

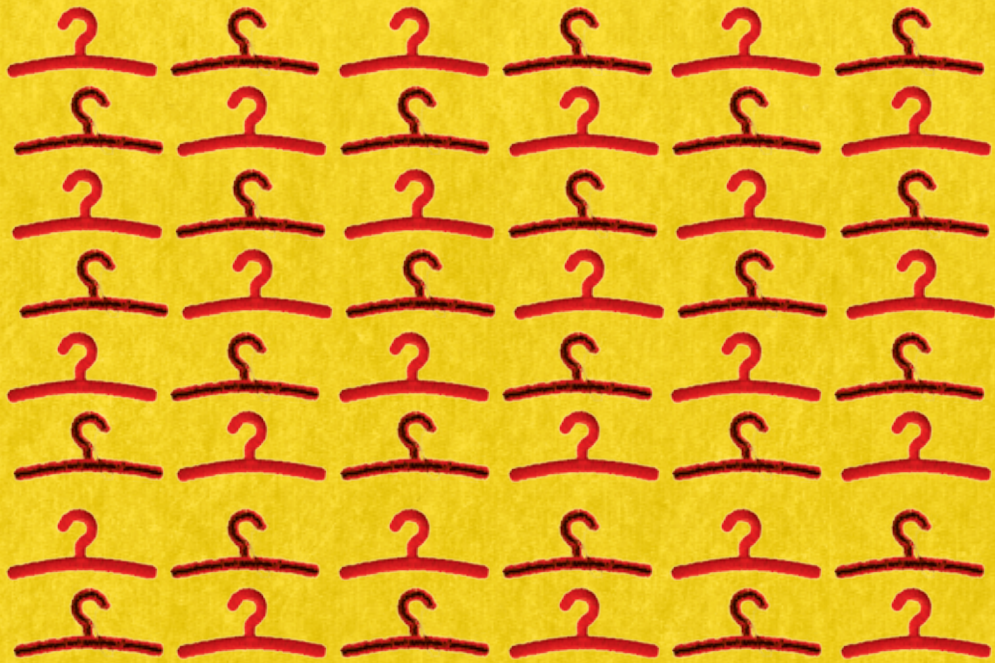


STANDING FIRM  
AGAINST  
FACTORY FLOOR  
HARASSMENT

preventing violence  
against women garment workers  
in Bangladesh and India

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a project of Fair Wear Foundation (The Netherlands) • SAVE • Cividep (India)  
AMRF Society • Awaj Foundation (Bangladesh)



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fair wear foundation  
standing firm against  
factory floor harassment



Government of the Netherlands



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality  
and the Empowerment of Women

## introduction

Violence against women is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. Some form of harassment or violence – ranging from verbal and physical abuse and sexual harassment, to forced labour, assault and rape – has been reported by a disturbingly high percentage of garment workers. The good news is that workplace violence against women in the garment industry in India and Bangladesh is being increasingly acknowledged as a serious problem.

It is women who suffer the greatest damage, but workplace violence has negative consequences for all parties involved. Hostile working conditions lead to low productivity and high worker turnover. It also limits the potential contributions of millions of women workers to the broader society and economy.

The Preventing Workplace Violence project is an innovative partnership between Indian and Bangladeshi garment factories, European clothing brands, governments, civil society organisations and trade unions in Europe and Asia. Together, they are piloting new ways to address and remedy the root causes of workplace violence.

'Garment factories are places of dirty language and abuse. Those who have done a lot of sinning come here for penance.' – a garment worker in Bangladesh.

## workers speak up

Indian and Bangladeshi laws are very clear on the steps to be taken in workplaces to prevent and remedy violence against women. However there are no documented examples of factories where the laws are being properly implemented. In 2011, Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) and local NGOs in Bangladesh and India launched an effort to fully implement these laws in garment factories. In 2013, the laws in India were strengthened by the passage of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, and the project became among the first efforts in any industry to implement the new law.

