

RESEARCH BRIEF:

Garment Factory Characteristics and Workplace Sexual Harassment

This brief summarizes recent findings from research that has identified attributes which can lead to sexual harassment in workplaces in the garment sector. These findings suggest that sexual harassment can be reduced by doing the following: (a) aligning supervisor and worker pay incentives; (b) investing in the labour-management skills of supervisors; and (c) creating greater factory-wide awareness of the problem of sexual harassment.

I. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Workers in garment factories are often vulnerable to threats and incidents of various forms of abuse. Such abuse may include sexual harassment, and results from baseline worker surveys across Better Work country programmes indeed indicate that concerns about sexual harassment are common in garment factories. In addition to the damaging psychological and physical effects sexual harassment can have on victims, it can negatively affect workplace communication and overall factory productivity. As part of the Better Work impact assessment, researchers are working to identify which factory characteristics lead to a higher incidence of sexual harassment. Prominent findings to date include:

- Sexual harassment is less likely to be a concern in factories where managers recognize the challenges facing supervisors. **In factories in Jordan where managers acknowledge concern with the stress and lack of labour-management skills of supervisors, workers are up to 5% less likely to be concerned with sexual harassment.**
- **Haitian workers who report they have a daily production target are 50% more likely to be concerned with sexual harassment.** Also, misalignment in pay incentives between workers and supervisors—paying garment workers “by the piece,” but paying supervisors a fixed

salary—can create an environment conducive for supervisors to extort sexual favors from workers.

- Perceptions of trust, fairness and pay transparency can predict the rate of concern with sexual harassment in a factory. **Haitian workers who do not trust they will be paid on time are up to 36% more likely to be concerned with sexual harassment.**
- Factories with nearby competitors have fewer reported concerns with sexual harassment. **In Haiti, sexual harassment is 5.5% less likely to be a concern among workers in factories with nearby competitors.**
- **Workers who are isolated or have constrained ability to move freely are more likely to encounter sexual harassment.** For example, workers in Jordan without access to a phone are 35% more likely to express concern with sexual harassment.

II. BACKGROUND ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND THE GARMENT SECTOR

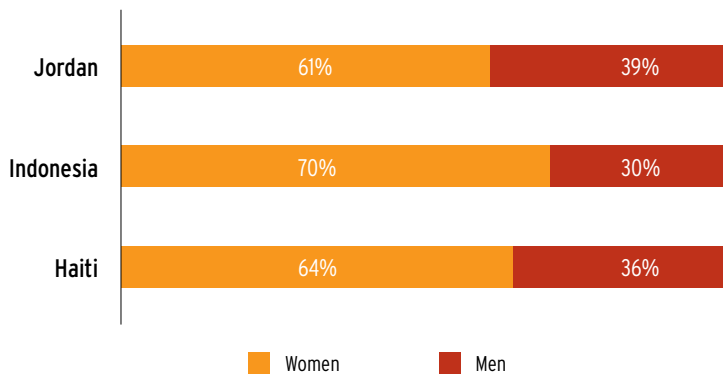
Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated. In the workplace, such conduct may also be seen by a worker as a condition of their employment (*quid pro quo* sexual harassment). Basic characteristics of the export-oriented garment industry predispose workers on factory floors to sexual harassment. Power differences as well as stigma and vulnerability associated with garment work, in addition to a repetitive and high-pressure work setting based on meeting production targets, have all been identified as factors that lead to a hostile work environment. Women—who comprise the majority of the garment sector’s workforce—are most



BETTER WORK

often, but not exclusively, the target of sexual harassment. Figure 1 illustrates the proportion of women and men garment workers in factories enrolled in several Better Work countries.

FIGURE 1: Gender Distributions in Better Work Factories



Women workers in the garment industry are often vulnerable because they are young, inexperienced, illiterate and migrating from rural areas or overseas to take advantage of a critical employment opportunity. In many factories, these women are supervised by a small number of men, creating a large power differential favoring the male supervisors and managers. In addition to large differences in power, the intense pressure felt by factory managers to meet production demands of international buyers can lead to the use of harsh disciplinary tactics to elicit greater productivity from workers. In some contexts, garment workers also face the stigma of working in a low-status occupation, and harassment may be more common among workers who are dehumanized or objectified as “cogs in a machine” rather than viewed as fully human.¹

Although these basic characteristics of the garment industry exist across all factories studied, reported rates of sexual harassment vary widely. Moreover, rates of concern with sexual harassment vary among factories within the same country. Despite facing the same operating challenges common throughout the sector, some factories are organized in a way that discourages

this form of abuse. On the factory floor, a perpetrator must have both a propensity to sexually harass as well as the opportunity.² The research approach described in the next section is designed to understand how some factories are organized to limit those opportunities and to reduce sexual harassment.

