



# Sexual Harassment: A Global Problem

*“Prevalence of sexual harassment in populations is estimated to range between 51% (EU) to 81% (US) over the course of a person’s lifetime”*

Sexual harassment is a widespread and global problem that affects both women and men. It is, however, more commonly experienced by women and girls, across all levels of society around the world.

The global #MeToo movement that went viral in October 2017 started out as a social media hashtag, following sexual harassment allegations within the American film industry. The movement has since massively grown, encouraging millions of women across the world to speak out about sexual harassment. The #MeToo hashtag has been tweeted or retweeted over 19 million times in a year.<sup>1</sup>

In 2018, the “16 Days of Activism” focused on the theme ‘Orange the World’. Widely used online, the hashtag #HearMeToo allowed women and girls to unite their voices against violence, whether as survivors or activists. Sexual harassment is seen as pervasive, although there is still limited data on its prevalence across countries and regions to adequately define the scale and scope of the problem (see Table 1). Additionally, the lack of consensus around definitions, measurement and assessment timeframes makes it difficult to compare these estimates.

Types of sexual harassment	Country/countries and year of Study	Prevalence
Lifetime	USA, 2018 <sup>2</sup>	81% of <b>women</b> experienced sexual harassment once in a lifetime including verbal sexual harassment (77%), unwanted touching (51%), being physically followed (34%), and unwanted genital flashing (30%).
	European Union, 2015 <sup>3</sup>	55% of <b>women</b> experienced sexual harassment once in a lifetime; in the past 12 months (21%).
Institutional /workplace	39 countries across Europe, Africa, Asia-Pacific, America and Arab regions, 2016 <sup>4</sup>	82% of <b>women parliamentarians</b> subjected to psychological violence such as humiliating sexual or sexist remarks, gestures and images during their parliamentary term, by male colleagues from opposing and own parties
	US, 2015 <sup>5</sup>	23% of <b>female undergraduate students</b> had ever experienced sexual assaults and misconduct by physical force, threats of physical force or incapacitation
	Australia, 2018 <sup>6</sup>	39% of <b>working women (aged 15 and above)</b> had ever encountered workplace sexual harassment.
	Cambodia, 2017 <sup>7</sup>	29% of <b>female garment factory workers</b> had been experiencing sexual harassment at work and on the way to work within the last 12 months
	US, 2018 <sup>8</sup>	7% of <b>female physicians</b> experienced unwanted sexual comments, leering, physical contacts, infringing on personal pace and another form of sexual harassment over the past three years.
Street-based	Global, 2017 <sup>9</sup>	An International review showed that 15- 95% of <b>women</b> experienced sexual harassment and assault on public transport.
	India, Thailand, Brazil and the UK, 2016 <sup>10</sup>	More than 75% of <b>women</b> experienced some form of violence or harassment in public places in UK (75%), India (79%), Thailand (86%) and Brazil (86%).
	Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine, 2017 <sup>11</sup>	40-60% of <b>women</b> encountered sexual comments, stalking/ following, or staring/ogling.
Cyber	European Union, 2015 <sup>3</sup>	11% of <b>women</b> experienced unwanted sexually explicit emails or SMS messages or inappropriate advances on social media at least once in their lifetime; while 5% encountered similar experiences in past 12 months.
	US, 2017 <sup>12</sup>	21% of <b>women aged 18 to 29 years old</b> reported being sexually harassed online such as receiving unwanted explicit images.

Table 1: Prevalence of Sexual Harassment worldwide

## What Causes Sexual Harassment?

Sexual harassment is a gross violation of human rights associated with discrimination and abuse of power. It is generally perceived as offensive, unwanted, and unwelcome behaviour of a sexual nature towards women and men, and considered a form of violence against women and girls (VAWG).<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1 depicts a number of layered causes that contribute to the vulnerability of women and girls for sexual harassment:

- Individual characteristics of perpetrators<sup>11,15</sup> and victims<sup>2,16</sup> as highlighted in the literature (Box 1).
- Organizational conditions or working environments with a higher ratio of males; leadership, job duties and tasks that favour males, and the lack of formal procedures for reporting sexual harassment incidents to management.<sup>17, 18, 19, 20</sup>
- Social norms and practices that reinforce power imbalances between men and women, including environments where sexual harassment is tolerated, ambiguous, or even supported; or social norms about women and girls being less valuable and having fewer rights and opportunities than men.<sup>17, 19, 20, 21, 22</sup>

