



WOW // Work and
Opportunities
for Women

Sexual exploitation and harassment in labour market transitions

Experiences that young women face in early-career jobs

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Query Question:

1. What is the evidence on the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment (actual/potential) of young women during transitions to the labour market/early career work schemes (e.g., internships)? What are the drivers/risk factors? Who are the most vulnerable women?
2. What are some best practice examples of where employers and other actors have taken action to prevent and respond to incidences of sexual exploitation and harassment of women?
3. What are the impacts of sexual exploitation and harassment in transitions to labour market/early career work schemes on women's economic empowerment? Impacts should include impacts at the individual, institutional, and national levels.
4. What are the key evidence gaps which can be filled with primary data collection?

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Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AAUW	American Association of University Women
AUD	Australian Dollars
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
G7	Group of Seven Countries
GBVH	Gender based violence and harassment
GFF	Girls First Finance
GHS	Ghanaian Cedi
ILO	International Labour Organization
HCT	Hotel, Catering and Tourism
HMG	His Majesty's Government (UK government)
MSME	Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NR	Nepalese Rupees
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations
USD	United States Dollars
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WOW	Work and Opportunities for Women

Glossary

This query draws on FCDO's definitions of sexual exploitation and sexual harassment, which are taken from the United Nations (UN) definitions.

Sexual exploitation: *“Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes. Includes profiting momentarily, socially, or politically from sexual exploitation of another”* ([FCDO, 2022](#)).

Sexual harassment: *“A continuum of unacceptable and unwelcome behaviours and practices of a sexual nature that may include, but are not limited to, sexual suggestions or demands, requests for sexual favours, and sexual, verbal or physical conduct or gestures, that are or might reasonably be perceived as offensive or humiliating”* ([Ibid.](#)).

Sexual exploitation does not necessarily involve *forced* sexual activity (although this is possible) but also includes sexual activity where a person feels *pressured* to take part, even if they are not directly coerced to do so. Furthermore, sexual exploitation is not necessarily an explicit *quid pro quo* arrangement between a worker and an employer or recruiter¹ (i.e., where a worker is directly pressured to engage in sexual activity to obtain or keep a job). Sexual harassment that workers feel obliged to tolerate to keep their jobs is part of sexual exploitation because of pressures on workers not to ‘cause trouble’ by lodging a complaint. Sexual exploitation is sometimes referred to as ‘sexual favours’, although this term may be misleading as it could suggest incorrectly that the sexual activity is not pressured or coerced.

Sexual extortion/sextortion: A form of corruption whereby a person entrusted with power uses it to sexually exploit someone dependent on that power (this may be instead of or in addition to extracting money from that person). Sextortion takes many forms, such as a procurement officer offering a contract in exchange for sex or a hiring manager or recruitment agency offering a job or internship in exchange for sex ([Transparency International, 2020](#)).

Rape: Understood across many countries as when a person uses their penis without consent to penetrate the vagina, mouth, or anus of another person ([CPS, n.d.](#)).

Early career workers: This is understood as girls/women aged 16 to 25 who are in their first roles (whether paid or unpaid) at work. This may include internships, apprenticeships, volunteer positions and standard paid positions in both the formal and informal economies.

¹ Given the common practice of companies using recruiters or hiring agencies, it is important to consider potential sexual exploitation perpetrated by such third-party actors.

Executive Summary

This report provides an evidence review of sexual exploitation and harassment of women and girls during their early careers ('sex-for-jobs/advancement'). It is part of a larger study led by [Girls First Finance](#) (GFF) exploring sexual exploitation in educational and work settings, which will be presented at a GFF and FCDO-hosted conference in June 2023.

Evidence of the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment during early careers

There is growing evidence of sexual exploitation and harassment of young women during their early careers from a range of countries and sectors in both the formal and informal economies. This study finds global evidence of sexual exploitation and harassment of young women in the workplace as well as studies in 15 countries and 23 sectors.

