

## Study: Sexual harassment common among young women workers in Bangladesh

Social and gender norms constrain women in articulating transgressive and inappropriate behaviour by men, says the study



Representational image **Mahmud Hossain Opu/Dhaka Tribune Tribune Desk**

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New research reveals that young female workers, primarily aged between 18 and 24, in Bangladesh often experience sexual harassment at work, but their concerns about it are ignored.

Most do not dare to challenge men when witnessing or experiencing sexual harassment because they feel ashamed and think taking action will worsen the situation, said a press release.

In partnership with the Institute of Development Studies and Sobujer Obhijan Foundation, researchers from the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) conducted the study among domestic workers and factory workers in Dhaka.

The study was conducted between July and November 2021, and looked specifically at how job informality, language, and social norms influence women's voice and agency in response to workplace sexual harassment, the press release added.

### **Poor women face more harassment**

Decent employment is considered a crucial avenue to agency and empowerment for young people worldwide. However, for young women, particularly from poorer backgrounds, the risk of experiencing sexual harassment in their places of work leaves them vulnerable, both in terms of physical security and finances.

Maheen Sultan, senior fellow of Practice at BIGD and one of the researchers, said: "The findings show that sexual harassment is widespread in both formal and informal workplaces, but domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to its most severe forms, assault and rape, due to their isolated working conditions.

"We also found that women are not passive victims, but their agency is severely constrained by social and gender norms."

Discussions of physical acts are considered vulgar and so there can be a reluctance to bring forward complaints, or confusion and misinterpretation where complaints are brought forward. At the same time, formal institutions are failing young female workers.

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, reads the press release.

### **28% of incidents remain unresolved**

A team of youth researchers had also pursued their own inquiry as part of a project.

Worryingly, their online survey among university students and teachers revealed that almost half of the 250 respondents did not know what had been done to resolve incidents of sexual harassment to which they had been witnesses.

Of the women, 28% said the issue had not been resolved at all, with 23% of men agreeing.

The youth team also explored how family members responded when young females experienced sexual harassment at work.

Interviews with young female workers and their male family members highlighted a lack of transparency and consequences.

When women made complaints about what they were dealing with, they were mostly responded with some workers being fired or the police being bribed by the families of those accused, reads the press release.

## **Recommendations**

The report suggests that elected officials, trade union leaders and NGO representatives take firm steps to promote 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 she experienced.

It says domestic and agro-processing workers should be trained on labour laws and guidelines on workplace sexual harassment prevention and protection.

Moreover, female workers should be given support to strengthen their civic and political capacities in order for them to develop the confidence and courage to demand their rights and speak out if incidents occur.

Trade unions should take steps to demand that the labour laws include and prioritise informal workers and the issues of sexual harassment.

The research team is campaigning to change attitudes around workplace sexual harassment, including a short film shown recently at three universities.

The team has also produced a poster to display in places of work – calling on people to “smash the silence, put an end to harassment”. The same design has been printed onto masks to be worn by workers.