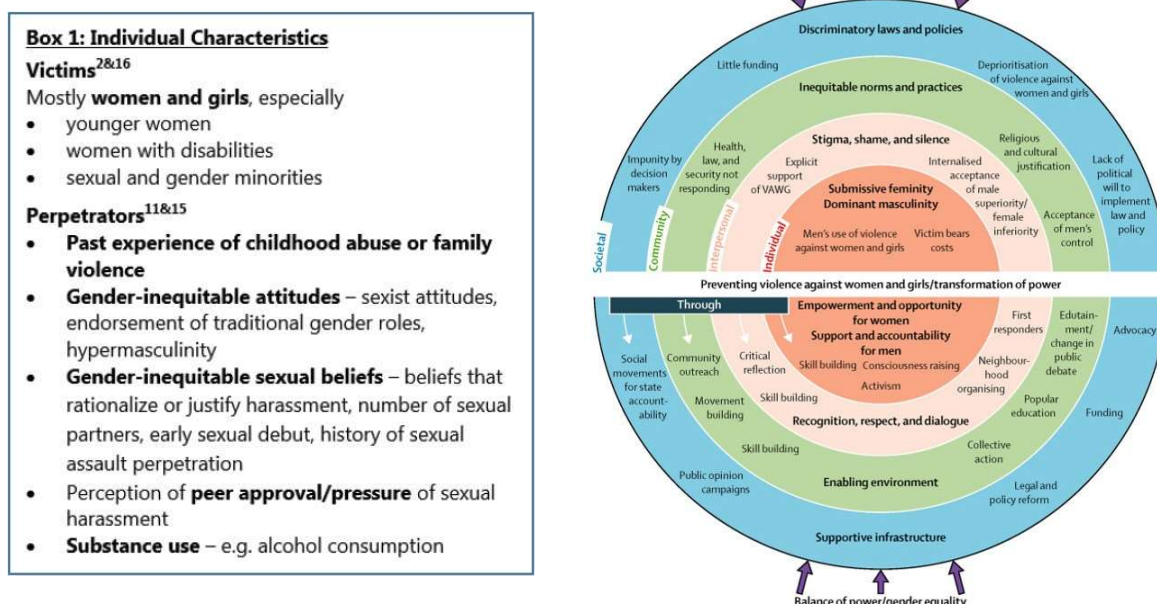


Figure 1: Ecological model on causes and responses to VAWG from Michau et al (2015)<sup>13</sup>

## What are the Impacts and Costs of Sexual Harassment?

### Health Impact

Sexual harassment has short and long term impacts on victims, affecting their mental, physical and sexual health and well-being, regardless of which stage of life they are at. Health impacts might vary depending on the individual, type, severity, and duration of the harassment (see below).<sup>19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25</sup>

Psychological and mental health impact <sup>19,21,22&amp;23</sup>	Physical health impact <sup>19,21&amp;23</sup>	Indirect impact <sup>21,24&amp;25</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Sadness</li> <li>• Shame and guilt</li> <li>• Loss of confidence and self-esteem</li> <li>• Loss of trust in people</li> <li>• Withdrawal and isolation</li> <li>• Traumatic stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)</li> <li>• Suicidal thoughts or attempts</li> <li>• Suicide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress-related psychosomatic symptoms:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Headaches</li> <li>- Muscle pains</li> <li>- Nausea and gastrointestinal disorders</li> <li>- Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>- Fatigue or loss of motivation</li> <li>- Respiratory problems</li> <li>- Eating disorders (weight changes)</li> <li>- Heart palpitations</li> <li>- Insomnia</li> <li>- Increased blood pressure</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Actual bodily and sexual threat and injury that caused by severe forms of sexual harassment (such as rejection of sexual favours demands)<sup>21</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging in problematic self-medicating behaviours, including substance abuse and smoking</li> <li>• Engaging in high risk sexual behaviour</li> <li>• Increased risk of future victimization by peers and dating partners</li> </ul>

Table 2: Health consequences of Sexual Harassment

## Economic Impact

Data on the economic impact of sexual harassment is rather limited. Current data are patchy, and outdated, and have mainly focused on the direct and indirect costs to companies, industries and governments, primarily in the United States.<sup>7, 22, 26, 27</sup> (see Table 3) It is still unclear how much costs the healthcare system incurs from sexual harassment. Much less is known about the economic burdens on victims. This is partly due to limited evidence on its effects on the victim's job performance, job change and insecurity, career opportunities, and retaliation for reporting.