However, there are limited rigorous data available on the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment in the transition to the labour market. Data come mostly from small-scale research studies that limit our ability to understand the scale of the problem, compare between countries or sectors, or track changes over time. Official data on recorded incidents (e.g., by companies or educational institutions) are often vastly under-reported due to a lack of trust in reporting mechanisms and the potential for reprisals. To account for this underreporting, increasing the availability of population-based prevalence data using consistent survey measures is important.

In a global [survey](#) of 800 girls and young women, 62% of respondents stopped pursuing an academic or career opportunity because of a fear of sexual exploitation in that specific environment. Of the 81% of respondents who reported having felt pressured to engage in sexual acts at some point in their lives, 6.5% cited the need for a job as the reason, 1.7% cited career advancement, and 1.2% cited a fear of retribution at work if they did not comply with perpetrators' wishes. Very few sought help from formal sources, with only 2% speaking to an authority figure and 1% filing a formal report (data provided by GFF).

Young women's risk of sexual exploitation is heightened in traditionally male sectors such as construction, mining and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) due to sexist workplace cultures and male-dominated workforces ([Hardin et al., 2021](#); [Quay, 2014](#); [Transparency International, 2019](#); [Pew Research Center, 2018](#)). However, having a large number of female workers does not necessarily make sexual exploitation less prevalent if men still dominate in hiring and management roles whilst women remain in more junior positions ([BBC Panorama, 2023](#); [Mkono, 2010](#); [IDS, 2022](#); [Fair Internship Initiative, 2018](#)).

In some countries, people in positions of power try to extort sexual favours from young women in exchange for access to jobs and public procurement opportunities (known as 'sextortion'). This is often related to a broader bribery culture ([Transparency International, 2019](#); [UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017](#)). There is also evidence of sexual exploitation affecting women working in the informal economy, such as domestic workers, whose higher risk is partly due to their isolation from support networks and financial insecurity ([IDS, 2022](#)).

Drivers and risk factors of sexual exploitation and harassment during early careers

- Power and unequal gender norms are key drivers of discrimination against women, including sexual exploitation and harassment ([Neville et al., 2020](#); [Care International, 2017](#)).
- Poverty or financial insecurity, meaning young women may be desperate to keep their jobs, receive a bonus or achieve promotion ([Neville et al., 2020](#)).
- Lack of legal protection against workplace sexual harassment ([World Bank, 2020](#)).

- Fear of retaliation for reporting, partly related to a lack of protective workplace policies ([Snaathorst, 2018](#)).
- Temporary/outsourced contracts since temporary workers often lack knowledge of workplace policies and reporting mechanisms ([ILO, 2017](#)).
- Imbalances of power between male hiring managers/supervisors and junior female staff ([BBC Panorama 2023](#); [Fair Internship Initiative, 2018](#)).
- Unpaid internships increase young women's risk of sexual exploitation and harassment at work and decrease their ability to report it ([Fair Internship Initiative, 2018](#); [Taube, 2014](#)).
- Job scarcity means job seekers may be more likely to tolerate sexual exploitation to obtain or keep a job ([BBC Panorama 2023](#)).

Who are the most vulnerable women?

Young women aged 16-25 are at higher risk of sexual exploitation and harassment due to their lack of experience in the workplace, lower position in organisational hierarchies, and higher likelihood of economic precarity. Within that group, the following groups are most at risk: migrant workers, temporary and agency workers ([IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020](#)), domestic workers ([IDS, 2022](#); [BIGD, 2022](#)), women working in traditionally male sectors ([Preston, 2021](#); [Quay, 2014](#); [Bridges et al., 2022](#)), workers whose pay structures rely on tips ([IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020](#)), women with diverse sexual and gender identities ([Mkono, 2012](#)) and women with disabilities ([TUC, 2021](#); [Eldén et al., 2020](#)).

