

Taking #MeToo into global supply chains



Sexual harassment in the workplace is not a new phenomenon. There have been some well publicised episodes before – [Clarence Thomas](#), Justice in the American Supreme Court, and more recently, [Dov Charney](#), founder of American Apparel retail stores come to mind. But they appeared to be just that: isolated episodes. The flood of allegations unleashed by the #MeToo movement suggests otherwise.

The problem is not merely episodic: it is systemic. While the tipping point came from the testimony of a number of high-profile women in the media and show business, the shock waves of the #MeToo movement make it clear that sexual harassment is pervasive in every industry and in every country. Accusations have now engulfed [political establishments](#), [churches](#) and educational institutions ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

The #MeToo movement is helping to combat the shame that silences victims and protects abusers. It is also demanding change. It is now up to those who run these establishments to work out how to respond. We focus here on the dilemmas of multinational firms with global supply chains.

First, what does it mean to say that sexual harassment and violence is a systemic problem? Such forms of abuse reflect the power imbalances between men and women that characterise gender relations everywhere. Sexual harassment or abuse at work is the exercise of power by men in a context where both men and women come to earn their living and it serves to reassert male dominance through the humiliation of women. That same power also protects perpetrators from the consequences of their actions. Women who accuse them risk losing their employment, public shaming and other forms of silencing. The intersection of gender inequalities with inequalities of class, race, ethnicity, age and migrant status serve to further intensify the vulnerability of particular groups of women.

Most global supply chains have been able to profit from vulnerable women. Their workers are generally poor, do not have much education, may be migrants from rural areas and many are the main breadwinners for their families. Their need for their jobs means that they must put up with any harassment they encounter. For example, according to the Fair Wear Foundation, almost [60 per cent](#) of Bangladeshi garment factory workers have experienced harassment at work. Women in horticulture, hotel and restaurant work are similarly vulnerable. In Ecuador's export-oriented flower production industry, for example, one [study](#) reported that over 55 per cent of flower workers have suffered some form of sexual harassment and for younger workers aged 20-24 the figure was over 70 per cent.

How can firms address such widespread abuse in their supply chains? Some, like IKEA, have included [explicit provisions](#) covering sexual harassment in their Codes of Conduct for suppliers. But multiple studies have demonstrated the difficulty of enforcing Codes of Conduct, even over issues generally included in national legislation such as limits on working time, and even in companies, such as [NIKE](#), best placed to address the problems. Furthermore, a suitable legal framework on sexual violence and harassment is not even available in a significant minority of countries.

International Labour Organization (ILO) research on violence and harassment at work published in 2017 found that 23 per cent of the 80 countries studied did not have a legal definition of sexual harassment at work, while a further 12 per cent only allowed for “vertical” harassment (that is, harassment by superiors, not co-workers). Meanwhile, 25 per cent of countries in the study had no [protections against reprisals](#) for complainants. Where legal protection is weak or absent, a code of conduct will clearly be harder to enforce. But even in the presence of a suitable legal framework, a code of conduct is not a very effective tool for redressing a power imbalance.

More encouraging evidence comes from the Better Work programme, a partnership between the ILO and the International Finance Corporation, which brings together governments, global brands, factory owners, and unions and workers to improve working conditions and competitiveness in the garment industry, which is currently active in seven countries. A [rigorous assessment](#) of the program conducted by researchers at Tufts University found that Better Work decreased sexual harassment concerns in most countries where it was active, with the dominant trend one of improvement over time.

Some of this improvement resulted from improved management and training; a specific training module on sexual harassment for supervisors in Jordan proving particularly effective. Improvements also stemmed from worker representation. The presence of Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs) – Better Work social dialogue forums including worker and management representatives – was associated with decreased reports of sexual harassment, particularly when women were adequately represented on the PICCs.

This highlights the fact that while effective remedies require legal frameworks and explicit organisational provision, they must also change organisational culture and protect those who speak out about abuse. Power imbalances lie at the heart of cultures of abuse. The classic means through which workers have addressed power differences in the workplace is forming their own organisations to represent them. Most codes of conduct include provisions on freedom of association and rights to collective bargaining, which form part of the ILO [core labour standards](#). Taking this commitment seriously offers an indirect, but potentially effective, means of addressing sexual violence and harassment in supply chains. For example, the Tufts research on Better Work cited above found that collective bargaining agreements had a direct impact on reducing concerns regarding sexual harassment and verbal abuse, improving worker satisfaction with the outcomes of complaints and encouraging workers to raise concerns with trade union representatives.

Of course, unions are not immune to the gender dynamics of the societies in which they are embedded. Campaigns by Global Union Federations, such as the [IndustriALL](#) ‘Not in our workplace, not in our union’ pledge, are attempting to address this and raise awareness of the importance of addressing sexual violence and harassment at work including within collective bargaining. Some local unions are already acting on the issue. For example, a 2010 collective bargaining agreement in Uganda negotiated between the Uganda Flower Exporters Association (UFEA) and the two national trade unions representing floriculture workers (UHAWU and NUPAWU), addressed the issue of sexual harassment.

With support from women’s organisations, an employers’ organisation and the government, the union was able to negotiate two separate agreements covering all workers including a policy and procedure for dealing with sexual harassment on the flower farms. This stipulates that a sector-wide sexual harassment policy must be put in place in all enterprises that employ more than 25 workers. Farms have implemented a mixture of management-led and worker/union-led [grievance mechanisms](#) and conditions have improved significantly.

Working in partnership with local trade unions or worker representatives to address sexual harassment and violence is more likely to bring success than top-down initiatives. Such approaches offer women a protected voice which is the best antidote to the shaming and silencing that comes with sexual abuse. Moreover, this can bring benefits for the whole supply chain. As the Better Work assessment demonstrated, harassment and abuse reduce productivity, while an improved workplace climate for women positively impacts business performance. Doing the right thing does not only bring moral benefit.

**Notes:**

- This blog post draws insights from the authors' work on the [Garment Supply Chain Governance Project](#).
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