Despite many challenges, the project is proving successful: factories are allowing training for workers and managers on the importance and benefits of treating women better; several anti-harassment committees and telephone helplines have been established; workers are speaking up about problems; and factories and clothing brands are working together to remedy those problems. The project is also providing rare insight and solid documentation of a problem which is rarely spoken about.





## ‘easy prey’

Sumi\* (23) always dreamed of having a good job and liked going to school very much. But her family was poor and decided to move from the countryside in Bangladesh to Dhaka in the hope of improving their situation. 14-year-old Sumi took a job in a garment factory.

Everything was going well with Sumi at work until one day a couple of her male colleagues tried to abduct her from just in front of the factory gate. **‘I screamed and cried for help. Luckily some bystanders came over. I was hurt, but rescued.’**

## unsafe abortion

Sumi found a new job and after six years she is proud to be a senior sewing machine operator. Sumi got married to a line chief from the same factory. ‘My husband has not informed his family about our marriage yet. He fears that his family will not accept me if they find out about my profession.’

She got pregnant, but her husband didn’t want her to keep the child. ‘So I went for an unsafe abortion. I was not treated well and had a bad infection. Since then I’ve had many complications. I’m scared that someday my husband might leave me.’

Sumi has heard many stories about sexual harassment in different workplaces. Women workers are also harassed on the way to work. When they’re unprotected, she believes that people treat them as ‘easy prey’. The factory where she currently works treats women well.

## a man’s job

‘In the factories where I used to work, women are not treated as human beings. It’s as if women workers are born to take orders from men. Men feel like they can touch them anywhere they want and use any kind of language.’

Sumi’s factory offered her the position of line supervisor, but she refused. She is scared of taking on managerial responsibilities; to her, that is a man’s job. She just wants to be happy and save some money.

\* For reasons of privacy, the names of the people interviewed in this report have been changed. The people portrayed in the interviews are not those shown in the photos.



# acknowledging a problem

Offensive and sexually explicit language, hitting, hearing suggestions to become a prostitute, slapping on heads, pulling of hair; all are examples of abusive behaviour reported by garment workers. Millions of women have experienced this type of treatment because they made a mistake, failed to meet a production target, asked for leave, worked slower because of illness, or arrived late. Many women have also experienced unwanted sexual advances in the workplace, stalking, or worse, from male colleagues or supervisors.

These issues have long been a part of life in garment factories, but until recently the problems have rarely been reported. Often, neither senior factory managers nor their foreign customers were aware of the level of harassment. How is this possible? Several factors contribute to the 'hidden' nature of workplace violence.

## **female workers have been reluctant to speak up about harassment**

They see it as unfair and deeply disturbing, but inevitable and an extension of the 'normal' behaviour they experience outside of work. They feel ashamed and embarrassed, and historically have kept silent for fear of making things worse, risking their reputations, or damaging their marriage prospects. The reporting of harassment or sexual or physical violence remains rare.

## **harassment and violence is difficult to detect in factory audits**

A reluctance to report incidents and a belief that harassment is 'normal' makes it difficult to detect harassment in factory audits, even using FWF's offsite worker interview system. Project partners had anecdotal evidence of widespread problems and some research had pointed in a similar direction. However, it was not until this programme invested significant time in educating, speaking with, and earning the trust of, workers that the true scale of the problem started to come into focus.

### senior management may not see the problems

One of the most telling statistics found in the project's baseline research regards perceptions of yelling: only 20% of managers thought there was a lot of yelling in factories; 60% of workers thought it was common. Workers also reported that the vast majority of problems are with their immediate supervisors, who can change their behaviour when senior managers are on the factory floor. There is also a perception among many managers that while women may be yelled at, or occasionally hit, the environment is still preferable to other options available to poor uneducated women – like prostitution. The partners believe that a different frame of reference is more appropriate: Harassment of the type reported by many garment workers would never be tolerated in the stores where garments are sold; so why should it be tolerated in the factories where the garments are made?

### traditional systems to report problems are not trusted

Recent Indian and Bangladeshi anti-harassment laws are clearly designed to address the shortcomings of traditional complaint systems. As several workers noted: 'There is a complaint box but it does not work because it's never opened.' 'Everyone is encouraged to submit complaints. But when I have a problem and want to see the administrator, the line chief does not allow me to meet him.' And 95% of garment factories in India and Bangladesh are not unionized; so any reporting via unions is rarely possible.

