



Voicing and Challenging Workplace Sexual Harassment in Bangladesh

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Summary

Workplace sexual harassment is common in Bangladesh. It refrains women from entering the labour market and is also a major reason for them to drop out of work. Based on case study research with factory workers in agro-processing firms and domestic workers, this policy brief explains how language, social, and gender norms constrain young women's voice and agency in response to sexual harassment. It highlights how such norms sustain the normalization of sexual harassment and the existing gaps in formal institutions.

Key Messages

- Young female domestic and agro-processing workers use generic language rather than explicit terms for sexual abuse. They are constrained by social norms of modesty and respectability from naming actions, body parts, and even harassment or abuse.
- Due to the isolated nature of domestic workers' jobs, they have little social support to share and protest sexual harassment. In contrast, agro-processing workers can support each other and access informal mechanisms of complaints to seek redress from their supervisors. However, these workers do not access formal complaints and redress mechanisms.
- The few young women who had the courage and opportunity to protest were limited to accessing informal mechanisms for complaints and redress. This is because most women lack faith in formal institutions such as the police, or judiciary system, or locally elected representatives.
- Developing young women's civic and political capacities to protest harassment and seek redress will require concerted action by the government, trade unions, and civil society. This collective effort can put into place effective complaints and redress mechanisms along with accessible language to describe sexual harassment, which can be used by people from all backgrounds and ages.

Harassments Experienced by the Domestic Workers and Agro-Processing Workers

Although official statistics show that among the 60.8 million employed, an estimated 5.5% have experienced sexual abuse “7.4% for urban women”—(Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2018), the phenomenon is mostly underreported. Workplace sexual harassment refers to a range of inappropriate practices with implicit or explicit sexual undertones regarding women’s bodies and self, usually done by men, which happen as the result of power and gender hierarchies.

The findings presented in this brief are based on qualitative research with live-out domestic and agro-processing factory workers. These workers reported different forms of harassment at the workplace and on the way to work. Workplace harassment for both types of workers includes a wide range of abuse with varying degrees of severity, ranging from jokes and comments to sexual assault. Domestic workers reported a wider range and greater severity of harassment. Looking or leering or gesturing is the most common form, which all respondents reported to have experienced. The majority of domestic workers had experienced physical abuse at least once and some had experienced incidents of severe physical abuse.

Verbal harassment with sexual overtures debases workers and robs them of self-respect. It is prevalent and can be in the form of compliments, sympathy, assistance, or vulgar remarks. Domestic workers face it mainly from the male members of their female employer’s household. For agro-firm workers, verbal harassment from supervisors or superiors was rare but common in public spaces.

The vulnerability of young female workers to sexual harassment is influenced by social and gender hierarchies in the workspace, the conditions for formality or informality, their socio-economic background, and their age. Live-in domestic workers are most at risk of sexual harassment due to their isolated working conditions. On the contrary, the factory floor is less risky for the factory workers as they are surrounded by colleagues. Many agro-processing factories have sex-segregated floors. Supervisors are protective of the factory’s reputation and guard the behaviour of all workers.

“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.’”

—A 19-year-old firm worker (BD-Interview-FW-01)

The working conditions of domestic workers are completely informal and they have no formal organization to protect their rights. Poverty, hierarchy, and informality create a power asymmetry that offers no protection to domestic workers. In contrast, the factory workers and their supervisors work under semi-formal conditions. While most workers have no contracts, some have complaint mechanisms that offer some recourse for justice. Despite the power asymmetry, factory workers have the strength of numbers which gives them greater courage.

Role of Social and Gender Norms

Social gender norms nurture the sexual vulnerability of young female workers. Sexual harassment is normalized for girls in most situations. Men take advantage and exert force upon girls. Therefore girls bear the onus of protecting themselves.

“I obey what our parents taught us. Mother told me, ‘Don’t go with boys. If you like anyone, just tell us and we will arrange things for you. Don’t go with any boys because some could even murder you.’”

—A 24-year-old married firm worker (BD-Interview-FW-17)

Women need to protect their personal and family honour and maintain their “goodness” and purity. They are to be modest and not attract attention, not be heard, and never take the initiative of speaking to or approaching a man. Male family members are considered “guardians” at home and in public. On the factory premises, the male supervisors assume the role of “guardians” and take action to discipline those men who misbehave with the girls.

“We said to him that we are not alone and that we will not even complain to the Sir; we have brothers and fathers outside. So then he apologized 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.”

—A 19-year-old firm worker (BD-Interview-FW-21)

The concepts or norms of “honour” and “shame” heavily influence the discourse and action on sexual harassment for both types of workers as they are conscious of norms that regulated the sharing of such incidents. They describe incidents differently depending on who they are speaking to and masking their language when speaking to employers and authorities. Also in interviews, expressions such as “I don’t know anything about it” and “I forgot” were used and many did not want to talk about it.

