

Case Study 4.3

Challenging sexual harassment in the apparel supply chain through MSI action

Fair Wear Foundation's (FWF) violence prevention programme in export-oriented garment factories in India and Bangladesh supports the setting up of factory anti-harassment committees and help-lines.

FWF and local stakeholders develop initiatives with factories, as well working with brands to ensure their purchasing practices do not exacerbate workplace verbal, physical or sexual abuse.

The FWF programme operates at three strategic levels:

- At factory level: management, supervisors and workers receive training and support to prevent sexual harassment. Practical support is provided to set up and train the anti-harassment committees required by national legislation⁴.
- At community level: the project builds networks to provide a supportive environment to workers and new anti-harassment committees, through locally provided training, workers' helplines and support from local workers' organizations and NGOs.
- At international level: the project uses the influence of FWF member brands with factories to introduce the programme, coach management, train supervisors and workers and support anti-harassment committees.

FWF brands also work towards eliminating business practices that exacerbate violence in factories, such as demands for unreasonably high production targets. Eventually FWF aims to include new requirements to reduce sexual harassment in the verification process for all its brand members.

The following describes the linked steps of the FWF Violence Prevention programme:

Step 1) Test whether sexual harassment is a problem

A FWF baseline survey (unpublished) and off-site interviews with workers indicated sexual harassment and verbal abuse was common in garment factories. Interviews with workers took place away from the workplace, making it easier for them to speak out about sexual harassment.

“During the run-up to a regular FWF factory audit we interview workers off-site. Factories are not told which workers are interviewed and strict confidentiality is maintained. These worker interviews are often the source of important insights into conditions and pay in the factory.” (Bablur Rahman, FWF Bangladesh country officer)

Step 2) Engaging participation and support from factories

Brands and factory managers were approached to participate in finding solutions to sexual harassment, highlighting the potential business benefits for the factory. FWF offered management and workers training and monthly support for managers and anti-harassment committees. Union negotiators were included in the process, if there was a union.

⁴ In India under the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013* and under a Bangladeshi High Court ruling recommending factories establish Anti-Harassment Committees.

Step 3) Provide training on sexual harassment

Training for managers, supervisors and workers helped raise awareness of sexual harassment in factories. The local trainers were not associated with the factory and were specialists in dealing with sexual harassment. Preparatory training was provided to 1164 female and 571 male workers and the managers at 45 factories in Bangladesh and India. A new component of the programme focuses on training male line supervisors on sexual harassment, who are often the offenders, as well as training of women to become supervisors.

Since many female workers in garment factories in India and Bangladesh are not literate, good use was made of role-plays, art through interactive focus groups and body mapping. (FWF, 2015)



Refer to Module 6 for more information about the creative tools used to reach workers, including artwork focus group discussions.

Step 4) Factory committees

Technical advice was provided to anti-harassment committees and managers on how to deal fairly and confidentially with complaints of sexual harassment or flag up factory-wide issues, for example, name calling at factory gates or on work buses.

“Workers are hesitant to talk to senior management, so the fact that they now have representatives who are at the same level as them has really helped them to discuss these matters. And I think communication is really the key – once you start talking about something, the men and women, then these kinds of incidents are reduced.” (Indian factory owner who joined the FWF violence prevention programme)

The training helped managers to see that preventing sexual harassment can bring benefits to the factory and was an important early step towards giving workers some voice.

Step 5) Local harassment helplines

FWF telephone helplines staff, trained to deal sensitively with sexual harassment complaints, provided independent advice and a reporting mechanism for workers. Many of the early calls to the FWF helpline concerned sex discrimination – such as pregnancy dismissal or overtime – but gradually they became trusted to deal with sexual harassment.

“When FWF started handing out cards with the hotline information instead of putting the telephone hotline number on the factory wall, there was a big increase in the number of calls from women workers.” (Suhasini Singh, FWF India country officer)

Step 6) Provide practical support

Factory committees received regular training and technical assistance, such as legal advice and help with identifying sexual harassment.

Step 7) Develop model policies and procedures

New model factory sexual harassment/violence prevention policies and complaints procedures were developed by FWF for factories to adapt and implement.

Step 8) Expand social dialogue

Ending sexual harassment proved a useful starting point for employers and workers to develop initial social dialogue, particularly as many factories have no history of management-worker negotiations or trade unions.



Participation in the project has led to a shift in some managers' attitudes towards sexual harassment in the factory. As a result of the success of the FWF violence prevention programme, some European clothing brand members include participation in the programme as part of their business negotiations with factories. This provides a motivation for factories to participate.

“Initially many factory managers denied that sexual harassment even existed. But it was noticeable that some of the younger factory managers (often the better-educated sons of factory owners) were keener... on maintaining a good working environment. Eventually, with the support of some of our brand affiliates, we got together a small critical mass of factories in Bangladesh and India. Once we started running our management and worker education training programmes, we had managers from other factories come and ask to join the programme because they heard the training is good – and it helps them comply with the law.” (Juliette Li, FWF Violence Prevention Programme Coordinator)

FWF's violence prevention programme gives ground for encouragement. Factories and clothing brands are beginning to work together more effectively to challenge a culture of violence against women and see the benefit of constructive social dialogue. An important outcome is that workers are beginning to speak out about problems and to suggest solutions to factory problems. FWF's initiative on preventing sexual harassment is expanding and has been integrated into a five-year Strategic Partnership (2016-2021) between FWF, Dutch trade unions and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

“Working conditions for women have changed dramatically after the intervention of the anti-harassment programme in our factory... After the anti-harassment awareness training, I am able to analyse sexual harassment of many kinds. Some are explicit and some remain implicit...if a woman does not feel comfortable working in a factory, productivity must suffer.” (Ms Morsheda, aged 26, a senior operator and Anti-Harassment Committee President in India, quoted in UN Women, 2014)

Source: Fair Wear Foundation (2015) Setting up Anti-harassment committees and violence prevention systems: The experience of Fair Wear Foundation. Available at: <http://www.fairwear.org/ul/cms/fck-uploaded/documents/policydocs/Settingupahcs2015.pdf>