### who are the workers?

Garment workers in India and Bangladesh are mostly under the age of 20. They migrate from mostly small, traditional villages in poorer states with high unemployment, to major textile hubs. Often they cannot read or write.

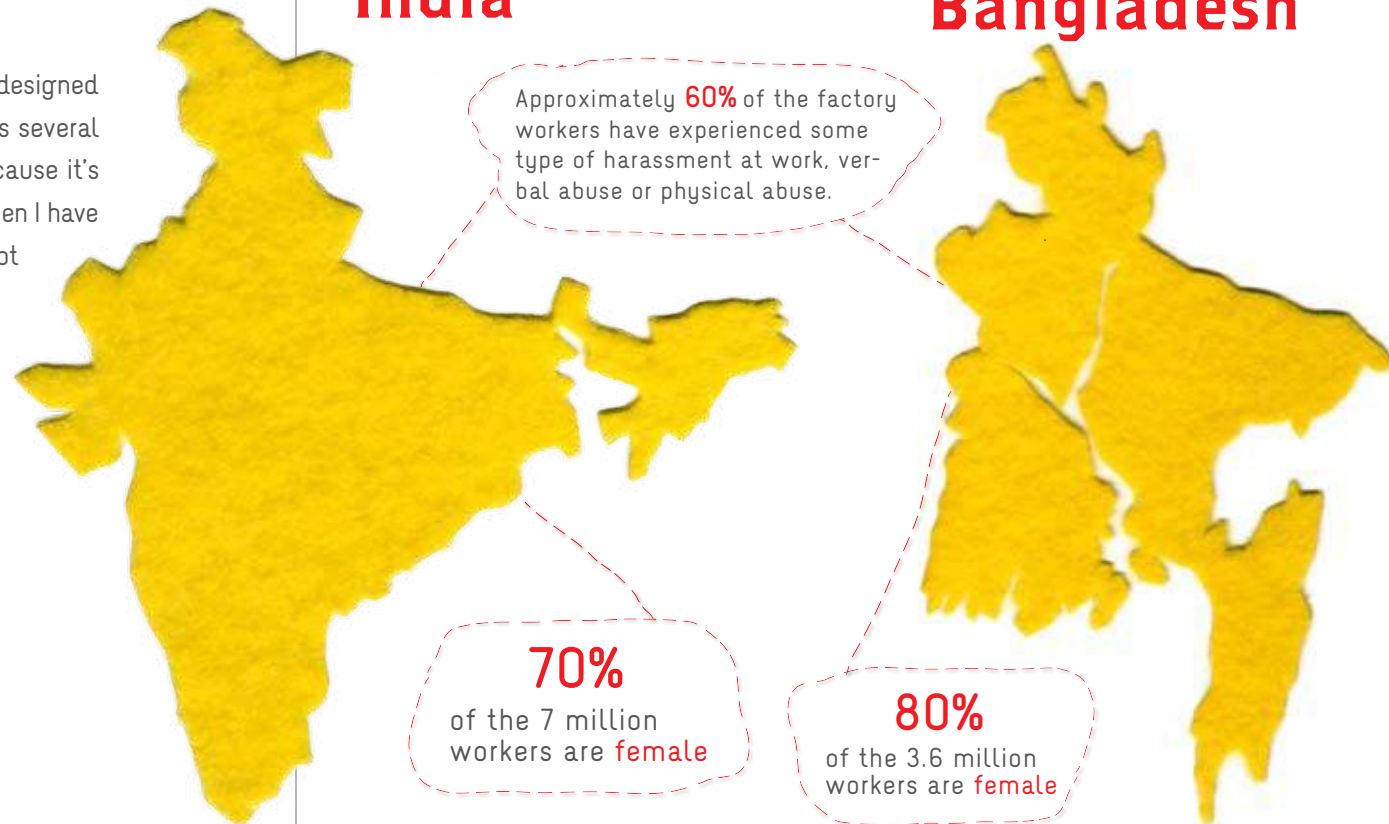
They are usually the first generation working in a factory and away from home. Their parents know nothing about life in a factory and can provide little guidance. The women need income and their family is counting on them.