“I do not talk with people. And even if someone says anything to me, I do not reply to them. I pass by quickly. Even if I saw my father passing by me, I would not talk with him. I do so because of shame. I am a modest person; otherwise, I would have gone with people when they proposed to me. Many people proposed or called me when I was passing them.”

—A 20-year-old domestic worker (BD-Interview-DW-07)

Everyday Language of Sexual Harassment

The narratives indicated a lack of adequate vocabulary regarding sexual harassment at work. Many were not aware of the acts that constituted sexual harassment. The lack of awareness and language, shaped by normative practices, creates an unsafe space at work. The lack of clear and specific expressions identifying sexual harassment undermines the severity of the offences. Instead of specific sexual phrases, young women used generic terms relating to violence. Explicit terms were avoided, and indirect expressions dominated their description of incidents of sexual harassment, often terming them as “accidents”. Identifying the violence as an accident is problematic because it takes the responsibility away from the perpetrator and normalizes the abuse. Avoiding terms with sexual connotations, women resorted to Bangla words such as *atyachar* and *nirjatan* meaning “torture” and “violence,” rather than more explicit vocabulary.

Enabling and Limiting Factors for Voice and Action

Both domestic and agro-processing factory workers rely on prevention and self-protection strategies to avoid sexual harassment at work or on the way to work. These strategies, either individual, collective, or both, are a form of agency. Domestic workers emphasized individual strategies, while factory workers elaborated on their collective strategies.

The workers have some common individual strategies. These include keeping quiet and not talking back, keeping one’s eyes, down and not looking men in the eye, and keeping the body covered. Common prevention strategies for factory workers include walking and staying together. The factory management also takes various steps to ensure that women and men do not talk to each other to limit social interactions between them because it is considered inappropriate. By implication, this helps to prevent sexual harassment. Most workers used informal complaints mechanisms in dealing with incidents of harassment. Some factory workers mentioned that if they face any harassment at or on their way to work, they would complain to their male family members who may take mitigating action such as reprimanding the offender or beating them up. Complaining to the employer or having the husband take action would seem to be an informal mechanism used by domestic workers. Participants of the focus group discussion (FGD) mentioned that both male and female workers could complain to their superiors who would take informal action.

“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 13-year-old firm worker (BD-Interview-FW-08)

Formal complaints mechanisms are absent for domestic workers. Factory workers can go to the administration or human resources sections, but none had done so. Going to the police, court, or local elected leaders was dismissed as inaccessible, costly, and unrealistic. They believed going to formal institutions like the court or police would require money to file a case to get justice as rich people manipulate the system with money and power.

“The poor, lower-class—those who can’t protest—have to tolerate. Where can they seek justice? If they seek justice then they have to pay money first. Those who don’t have money, they have to tolerate.”

—A18-year-old married domestic worker (BD-Interview-DW 10)

Social respectability would also be at stake if they filed formal cases. Enabling factors, in both formal and informal mechanisms, include family support (brothers, sisters, husband); support from neighbours; and even

support from households where the harassment is taking place. Some women felt unable to talk to their families and husbands because of the shame or fear that they would be asked to stop work. Others reported talking to other women or family members for some mental support. Many factory workers and some domestic workers were able to seek advice from others in their situation. And in a few cases, the employer of a domestic worker was able to take action against harassers.

Recommendations

These findings show it is important to have effective workplace policies and practices to support the voice and capacity development of female workers so they can engage with employers and institutional actors. Improving safeguarding measures and strengthening young women's civic and political capacities are essential for negotiating safety at work. These are currently ignored by employment and private sector interventions. Therefore, our recommendations are:

- Develop and promote the accessible language to describe sexual harassment, which can be used by people from all backgrounds and ages and will enable a person to accurately describe what they experienced. This is critical both for the person experiencing the harassment and wanting to complain as well as for legal communities and the policymakers to deal with the issue.
- Train domestic and agro-processing workers on provisions in the labour law and guidelines on workplace sexual harassment prevention and protection.
- Support female workers to strengthen their civic and political capacities to develop the confidence and courage to demand their rights and speak out if incidences occur. They will also need the capacity to negotiate social support from their fellow workers, trade unions, and family members to make and follow through with their complaints.
- Trade unions and the labour law should include and prioritize informal workers and issues of sexual harassment of these workers in their remit.
- Train local government representatives and law enforcement agencies on how to receive

and handle complaints of workplace sexual harassment and take necessary action.

- Develop sexual harassment policies and user-friendly reporting systems in every workplace for any worker to access easily and get speedy results.
- Encourage social dialogue between employees, employers, trade unions, government officials, and organizations working for women and youth to ensure greater awareness among all stakeholders.

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Further Reading

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