice? Is my voice stronger than the money?' Another domestic worker, 35 years old and widowed, mentioned, 'Some people may go to police station. Some don't go to police. They think- we have not enough money; how shall we file a case? Our respect is interconnected with this issue, so we shouldn't be involved in legal activities.' An 18-year-old married domestic worker said:

The poor, lower class – those who can't protest – they have to tolerate. Where they can seek justice? If they seek justice then they have to pay money first. Those who don't have money they have to tolerate. People like us tolerate. And people who have money don't tolerate. People like us, if we are in a problem and seek justice then the people from our slum will demand money first – 'Give us money first, then you will get justice.'

Ugandan domestic workers, many of whom had migrated from rural areas, noted that they did not even know where the local police post was located, nor did they know the local council offices. They explained that they were kept in the homes without any introduction to the area after they were hired, thus they did not know the relevant authorities.

In addition to the problem of corruption, policemen might be potential harassers themselves. A 24-year-old firm worker who had once spent

a night in custody recalled how the police officer who was on call during the night had offered her to let her sleep in the room of the officer-in-charge, who was not present. She refused, knowing he wanted to have sex, and the fact she was 24 and mature likely helped her to speak to the officer in a way that he would leave her alone.

9.4.4 Local government authorities

One major difference between the two countries is the role of local government structures, which in the findings for the Ugandan case indicated a potentially important role for the women's representative in Local Council 1 (LC1, the elected local government at ward/village level in Uganda). The LC1 is the lowest level government in the decentralised governance system in Uganda. Members are elected during the local elections and most often are well known in the community; in particular the LC1 chairperson who can handle small disputes. LCs have reserved seats for a female representative: the Secretary of Women's Affairs or 'women's representative'. The majority of local council members are usually male, although women can take up other positions than just the women's representative, and men can dominate deliberations (Ahikire 2007).

The LC chairperson is often the one receiving complaints, but when this is a man, young women find him unreceptive. One participant explained how her voicing efforts were frustrated by the local council leadership. Male chairpersons were likely to disregard the complaint, often trivialising what had happened.

I told the local council chairman. I thought he would help me, but he did not. He just told me to go back and keep quiet and concentrate on my job. I later learnt that he is also a 'player' [having affairs], who had children with different women around the village so I believe he didn't see that as a problem. I cannot really tell [why he didn't help] but I think it's because the chairman is a man like him [the perpetrators, e.g. the chairman is also a harasser], because he said to me, 'Luckily you were not raped'. He said that I should let it go. I was so discouraged. At least he would have called the other man and warned him. But I think because I didn't give him money, he did not find my case worth his time.

Another woman, who was harassed by a man who had bent to peek inside her *lesu* (wrapper) to see the type of knickers she was wearing, recalled that the chairman had said that 'I should let it go and luckily I was not raped'. Male local leaders thus discouraged young women from pursuing cases relating to sexual violence. Even in cases involving pregnancies, out-of-court (informal) settlements were being encouraged by local council leaders.

Women's representatives, on the other hand, were named as potential go-to persons for sexual harassment because they are women in positions of authority. In the case of the women who reported harassment to the women's representative, they did not expect her to go to the police but to speak to employers and/or the perpetrators directly. They were expected to understand what happened and give sound advice. Young domestic workers approached her mainly as a fellow woman who could appreciate their experiences, but also one who would be respected by their bosses. They handled several cases including failure to pay domestic workers, mistreatment, and sexual harassment – settling these matters amicably without breaking up marriages.

Knowing this is a potential avenue for action, one domestic worker even used this as a way of scaring off a perpetrator. She recalled: 'That time when he grabbed me, I told him I was going to tell his wife and the secretary of women affairs. Since then he has never repeated the act.'

10. Conclusion

This research report has demonstrated the range of forms of sexual harassment experienced by factory workers and domestic workers in Bangladesh and Uganda. Workplace sexual harassment is widespread and can go as far as sexual assault, rape, and sexual exploitation. Employers, supervisors, and managers use their power to harass young women in exchange for salary increments, promotion, flexibility concerning production quota and shifts, or simply to retain their jobs. In factories, also, male co-workers without managerial powers harass women, whereas domestic workers are harassed by friends and relatives of their employers.

Men who are not employers or managers can harass women without needing to threaten them about losing their jobs: their power is based on their knowledge that women are unlikely to challenge transgressive behaviours due to feelings of shame and the tacit compliance of society that does not hold men accountable for their affronting behaviours towards women.

The report shows how sexual harassment can also be relatively ambiguous: when co-workers or employers from better-off economic backgrounds make sexual advances with the promise of a relationship and marriage, the conditions in which women consent are questionable. It is the prevailing gender order, of which social and gender norms are key components, which condone men to harass and thus undermine the bodily integrity of women. The women expressed a range of purposive action or agency through self-protection strategies, informal measures and the use of formal complaints channels to a limited extent. These acts of negotiations show they were not passive victims in most cases, but their individual voice and agency remain highly constrained.