Victims of sexual harassment deal with it differently, depending on their country and socio-economic status. For example, a study conducted in the United States found that 80% of female victims of severe sexual harassment left their jobs within two years.<sup>28</sup> In Cambodia, most female garment factory workers who have been sexually harassed chose to remain silent and retain their jobs due to limited job opportunities for women, and their obligation to provide for their families.<sup>7</sup>

Direct costs (related to lawsuits and legal settlements) <sup>26&amp;27</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total reported cost of sexual harassment charges filed and solved by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and Fair Employment Practices Agency (FEPA) in the United States, from 2000 to 2010 was estimated at USD 539.2 million.</li> <li>• Companies operating in the United States are required to pay a sum of compensatory and punitive damages to sexual harassment victims.</li> </ul>
Indirect costs (attributed to absenteeism, lower productivity, turnover, poor morale, increased healthcare cost) <sup>7&amp;22</sup>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A survey conducted in the United States in 1988 found that a typical Fortune 500 corporation lost USD 6.7 million as a result of these indirect costs.</li> <li>• A research study conducted in the garment industry in Cambodia estimated annual indirect costs of USD 89 million or 0.52% of Cambodia's 2015 GDP.</li> </ul>

Table 3: Cost of Sexual Harassment to companies, organisations, government and industries

## What are the Challenges in Addressing Sexual Harassment?

### The lack of a standard definition and measurement

The United Nations (UN) General Recommendation 19 to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Secretariats define sexual harassment as **“any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another”**.<sup>29, 30</sup>

However, no clear agreement exists yet on what constitutes sexual harassment. This includes boundaries, what is considered acceptable behaviour, and standard measurements of sexual harassment.

Carrell et al. (2000) proposed sexual harassment as a ‘spectrum of action’ (Table 4)<sup>31</sup>. This includes actions ranging from general sexist remarks/behaviour, to coercive sexual activities, including rape and sexual assault. Legally, there are challenges in determining the kinds of unwelcome behaviours that meet requirements for organisational or legal action to be taken, despite sexual assault and rape being clearly identified as criminal offences. This thus affects the ability of victims to take appropriate legal action.<sup>19</sup>

The lack of a universal definition and a standardised measurement of sexual harassment has prevented the reliable measurement of the incidence, prevalence, and impact of sexual harassment across sectors, settings and countries. As a result, evidence-based policy recommendations and rigorously evaluated prevention and response strategies, including in the health sector, are limited.<sup>19</sup>

Visual	Verbal	Written	Touching	Power	Threats	Force
Ogling Staring Posters Magazines Flyers	Requests for dates Questions about personal life Lewd comments Dirty/ sexual jokes Whistling	Love poems Love letters Obscene Poems Obscene letters Cards	Violating space Patting Grabbing Pinching Caressing Kissing	Relationships Using position to request dates, sex, etc	Quid pro quo Demands Loss of job Selection process	Rape Physical assault
← Offensive Conduct (Maybe illegal)				Demands (Illegal in all cases) →		
Individual perceptions and reactions determine harassment Behaviours unwanted by the recipient are harassment Behaviours may not be intended to harass, but that is often the result Illegal if the result is perceived as harassment				Behaviours are intentional; goal is to be intimate, harass or hurt another person		