Examples of best practices to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and harassment

This study has identified five promising practices that address sexual exploitation and harassment at work. These comprise:

- (1) Women entrepreneurs in Malawi reporting sextortion via a [civil society organisation](#).
- (2) An [employer programme](#) in the mining sector in South Africa that requires modelling behaviour from leadership around discussing gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), aligns policies with the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\) Convention 190](#) on violence and harassment at work, and ensures female miners always work alongside another woman.
- (3) A [training programme](#) to raise awareness about sexual harassment and how and where to report it and to build the support networks of young, migrant, garment workers in Bangladesh;
- (4) A [peer-to-peer learning scheme and certification](#) for executives to address GBVH at a Pakistani hotel chain.
- (5) An [agreement](#) between a global hotel chain and a trade union to address GBVH across 31 countries that includes the creation of a zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment from staff, suppliers and hotel guests.

Impacts of sexual exploitation and harassment in transitions to the labour market

Individual level:

Women who leave well-paid, male-dominated sectors are likely to experience significantly reduced economic outcomes over their lifetimes. In Liberia, 40 out of 200 young women reported that a reason for preferring self-employment was wanting to avoid sexual harassment ([Ruiz-Abril, 2008](#)). However, female entrepreneurs often struggle to access business financing, which can increase their risk of exploitation ([Dioh Simpa, 2022](#); [Roderick, 2023](#)). In the United States, the lifetime cost to a woman leaving a construction apprenticeship is estimated at USD 1.3 million ([Hegewisch et al., 2021](#)). The fear of potential sexual harassment can deter women from pursuing employment in lucrative, male-dominated industries ([Filmer and Fox, 2014](#)).

Institutional level:

Reduced worker productivity related to harassment and the exclusion of women from the workplace due to sexual exploitation and harassment can lead to financial losses for companies.

The cost of sexual harassment in garment factories in Cambodia is estimated at USD 99.38 of lost value per worker per month ([Care International, 2017](#)). In the tech sector in the United States, 10% of women reported unwanted sexual attention in the job that they had most recently left. The recruitment cost to replace the percentage of employees leaving the tech sector due to unfairness (including sexual harassment) is estimated at USD 16 billion per year ([Scott et al., 2017](#)).

National level:

The reduced wages that women often experience after leaving jobs due to sexual harassment and exploitation have a shrinking effect on a country's overall economy.

In Cambodia, the cost of sexual harassment in the garment sector was estimated to be nearly USD 89 million or 0.52% of national GDP in 2015 ([Care International, 2017](#)).

Key evidence gaps which can be filled with primary data collection

- Evidence of the prevalence of workplace sexual exploitation and harassment of young women in **formal work schemes** such as internships, apprenticeships and work placements in low-income settings.
- Evidence of the prevalence of workplace sexual exploitation and harassment of women in their early careers from **large-scale, nationally representative studies**, particularly in low-income countries.
- More robust evidence from low- and middle-income countries of workplace sexual exploitation and harassment of women in their early careers from low- and middle-income countries, particularly the **Middle East and North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Pacific regions**.
- Support LGBTQI+ organisations and researchers to build the evidence base on workplace sexual exploitation and harassment of young women with diverse sexual and gender identities, ensuring that any research follows [ethical recommendations for a do-no-harm approach](#).
- Evidence on which kinds of interventions are most effective in **preventing sexual exploitation and harassment in the workplace, particularly for the groups of young women at highest risk**.
- Calculations of the economic cost of workplace sexual exploitation and harassment over women's lifetimes.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In 2019 the G7 committed to ‘*championing the agenda to end violence in schools and other educational and learning institutions to ensure girls’ safety in and on the way to school, creating safe learning environments and encouraging existing global initiatives in this field*’ ([G7, 2019a](#)) and to ‘*make TVET [Technical and Vocational Education and Training] more accessible to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, persons with disabilities or special needs, and marginalized rural, remote and displaced populations, by providing them customized support and a safe learning environment*’ ([G7 2019b](#)).

In response to these commitments, [Girls First Finance](#) (GFF) and FCDO are hosting a conference in June 2023 on the sexual exploitation of women and girls in: (1) secondary and tertiary education institutions by older male “sponsors” for education fees or living expenses; (2) by teachers for grades; and (3) during early career apprenticeships, work placements and internships for jobs and career advancement from employers and hiring managers. The conference will focus on the issues of ‘sex-for-fees’, ‘sex-for grades’ and ‘sex-for jobs/advancement’.