### Sumangali

Under the Sumangali scheme, a form of forced labour common in Tamil Nadu, India, girls' parents are persuaded by brokers to sign up their daughter(s). These families are usually poor and from the lower castes. The scheme promises an attractive sum of money after completion of a three-year contract working in the factory. Once the contract is signed, young girls are under the control of the factory or the broker. It is often reported that the girls live in captivity for a long period. Girls are often forced to work up to 12 hours a day, live in hostels with few facilities, and earn a very low wage.

## India

## Bangladesh



### harassment happens all the time - just not to us!

On the outskirts of Tirupur, we are to meet a group of garment workers at one of their homes after the end of their shift. Six women gather around us on a porch facing onto a small yard. Five of them work as 'checkers' which is among the lowest-paid jobs in the Tirupur garment factories.

One woman called Ramya started out as a 'helper' to a tailor. As she had some relatives working in the factory, the tailor left her alone, but the other girls were harassed mercilessly: 'The tailor would slap them, prick them with his needle and even kick them, for no reason at all.'

The other women chip in: they too have witnessed this kind of harassment throughout their working lives. But all of them deny having ever been subjected to it. Nobody has ever been shouted at? 'Yes, every day!', Ramya responds. 'Supervisors shout at us and humiliate us all the time. It makes us feel really bad. We don't like to talk about it.'

### keep quiet

'Sometimes the shouting is justified; when we've made a mistake, or been wasteful,' Ramya explains. 'When that's the case, we simply accept the shouting and apologise. But when it's unjust...' 'We just keep quiet anyway!', her neighbour interrupts her.

What about sexual harassment? They giggle. 'We're way too old for that! When we were young - before we were married - the men would tease us. When we would hand the tailor or supervisor an item of clothing, for example, they'd grab our hand and stroke it.'

As we prepare to leave, I ask the four women who have daughters how they would feel if their daughters would end up working in a garment factory. 'No way,' one of them answers, 'we would never want them to suffer the things we have endured!'



# steps towards a solution

No clothing brand wants sexual harassment or abuse against workers in their supply chains. No factory owner wants to be known as allowing abuse to take place in his or her factory. When no problems related to harassment are being reported, the easy response is to conclude that there are no problems. However, research shows that harassment is often a hidden issue.

The United Nations Framework on Business and Human Rights emphasizes the importance of 'human rights due diligence' – identifying and remedying possible human rights problems in supply chains, even if those problems are not immediately obvious. The participants in this project are currently providing examples of how to carry out such due diligence.

'We have to handle our workers very carefully because there is another factory next door. Workers will immediately leave if they feel they are not being treated properly. We agreed to pilot an anti-harassment committee with Fair Wear Foundation because the brand we supply asked me to and also because we want to ensure a stable workforce.' – **Indian factory director**



# a solution

## clothing brands

Clothing companies increasingly realize that they need to take action to address violence on the factory floor. No company can afford to ignore sexual harassment because of the negative effects on the workforce and the potential reputational damage.

For European clothing brands involved in the project, preventing violence against women is part of their business negotiations with factories. They turn violence from a social issue into an issue with economic consequences for factory managers.

### **Kwintet** (Swedish FWF member since 2010)

'Increasing the awareness of top and middle management, as well as employees, usually brings the necessary break-through in ensuring a good working environment in the factory. All levels in the factory are positive about the training sessions and express an increased understanding afterwards as to why good industrial relations are important and why it is a win-win situation for all the involved stakeholders.'



### **McGregor Fashion Group** (Dutch FWF member since 2007)

'Due to the fact that most workers in garment factories are women, and that the harassment rates against women in the garment industry must be taken seriously, we truly believe that our participation in this project is part of our corporate social responsibility (CSR).'