III. RESEARCH APPROACH

Before designing a strategy for reducing sexual harassment, it is important to understand what characteristics of a factory workplace enable it. Researchers considered several possibilities. A primary hypothesis tested is that sexual harassment arises where it is unacknowledged. In this scenario, sexual harassment becomes widespread when managers remain ignorant of sexual harassment concerns among workers and when workers are denied the opportunity or lack the agency to express their concern. The resulting lack of awareness throughout the organization leads to an absence of policies to address sexual harassment, and it is allowed to proliferate.

Researchers also considered whether structural factors create an environment that leads to sexual harassment. One hypothesis supposes that opportunities arise for sexual harassment when the pay for supervisors and workers is determined using different incentives. For example, if a salaried line supervisor who is predisposed to harass is given the power to certify whether a worker has met a production quota that affects the worker’s pay, the supervisor may use this power to demand sexual favors in exchange for approving the production bonus.

For the research reported here, groups of 30 workers and four managers in each participating factory were randomly selected to complete a computer-assisted survey.³ Researchers then analyzed responses from workers and managers related to their concerns with sexual harassment in the workplace along with their responses to questions about how their pay is determined, what incentives exist for production efficiency

1 A substantial body of research shows that individuals in positions of power are more likely to tolerate or inflict harsh treatment if subordinates have been dehumanized. See: Bandura, A., Underwood, B., & Fromson, M. (1975) “Disinhibition of aggression through diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of victims,” *Journal of Research in Personality*; Rudman, L. A., & Borgida, E. (1995) “The afterglow of construct accessibility: The behavioral consequences of priming men to view women as sexual objects,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

2 Social psychology research has shown that sexual harassment is caused by a combination of individual and situational factors. The ability to reliably measure an individual’s likelihood to sexually harass has been established through experimental trials that controlled for situational factors and documented variation among the behavior of individuals. See: Pryor, J. B. (1987) “Sexual Harassment Proclivities in Men,” *Sex Roles*.

3 A total of 3,095 worker survey responses were analyzed in this study: 669 workers in Haiti, 970 workers in Jordan and 1,456 workers in Indonesia.

and other aspects of how a factory's operations are structured.

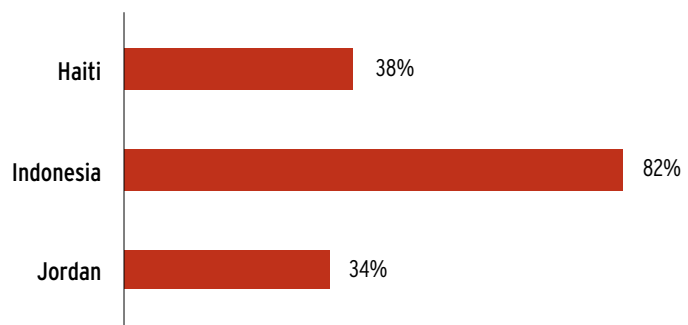
IV. FINDINGS

As seen in Figure 2, concern with sexual harassment is high at the time of baseline data collection in factories participating in Better Work. Indonesian survey participants were most likely to report concern with sexual harassment (82% of respondents). This does not mean that 82% of workers have experienced sexual harassment—workers may be expressing concern about observing or being aware of sexual harassment in their factory without having been targets of sexual harassment themselves. Furthermore, workers who have experienced sexual harassment themselves may choose not to respond or may not identify their experience as sexual harassment. In Jordan, 25% of the sample chose not to respond to the sexual harassment survey question. Of those who did answer, over one third believes that sexual harassment is a concern. In Haiti, 38% of workers report that sexual harassment is a concern in their factory. To gauge the incidence of *quid pro quo* sexual harassment, Haitian workers were also directly asked whether they had to be someone's girlfriend/boyfriend in order to retain their job—9% responded “yes.”⁴

By analyzing the answers given by managers and workers, researchers have identified the following main findings:

Sexual harassment is less likely to be a problem in factories where managers recognize the challenges facing supervisors. Current research results do not show that greater manager awareness of sexual harassment reduces its incidence; however, it is less of a concern in factories where managers express a need for greater training of their supervisory staff or express a concern with the stress levels of supervisors, two questions asked on the manager surveys. In many garment factories, line supervisors are recruited from production lines and given little or no training in modern management

FIGURE 2: Percentage of Workers Who Report Sexual Harassment is a Concern in Their Factory at Baseline



techniques. Supervisors without training are more likely to revert to verbal or physical abuse to manage workers and elicit effort on their line, and evidence shows this could extend to sexual harassment. In Jordan, workers are 4.6% less likely to be concerned with sexual harassment if their managers are concerned with supervisors' labour-management skills. Managers who recognize the need to build management capacity among supervisors appear more likely to oversee work environments with less sexual harassment. Additionally, workers are 4.9% less likely to express concern with sexual harassment if managers are concerned with the stress levels of their supervisors. As with recognizing the need to equip supervisors with the skills necessary to manage their workforce, managers who recognize the stress experienced by supervisors appear more likely to create work environments that discourage sexual harassment.