This query aims to provide an evidence review of the sexual exploitation of women and girls during their early careers (point 3 above). It will also highlight research and evidence gaps which GFF will explore through focus groups and an [online survey](#)². As well as being a publishable and stand-alone report, it will feed into another report led by GFF, which will cover sexual exploitation in both educational settings (‘sex-for-fees’ and ‘sex-for grades’) and work settings (‘sex-for-jobs/advancement’). This report, led by GFF, will be presented at the GFF/FCDO-hosted conference in June 2023.

2. What is the evidence on the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment (actual/potential) of young women during transitions to the labour market/early career work schemes (e.g., internships)?

2.1 Evidence of prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment

There is growing evidence of sexual exploitation and harassment of young women during their early careers across a range of countries and sectors in both the formal and informal economies. This study finds evidence of sexual exploitation and harassment of young women in the workplace in 15 countries – as well as globally – and 23 sectors, in addition to research where the sector is unspecified.

However, there are limited rigorous data available on the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment in the transition to the labour market. Data come mostly from small-scale research studies that limit our ability to understand the scale of the problem, compare between countries or sectors, or track changes over time. Official data on recorded incidents (e.g., by companies or educational institutions) are often vastly under-reported due to a lack of trust in reporting

² GFF’s survey went live in March 2023. It is targeted at girls and young women aged 14-27 but anyone can complete it. The data referred to in this report are from the responses of approximately 800 individuals who filled in the survey up to 5th May 2023.

mechanisms and the potential for reprisals. To account for this underreporting, increasing the availability of population-based prevalence data using consistent survey measures is important.