# preventing workplace violence: how the programme works

The programme is designed to provide factories with the tools they need to implement anti-harassment laws, and workers with the knowledge required to use the systems provided for by the law. There are three major elements:

## training courses

With the support of FWF member brands, the project's local partners provide training to workers. This training includes basic rights, an outline of the anti-harassment laws, and information on worker helplines.

Training is also given to senior managers to explain the project, to secure their buy-in, to explain the laws, and to explain how a functional complaint process can lead to lower worker turnover and better productivity. One of the unique aspects of this project is that the training is held with the full knowledge and permission of factory managers. The project is designed to provide training to over 30,000 workers over three years.

## anti-harassment policies and committees

The law calls for the election and creation of elected anti-harassment committees (AHCs) who can file grievances on behalf of garment workers who have experienced harassment. They work with managers to ensure that cases are resolved appropriately. Factories are required to create policies to address complaints and reduce overall harassment. Local NGOs and trade unions provide support and counselling when needed. If necessary, there are linkages to law enforcement agencies for the prosecution of major violations.



## worker helplines

In cases when workers have questions about their rights, or when the anti-harassment committees are not yet functional, they can also call the FWF helpline. FWF requires member companies to negotiate a solution to complaints filed this way, and publically reports on how brands resolve the complaints.

## committee at work:

### in a big training room in a factory in Tirupur...

... forty girls and young women sing a song about standing firm against harassment. A few of them move to the middle of the room and start performing a skit: one girl plays a drunken husband who is hitting his wife and preventing their daughter from going to school. The wife does not accept his behaviour, raises her voice and stands tall. Together, these forty women form the factory's anti-harassment committee. They were elected by their peers: the factory's employees were divided up into groups of ten, which each group choosing one person to represent them in the committee. Since the start of the project training, they say, they've learned a lot about harassment and how to deal with it. They haven't had to deal with actual harassment complaints yet, but just recently, one of the committee members was called in for help when a worker was self-harming, inflicting severe scratches on herself. Now she is providing support to the girl, making sure she is monitored.

## nervous looks

The committee members agree that this kind of issue helps establish their position, even if it doesn't involve actual harassment. They're sure that if any harassment were to happen, their colleagues would know they can approach them. They know that their supervisors have received some training as well. But it hasn't changed them much yet. And besides, they say that there is no harassment at this factory – throwing nervous looks at each other when the question is asked. The interview setting does not help them open up, facing the interviewer, photographer and translator. Two management representatives are also present, one on either side of the women.

Only one woman has the courage to raise her hand when I ask if nobody dreams of being a factory manager. She looks around proudly when the other girls give her a round of applause. When she is factory manager, she promises, she will make sure that the women working for her are heard.

# results

The training courses are bringing some early success, and three major themes have emerged during the first two years of this three-year project.

## increased worker knowledge

Increased confidence is measured in being able to deal with harassment on a daily basis and having a clearer understanding that they have a right to be free from violence. Workers reported that they were more confident about raising problems and solving problems together with managers.

## anti-harassment committees

The election of the first group of anti-harassment committees is a major step towards better dialogue between workers and managers. Given the sensitive nature of harassment issues, it will take time for fully functional committees to develop, and for the most effective strategies for their management to emerge. The learning curve for both workers and managers is significant, however valuable lessons are already being learned.



# Results

Initially, as expected, workers reported relatively minor issues. However, as worker trust in the systems grows, reports about more serious issues are likely.

For example, during a few successful interactive AHC meetings in various Indian factories, issues of female workers who were being teased by male colleagues, were discussed. When an official complaint was filed, both the AHC members and the management immediately approached the workers concerned and warned them to stop. After that the victim was left alone – a small but significant milestone for this factory.