Concerning the role of informality, the findings contradict the existing idea that formal jobs will offer more protection and security. In both countries, the nature of work arrangements for factory workers was still very informal: while firms are legal entities, most workers were informally employed without contracts, social security, and benefits. In Uganda, the firms had no firm-based policies or functioning mechanisms for reporting instances of sexual harassment, nor did they take action to discourage inappropriate and transgressive behaviours. Here, women reported that supervisors and managers were perpetuating sexual harassment.

However, the selected firms in Bangladesh had induction procedures for new workers, whereby they were informed about complaint mechanisms. Here, male supervisors had reprimanded harassers informally in some

cases. As the result of patriarchy and gender norms around the honour of young women, some of the senior male managers and older female workers monitored social interactions between sexes. Factories were concerned about their reputation, while these older and senior individuals felt they had to maintain prevailing norms on gender separation and women's honour. The overall environment therefore discouraged sexual harassment to some extent. However, concerns about shame and family honour strongly discouraged Bangladeshi firm workers to speak about sexual harassment.

In both countries, factory workers were somewhat protected by the collective nature of their work. In terms of opportunities for voice, they could speak to each other and seek advice or support more easily, though this rarely resulted in further actions being taken.

By contrast, the isolated working conditions of domestic workers and their lack of mobility and social networks outside of the household make them highly vulnerable to sexual harassment. In their case, informality compounds this risk as they lack the avenues for reporting incidents of harassment and taking further action, especially because the police are not trusted.

Language is essential for voicing and challenging sexual harassment. A key finding of this study is that social and gender norms constrain young women in articulating transgressive and inappropriate behaviour by men. At the same time, existing norms have normalised such transgressive behaviours by men. Social and gender norms sustain the prevalence of sexual harassment because society at large is failing to challenge it and has normalised its various manifestations. The constraining effects of social and gender norms for women's voice and agency are recognised. However, this research has shown how exactly they influence women's ability to talk about sexual harassment.

Young women rarely have the courage to share details of incidents, even when among peers. Many of them, especially those with limited education and/or life experience, even lack the very vocabulary to describe what has happened to them. The study found that if they **do** choose to talk about an incident of sexual harassment, young women choose their words carefully to convey the nature of the offence. They deliberately and effectively 'mask' what really happened to them, which often results in the trivialising of certain acts. Euphemisms are used in particular when reporting to police and authorities, which leads to lack of responsiveness and/or the dismissal of the case. A greater understanding of how women themselves describe incidents of sexual harassment would help to design workplace measures and make them more user-friendly for the women. It would also help to improve the receptiveness and responsiveness of health workers, police, and other relevant authorities.

With respect to voicing, the findings showed that most women will only report to formal structures after first having found support in their more intimate social circles, which underlines how networks and social support are essential to speaking out. Even so, most women speak to family or friends without intending to take any further action in terms of reporting to police and authorities. Also, family and friends are constrained by social norms that limit expressing oneself openly about sexual harassment, and they also lack the power to challenge sexual harassment through formal avenues. If they respond to an incident, it is mostly to find informal solutions with employers or help women leave their job. When young women in Uganda reported incidents to the women's representative in local government, these officials sometimes settled the case informally without involving the police. Police themselves in most cases reproduce gender norms that lead to the blaming and shaming of the victim. Gender norms thus influence, and often limit, the voice and agency of women who experience workplace sexual harassment, those who might support them, **and** the formal actors and institutions responsible for ensuring their safety.

Finally, what do these findings mean for young women's empowerment through paid work? First and foremost: paid work will not lead to empowerment when there is a high risk of experiencing sexual harassment at work, when there is no support for women, and mechanisms for complaints and redressal are lacking. Countering sexual harassment requires strategies that target young women, as well as firms and government institutions. The women interviewed in both countries were aware that especially severe forms of harassment are wrong, while certain comments and 'stares' have been normalised as part of everyday life. These less severe acts are nonetheless experienced as uncomfortable and 'bad', but are hard to challenge. Women feel such acts are hard to prove and fear that employers and authorities may not believe them, and blame them.

Critical consciousness and individual agency are necessary conditions for countering workplace sexual harassment, but are not sufficient. And while familial and community networks are key for individual women to gain moral and other forms of support, challenging sexual harassment formally requires more in terms of formal mechanisms and collective, organised action. Genuine empowerment would require socio-political resources for women within and outside the workplace, which enables them to share experience, build confidence, and speak out. This includes induction processes, trustworthy go-to persons, and potentially women's committees.

In factories and companies, countering sexual harassment will require functioning formal mechanisms at work, designed in a way that they are trusted and accessible by women. Workplace policies and mechanisms

need to be well supported by management, which at the same time needs to discourage transgressive behaviour as part of the organisational culture. For informal workers, complaint mechanisms could be set up at health centres or police posts and public officials need training on how to handle cases of sexual harassment, and how to make referrals to justice institutions. Labour laws need to extend to informal workers to protect them overall. These interventions need to be accompanied by longer-term strategies that address regressive gender norms. Such measures would tilt the balance of power within the gender order towards women.

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