Box 1: Findings from GFF's survey

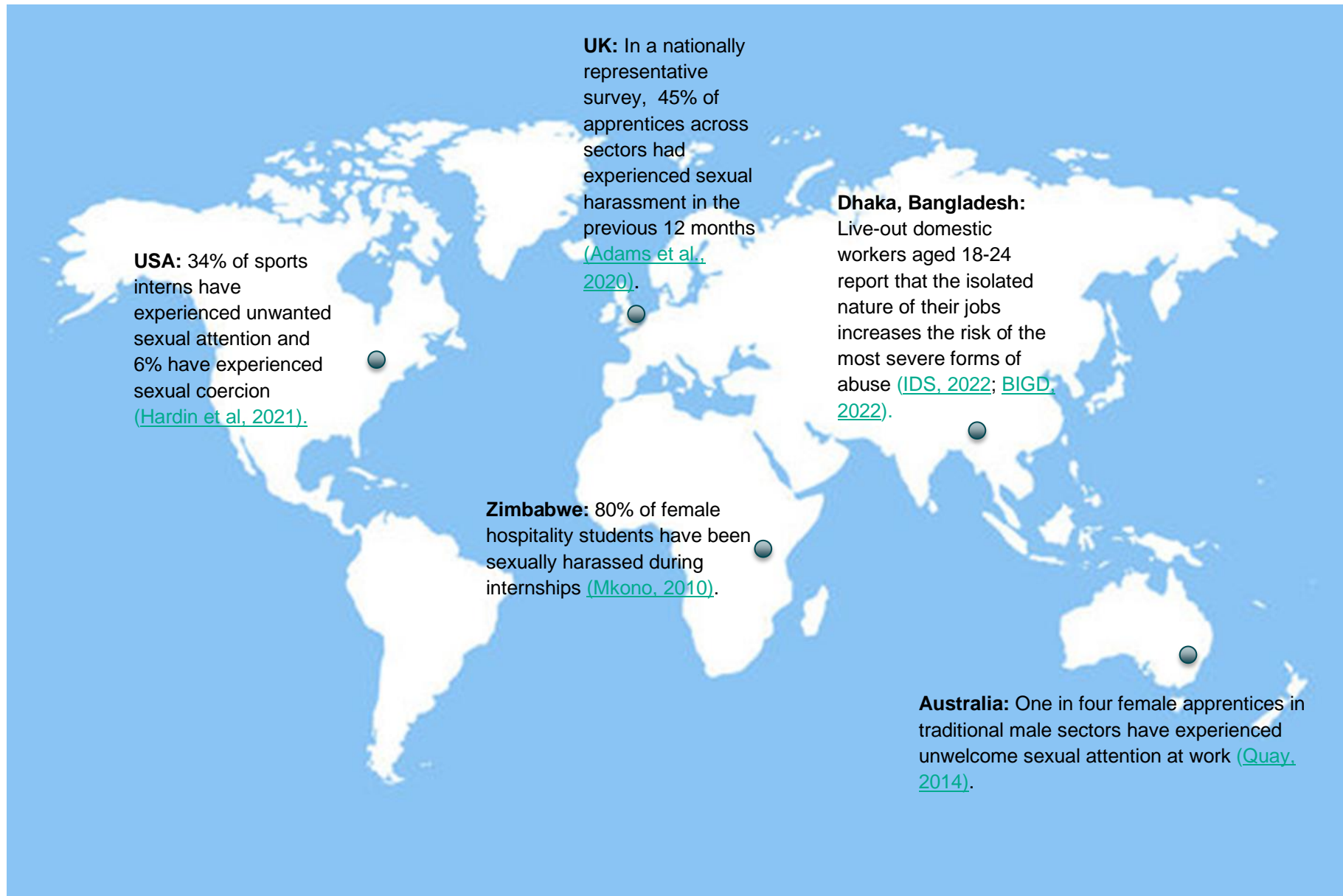
The recent [survey](#) by GFF of 800 girls and young women helps advance our understanding of sexual exploitation in the workplace. Of the 81% of respondents who reported having felt pressured to engage in sexual acts at some point in their lives, 6.5% cited the need for a job as the reason, 1.7% cited career advancement, and 1.2% cited a fear of retribution at work if they did not comply with perpetrators' wishes. 6.6% of respondents who were pressured into sexually exploitative relationships reported that their perpetrators were their work supervisors. Of those who sought support after being exploited, less than 1% filed a formal report, whilst 2% spoke to another authority figure (data provided by GFF).

Young women's risk of sexual exploitation is heightened in traditionally male sectors such as construction, mining, transport, and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) due to sexist workplace cultures where the small number of women are often marginalised ([Hardin et al., 2021](#); [Quay, 2014](#); [Bridges et al., 2022](#); [Transparency International, 2019](#); [Pew Research Center, 2018](#)). However, having a large number of female workers does not necessarily mean that sexual exploitation is less prevalent, particularly if men dominate in hiring and management roles whilst women remain in more junior positions. This is the case in agriculture, hospitality, sport, manufacturing, and some UN agencies ([BBC Panorama, 2023](#); [Mkono, 2010](#); [IDS, 2022](#); [Fair Internship Initiative, 2018](#)).

In some countries, people in positions of power try to extort sexual favours from young women in exchange for access to jobs and public procurement opportunities (known as 'sextortion'). This is often related to a broader bribery culture. There is strong qualitative evidence of this type of sexual violence occurring in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tanzania, Colombia and Malawi ([Transparency International, 2019](#); [UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017](#); [Stahl, 2021](#)).

There is also evidence of sexual exploitation affecting women working in the informal economy. In Bangladesh, domestic workers are at higher risk due to their isolation from support networks, even if they live out and their financial insecurity. There is anecdotal evidence of sexual exploitation, including rape, of informal women workers in the fishing sector in Kenya ([IDS, 2022](#); [FSD Kenya, 2022](#)).

Further details of sexual exploitation and harassment of young women in the workplace are summarised in the map below and the table in Annex 1.



2.2 What are the drivers/risk factors?

A complex range of drivers/risk factors operate at the individual, interpersonal, community, institutional and societal levels that can put young women at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation or harassment in their early careers. While none of these factors by themselves will lead to sexual exploitation, they directly or indirectly can increase the risk.