## project milestones

- Training to top management staff at 54 factories
- 3,500 workers have been directly trained at 24 factories
- 15,000 workers have been trained via peer-to-peer education
- Eight anti-harassment committees have been set up
- After the training, 97% of the workers felt 'more knowledgeable' about violence at their workplace
- Three anti-harassment telephone helplines have been established, operated by local partners, affiliated to FWF's existing helpline system
- So far, the Bangladesh helpline received 45 phone calls from workers in several different factories. Many were inquiries about laws and regulations, however 10 complaints were filed concerning labour rights violations
- It has taken longer for workers in India to begin using the helpline, however the first few complaints have also been filed in recent months, and growth is expected as word spreads among workers that the helplines are effective

'After setting up the anti-harassment committees, there have been fewer problems. Bad attitudes can affect production.' – Indian factory manager

## Nudie Jeans (Swedish FWF member since 2009)

'It is important to facilitate that these kinds of project reaches employees who really benefit from it and have limited chances to get the knowledge from elsewhere.

So far it seems to be working quite well. The training sessions are regular and they have set up functioning committees with representatives from different departments to deal with employee concerns.'

Nudie Jeans co



# ‘I’m not the father’

Shatil Ara, Fair Wear Foundation Bangladesh office, about training workers

‘In Bangladesh, harassment is culturally defined. Men are powerful. Women are in the bottom groups. Only excessive actions are actually recognized as harassment. Our first goal during our factory training courses is to understand and underline the root causes of harassment.

During a role play, sometimes a worker will play a pregnant woman who asks the manager if she can leave because she’s not feeling well. It’s odd to say you’re pregnant in a garment factory in Bangladesh. Factory managers often do not see a role for employers in the well-being of pregnant women. ‘I’m not the father,’ they argue. So they simply ask these women to resign. That is mental harassment.’

‘A major problem in our factory is pregnancies. Women want to rest during that time and so work less.’ - **Factory manager, India**



‘Our experienced trainers involve the women emotionally. They use psychological tools. And the workers learn what harassment actually means. They felt bad about it, ok, but was that really abuse? They are grateful that they can hold someone accountable for being harassed.’

# ‘top down and bottom up’

Juliette Li, Fair Wear Foundation, about training factory managers

‘Lots of women accept sexual harassment, because they don’t recognize it as such. And if they do, the factory manager doesn’t take it seriously. We want to create an atmosphere in which workers can talk to their bosses.

We work top down and bottom up and meet in the middle. Of course we want to empower women, but hierarchy is very important in the factories. Managers really care about the factory and many of them think they are doing the right thing: providing a livelihood for workers and their families. Plus, the way they treat female workers is also how they treat their wives, and how they were raised; how their fathers treated their mothers.

Beforehand, the managers stated that these training courses were not necessary in their factories. But after two training sessions, all managers agreed that harassment is happening. They shout at workers, but think it’s normal. They get the chance to open up about whether something is harassment or not. Once they see they are not being judged, they dare to speak out.’

## power relationships

'They continuously keep on bullying, they think shouting helps to make us work harder.' - **worker in India**

The FWF Baseline Survey held among 110 workers from 6 factories in Bangladesh gave some insight into the understanding of discrimination and power relationships:

- Male workers are educated and understand their work better than females.
- Male workers get paid more because they are powerful and are in contact with senior officials.
- Female workers are more often harassed.
- Female workers are not promoted, even if they have skills.
- If an 'older' female worker fails to meet the target, she is harassed so that she will resign.
- Newly recruited workers who are being more loyal and/or obedient get better pay increases.
- Both male and female workers with good relationships with managers get paid more.

'Normal behaviour of the supervisor and line chief is to abuse and scold the girls.' - **worker in India**

'I was shouted at for the quality of my work.  
It was to teach me to deliver quality products.' - **supervisor in India**



# drawing experience

Since many female workers in garment factories in India and Bangladesh are illiterate, the programme makes use of body mapping and art. The project trainers asked 15 women from six factories in Bangladesh to draw their feelings.