Table 4: A spectrum of behavioural patterns of sexual harassment<sup>31</sup>

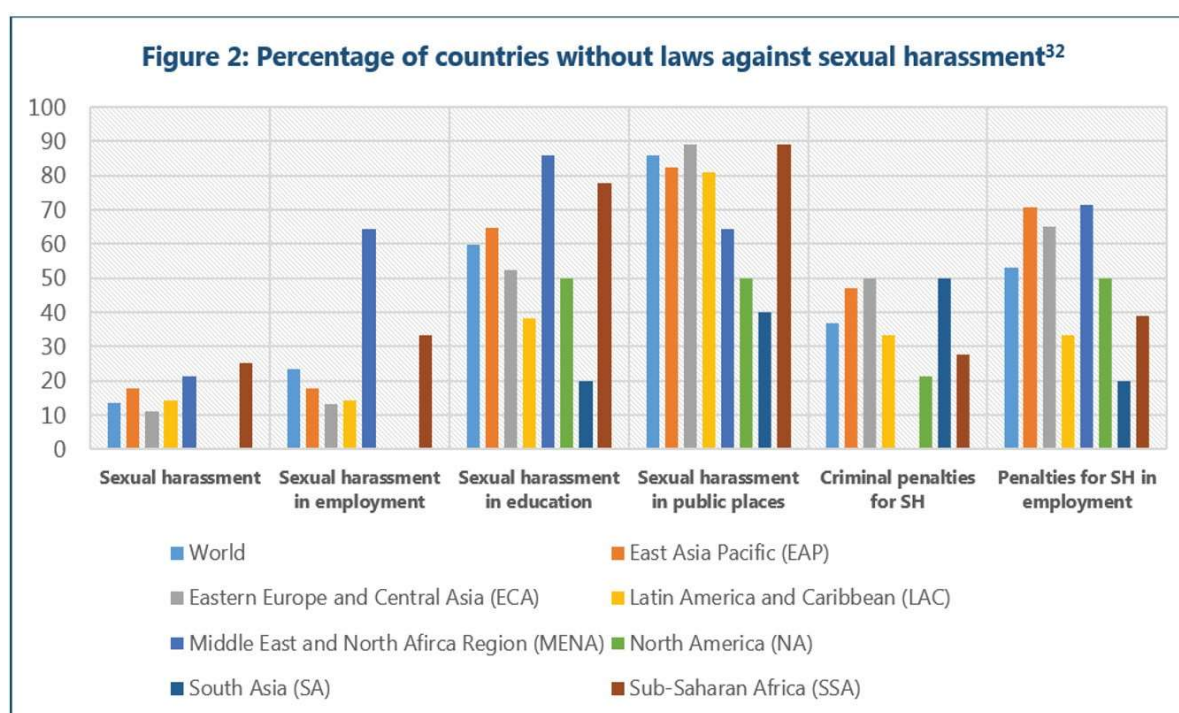


## The lack of sexual harassment laws and policies and/or their effective enforcement

Many countries lack appropriate laws against sexual harassment, especially in public places, according to a 2017 global study by the World Bank (see Figure 2). This means that 359 million, 1.5 billion and 2.2 billion women in employment, education, and public spaces respectively are at potential risk of sexual harassment.<sup>32</sup>

Inadequate legal protection contributes to underreporting of sexual harassment cases. Only two thirds of countries have criminal penalties for sexual harassment, such as fines or imprisonment, whereas less than half have penalties for sexual harassment in employment.<sup>32</sup>

Currently, the criminal standard of proof beyond reasonable doubt places the burden of proof on the person making a sexual harassment claim, which further reinforces the reluctance of victims to report and pursue legal action. A more realistic approach would be the 'balance of probabilities', based on the idea that something is proven because it is more likely than not to have occurred.



## Barriers in seeking help and support services, including healthcare services

Evidence suggests that most victims choose to not disclose their experience or seek help because of<sup>22</sup>:

- Fears of loss of job or retaliation
- Concerns of not being taken seriously or being labelled as overly-sensitive
- Reluctance to be seen as a victim due to social stigma and discrimination
- Lack of awareness of, or confidence in reporting, care and support system, and beliefs that nothing will be done
- Lack of support services, including healthcare services, which often neglect to address the needs and expectations of victims, contributing to the underreporting of sexual harassment

## Recommendations to Prevent and Address Sexual Harassment

### Leadership, legislation and policies addressing sexual harassment

Strict policies, law enforcement and institutional cultures that do not tolerate offensive behaviour prevent harassment.<sup>19</sup> Legislation and policies on sexual harassment should include:

- A universal definition of sexual harassment that clearly defines the boundaries and spectrum of conduct
- Confidential and friendly reporting mechanisms/procedures that specify if the organization's ability (e.g. failure to act in cases of sexual harassment) to increase reporting and reduce fear of retaliation
- Sanctions for perpetrators
- Compensation for victims
- Counselling, care and support services for victims
- Sanctions for perpetrators

### A multi-sectoral approach to transform harmful gender norms to prevent and respond to sexual harassment

Approaches that involve multiple stakeholders, such as governments, civil society and the private sector are needed to address sexual harassment. Addressing structural drivers and institutional barriers, transforming inequitable gender norms and practices, and creating supportive environments can improve the reporting of sexual harassment.

Men and boys should be encouraged to be agents of change for gender equality, and a comprehensive approach linking community advocacy and preventative efforts on gender equality, women's empowerment, sexual and reproductive health, mental health, substance use, human trafficking and intimate partner violence, should be implemented.

### Strengthening health sector response to sexual harassment

The health sector has an important role to play to ensure the early identification of victims and provide care, support and referral services to those experiencing trauma and stress-related symptoms. Education and training need to be provided to educators and health care providers to ensure comprehensive care and treatment and reduce barriers to care for sexual harassment victims (e.g. providing accessible, affordable, acceptable and quality treatment and care services in community settings).

### Research gaps related to sexual harassment

Further research is needed to address sexual harassment. This involves the development and validation of a standard tool of measurement for sexual harassment which integrates various socio-legal perspectives, and measures the prevalence, incidence, risk factors, structural determinants, and impacts of sexual harassment.

The tool should also enable the measure of the effectiveness of interventions and strategies in preventing and responding to sexual harassment. The standard measurement tool should comprise<sup>33</sup>:

- A clear definition of the boundaries and spectrum of conduct;
- Ethical and safety obligations;
- Methods for increasing disclosure; and
- Minimum items for measurement

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