- **Power and unequal gender norms** are at the root of sexual exploitation and harassment. Gendered stereotypes and norms about men's entitlement to sex can also drive sexual exploitation ([Neville et al., 2020](#)). Studies have shown that gendered power dynamics and norms supporting the patriarchal entitlement to sexual favours are at the root of sexual exploitation in a range of sectors, including the aid sector ([Feather et al., 2019](#)), higher education ([Morley, 2017](#)), and garment sector ([Care International, 2017](#)).
- **Poverty and financial insecurity** are risk factors that can exacerbate gendered power dynamics and increase the risk of women and girls entering exploitative, transactional sexual relationships ([Feather et al., 2021](#)). Food insecurity is also a risk factor for the sexual exploitation of women and girls, particularly in settings that lack social protection ([Rohwerder, 2022](#)). Poverty can increase women's risk of sexual exploitation and harassment due to their need for financial security or career opportunities when applying for a position or because they are desperate to keep their jobs, receive a bonus or achieve promotion. This risk can increase where alternative sources of employment are lacking or where people depend on one company or niche sector for their financial security ([Neville et al., 2020](#)). Women who are financially insecure may therefore be forced to engage in exploitative sexual relationships in the workplace to afford basic sustenance. Anecdotal evidence from Kenya shows that women fisherfolk who had access to cash transfers were able to avoid sexual exploitation by male fishermen ([FSD Kenya, 2022](#)).
- **Lack of legal protection against workplace sexual harassment** can also be a risk factor. Over the past five years, many countries have created or strengthened legislation against workplace sexual harassment.³ However, 50 countries still lack basic protections ([World Bank, 2020](#)). In some US states, unpaid interns are not classified as employees so they are not included under the purview of laws and regulatory bodies created to protect employee rights ([Hickman and Thompson, 2013](#); [Lachman, 2015](#)). In a high-profile case in 2013, a New York federal court ruled that an intern who alleged sexual harassment by her supervisor had no grounds to sue because she was not legally an employee. Whilst she could have pressed criminal charges under a forcible touching state law, this would not have protected her from being fired for rejecting her supervisor's sexual advances ([Taube, 2014](#)).⁴ This lack of legal protection increases the expectation of perpetrator impunity.
- **Imbalances of power between male hiring managers/supervisors and junior female staff** can increase the risk of sexual exploitation and harassment. In situations where men make up the majority of hiring managers, supervisors and contracting agents, sexual exploitation is more likely to occur, such as in Kenya ([BBC Panorama, 2023](#)) and Zimbabwe ([Transparency International, 2019](#)). Men who sexually exploit women in exchange for a job know that female

³ For example, since 2017, Bahrain, Barbados, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates have all enacted legislation on sexual harassment in the workplace, including redress avenues such as criminal penalties or civil remedies. In addition, Gabon, Montenegro, and Peru have enacted criminal penalties, and France, Georgia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and South Sudan have implemented civil remedies to complement existing legislation ([World Bank, 2020](#)).

⁴ As a result of this case, New York State extended sexual harassment legal protections to unpaid interns across the state ([Taube, 2014](#)).

job seekers cannot apply to female hiring managers or contracting agents. If sexual exploitation is an accepted social norm, women job seekers may assume that other male hiring managers/agents will also attempt to sexually exploit them, so they may be more likely to comply with perpetrators' demands. In the UN, most interns are women, whilst many senior employees are men ([Snaathorst, 2018](#)). Young female interns lack power and access to justice within the UN system and are more likely to work for or alongside senior men where exploitation could occur.