'We asked them four very simple questions: What do you like most and least about yourself, about your family life, about your job? What is your dream for the future?' - *Juliette Li (FWF)*

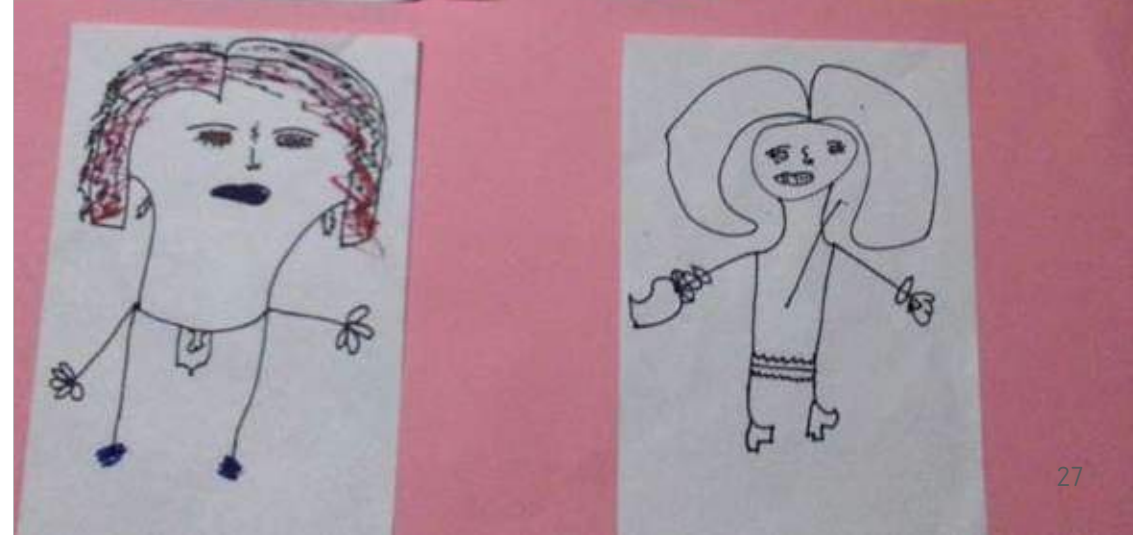
We did not mention the word 'harassment' or 'violence', but in almost every case, the workers opened up about harassment at work.

'Rehana drew herself in the bottom left corner. She has drawn her body very small, because she thinks she is ugly. The drawing on the white piece of paper at the top is about her family. In red ink, she drew her children who live far away from her in the countryside. On the blue sheet, she drew the timekeeper of the factory. Rehana described him as not nice and unfair. He is holding a clock. If the workers are five minutes late, half a day's wages are deducted.

On the yellow sheet, Rehana drew "evil". That's the production manager. He keeps yelling at the workers the whole day. Sometimes he hits them with clothes.

Keya also told her story. She likes everything about herself. She has two daughters, who she loves very much. She drew her husband. He drinks a lot and often goes gambling. Every time he comes home, he takes her money and leaves.

She likes her job. What Keya dislikes most is the girl she drew on the yellow piece of paper. Everybody in the factory knows that this girl is a "slut". She made friends among factory managers in order to get the easier jobs. Although things are going well for Keya, her dream is to go back to her hometown in the countryside. Life there is almost like heaven.'



## not allowed to leave the factory

'Three years ago, a 16-year old worker died in a spinning mill. She had hair colouring in her mouth, indicating suicide. During a post mortem her physical injuries showed that she died from a gang rape, and the hair colouring had been poured into her mouth posthumously. The police did not investigate and the girl's parents were not informed.

An investigation by SAVE indicated that the girl, who started working at the factory when she was only 12, had been abused by a number of supervisors and managers for years before she died. She had never talked to her parents about this.'

## court order

'Recently, a SAVE employee who was monitoring a Tirupur factory was having tea at a stall just outside the factory. She got talking to the tea stall owner, who told her that he regularly delivered food to the factory.

One time, when he was inside, he was approached by a female worker who urgently asked his help: she was twenty years old and had not been allowed to leave the factory for three years. And every day, she was forced to satisfy managers' and supervisors' sexual needs.

SAVE, upon learning this story, quickly got a court order to get the girl out of the factory. She was taken to a safe location to rest and recover, and afterwards taken back to her family, who were not told of the reasons. She was never paid for the years she worked at the factory.'