Workers who perceive trust and fairness in their workplace report less concern with sexual harassment. In contrast, sexual harassment becomes a greater concern in factories where general trust and a sense of fair treatment appear to be violated. For example, workers in Haitian factories who trust they will be paid on time only “some of the time,” “rarely” or “never” were 36% more likely to also work in a factory where sexual harassment is a concern. In Indonesia, if workers report that they perceive their supervisor as unfair, they are 14% more likely to be concerned with sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is more likely to be a concern in factories where garment workers are paid “by the piece”, and more so when their performance is assessed by supervisors who receive a fixed salary. In Haiti, 80% of workers surveyed in Better Work factories report that their supervisors set production targets for their lines. In these factories, workers are 50% more likely to be concerned with sexual

4 The reported percentages of workers in Haiti who have expressed concern with sexual harassment are based on baseline surveys collected from March–December 2011. A total of 413 workers responded to the survey question about concern with sexual harassment, and 257 workers chose to respond to the survey question “Do you need to be someone's boyfriend or girlfriend to keep your job?”. Following baseline survey collection and consultation with stakeholders in the country, slight revisions to the Creole translations of these survey questions were made for future data collection, in order to more accurately capture and understand the incidence of sexual harassment in garment factories.

harassment than workers in factories without production targets.

Furthermore, workers in Haiti who report that they—but not their supervisors—receive a pay bonus if their daily production target is met are 25% more likely to report that sexual harassment is a concern in their factory. The positive correlation of strong daily production incentives for workers and complaints of sexual harassment results from the environment that emerges when supervisors are charged with monitoring individual worker productivity and determining bonuses without having similar pay incentives of their own. Within this kind of factory pay scheme, supervisors lack the incentive to improve the overall efficiency of their production line. In addition, with the responsibility to reward production bonuses, supervisors may exercise their power over workers by forcing them into sexual encounters. Power relations are structured such that supervisors are enabled to demand bribes, in the form of sexual favors, in exchange for a positive report or assessment of individual worker performance.

Correspondingly, factories that incentivize supervisors by tying their pay to production efficiency, rather than giving them a fixed salary, witness lower concern with sexual harassment among workers. In factories where pay for supervisors is linked to production efficiency in Jordan, workers are 1.7% less likely to be concerned with sexual harassment.

Workers in factories with nearby competitors are less likely to report sexual harassment as a concern. In Haiti, workers whose factory managers report they face competition from nearby factories are 5.5% less likely to report concern with sexual harassment. One would expect this relationship, as tolerance for sexual harassment is likely lower where factories must compete to attract and retain workers.

Workers who face constraints on their movement are more likely to face sexual harassment. Migrant workers are less likely to be able to move around freely, whether because a factory holds their visa or because they work and live in industrial zones far from cities. And constraints on movement make workers more vulnerable to abuse. In Jordan, migrant workers comprise a large percentage of the overall garment workforce. Migrants from Bangladesh alone make up 15% of the workforce in factories enrolled in Better Work, and these migrant workers are 11% more likely to express concern with sexual harassment than other garment workers

in Jordan. In addition, constraints on communication appear to increase vulnerability to sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is 35% more likely to be a concern among the 3% of workers in Jordan without access to a phone.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Concern with sexual harassment is common among workers in garment factories. Recent analysis based on Better Work's impact assessment survey data suggests that managers may be able to reduce the prevalence of this type of harassment through several actions:

- Align the incentives determining pay for workers and supervisors. Workers and their line supervisors should have the same pay structure, such as a production target linked to a wage bonus, to minimize opportunities for supervisors to abuse their power in determining the pay workers receive.
- Address challenges facing line supervisors. Sexual harassment is less likely to occur where managers acknowledge the stress and low labour-management skills of supervisors. Introduction of supervisory skills training can serve to improve the management skills of supervisors.
- Promote greater communication among workers, supervisors and managers. More communication across all levels of the factory can foster greater trust and awareness of worker concerns.

In addition to these actions, factories should establish clear policies against sexual harassment; train managers, supervisors, and workers on the policies; and ensure implementation and enforcement. These steps hold the potential to create conditions in factories that reduce the likelihood of sexual harassment. As further evidence from Better Work impact assessment efforts continues to develop, researchers expect to gain even broader insight into what workplace characteristics most directly impact the prevalence of sexual harassment.

For further reading and full results:

Truskinovsky, Y., J. Rubin, and D. Brown (2013). "Sexual Harassment in Garment Factories: Firm Structure, Organizational Culture and Incentive Systems", Better Work Discussion Paper no. 13, Geneva: Better Work.

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