## the next steps

The Preventing Workplace Violence project represents first steps towards making the south Asian garment industry a safer and more positive work environment for women. The lessons of the first two years of the project indicate where next steps towards this goal should lead.

### improved training for women workers

As the first sets of training sessions are evaluated, it has become clear that modifications could make them more effective and sustainable. Among topics to be addressed are ways to make the training more specific to the experiences of worker in different factories; and ways to cope with worker turnover.

### more support and education for line supervisors

Much of the abusive behaviour suffered by women workers comes from male line supervisors, who are placed under enormous pressure to meet production deadlines. Better human resources and anti-harassment training for these supervisors would go a long way towards reducing chronic behaviours like shouting and hitting. It will also free up resources to identify and address more serious forms of gender-based violence.

### linkages to external resources

As the anti-harassment committees continue to gain the trust of workers, it is likely that more serious forms of violence and harassment will be reported. In such cases, victims will require a level of support that can only come from trained professionals. The committees – and the factory management – will need to develop linkages to external care providers.

### ongoing support from brands

Foreign brands, as the customers of factories, will continue to have an important role to play. Support for trainings helps to ensure that workers and managers have the skills and knowledge needed to reduce workplace violence. Stable business relationships with suppliers support these efforts. And many other common code of conduct best practices benefit women workers. For example, brands who help to reduce excessive overtime also reduce the risks women face from working and commuting home late at night.

**Fair Wear Foundation** (Amsterdam) is an independent, multistakeholder NGO that works with European clothing brands and the factories which supply them, to improve labour conditions for garment workers. FWF has strong relationships with trade unions. FWF is active in 15 production countries in Asia, Europe and Africa. FWF's 85 member companies represent over 120 brands, and are based in eight European countries. Members commit to implementing the FWF Code of Labour Practices, which is based on ILO and UN principles. FWF publishes annual reports on the progress of members towards implementation of the Code. [www.fairwear.org](http://www.fairwear.org)

**Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE)** (Tirupur) is a holistic human rights organisation defending the rights of children, women and workers through research, advocacy and capacity building. SAVE has provided support to over 10,000 girls and women in the past 17 years. SAVE works for the eradication of child labour, comprehensive empowerment of poor women, promotion of living standards of migrant and other labourers by formation of community strengthening structures, through awareness education, enhancing skills, capacity building, networking, lobbying and advocacy programs. [www.savengo.org](http://www.savengo.org)

**CIVIDEP** (Bangalore) is a civil society organisation that studies the effects of corporate activities on communities and campaigned with many other organisations and individuals for workers' rights and unionization and corporate accountability. Cividep is concerned with workers' lives and the effect of economic globalisation and corporate behaviour on the social, economic and physical environment. The underlying objective of Cividep is to evolve strategies to ensure that the rights of various stakeholders' vis-à-vis businesses are duly respected and to strengthen the accountability of businesses towards various categories of people who are affected by their activities. [www.cividep.org](http://www.cividep.org)

**Alternative Movement for Resources and Freedom Society (AMRF Society)** (Dhaka) AMRF's mission is to achieve a fair balance of trade gains among the stakeholders of industrial production systems. 'We honour the owners who gamble their money in the production processes; we honour the management bodies who work hard to manage these investments in a fruitful means; we honour the middle parties/bodies who engage themselves as the helping hands to make the bridge between different segments of the total chain of production and distribution channels; and we humbly admire the workers whose input into the production systems is the key factor for any economy.' [www.amrfd.com](http://www.amrfd.com)

**Awaj Foundation** (Dhaka) has been working for the legal empowerment of RMG workers in Bangladesh. With a network of some 200,000 garment workers, Awaj is one of the most vocal and reputable non-governmental organisations in the sector. Awaj Foundation is committed and pledge bound to develop a universal platform for workers, especially for women workers. The organisation is devoted to undertake welfare activities for destitute and neglected women, children, elderly, disabled and workers.





'Violence against women  
is one of the most pervasive  
and persistent forms of violence.  
It is a lethal combination,  
plagued by silence and impunity.'

**Meez Doraid, UN Women**

[www.fairwear.org](http://www.fairwear.org)