- **Unpaid internships** contain structural imbalances of power, whereby interns are already operating within an exploitative relationship with their organisation. Other staff members know that interns are willing to sacrifice months of earnings to get ahead professionally and may therefore be reluctant to risk damaging their reputations by reporting sexual exploitation or harassment ([Taube, 2014](#)). Un(der)paid interns are at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, making it harder to report,⁵ and they may fear not being believed if their harasser is more senior, as is likely to be the case ([Fair Internship Initiative, 2018](#)). Interns' lack of access to internal justice systems increases the risk of sexual exploitation⁶ and can send the message to interns that the UN organisational culture tolerates sexual harassment and exploitation ([Snaathorst, 2018](#)).
- **Fear of retaliation for reporting sexual harassment** is likely to be particularly acute for un(der)paid interns working in highly networked sectors such as human rights. Interns who report sexual harassment can easily be smeared as "difficult" or "delusional", which can impede their career in a close-knit professional community operating in a highly competitive sector. A lack of policies protecting interns from retaliation compounds the risk of under-reporting, whilst a lack of access to internal justice systems for interns may make retaliation against them harder to investigate and redress ([Snaathorst, 2018](#)).
- **Hiring staff on temporary and outsourced contracts** increases the risk of sexual exploitation and harassment. Perpetrators can be aware that women are less likely to raise a complaint if they are on short-term contracts (the benefit of complaining is decreased as the case may still be unresolved by the end of the survivor's contract). Short-term workers are also less likely to be aware of their employer's rules, guidelines, reporting mechanisms and support systems, so they may be unaware of acceptable workplace behaviour and how to report safely, making them less likely to complain ([ILO, 2017](#); [IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020](#)). Outsourcing of hiring to external employment agencies – as is extremely common in hotel housekeeping services, especially in the UK – further increases workers' job insecurity and may decrease their ability or confidence to report harassment ([Oxfam Canada, 2017](#)). The short duration of UN internships is also a reason why interns are less likely to report sexual harassment ([Fair Internship Initiative, 2018](#)).
- **Night shifts and overcrowding** in the mining sector or hospitality sector are often linked to increased risk of sexual exploitation. For example, overcrowded mining cages are a common

⁵ Third-party advocates, such as the [Women's Legal Defense Fund](#), specialist gender-based violence services or trade unions can play a key role in supporting survivors of workplace sexual exploitation and harassment, allowing them to report it without fear of retaliation and access subsidised professional legal support. There is anecdotal evidence of this helping women to raise formal reports of workplace sexual exploitation or harassment ([Blair, 2018](#)).

⁶ For example, UN interns cannot access the United Nations Dispute Tribunal, Appeals Tribunal or Ombudsman. Whilst they are allowed to address disputes through direct negotiations with the UN and can file complaints of discrimination, harassment and abuse of authority against staff members, their lack of access to formal systems is a barrier to reporting harassment, which may increase perpetrators' calculations that they are unlikely to face justice ([Fair Internship Initiative, 2018](#)).

site of sexual harassment of women miners during transportation to and from underground mines because male and female miners are forced to stand very close to each other, which provides the opportunity for some men to perpetrate verbal and physical sexual harassment ([Botha, 2016](#)).

- **Job scarcity**, particularly in settings with inadequate social protection, increases women's risk of sexual exploitation, including rape, to obtain or keep a job. Job scarcity can arise for various reasons, including mechanisation ([BBC Panorama 2023](#)), outsourcing, and using artificial intelligence (AI), which will likely replace certain administrative jobs where women make up a higher proportion of workers. Job scarcity is often a driver for women to set up their own businesses, but female entrepreneurs can struggle to attract investment across various countries. Reasons for this include bias from male investors, gender stereotypes about women's ability to lead a business, the small size common to female-led businesses, which makes them less interesting to investors, and women lacking access to networks or training that enable them to grow their businesses and increase their access to funding opportunities ([Dioh Simpa, 2022](#); [Roderick, 2023](#)).

2.3 Who are the most vulnerable women?

Young women aged 16-25 are at higher risk of sexual exploitation due to their lack of experience in the workplace, lower positions in organisational hierarchies, and higher likelihood of economic precarity. Within that age group, the following groups are at higher risk of sexual exploitation:

- **Migrant workers** often face discrimination, job insecurity, a lack of a support network, financial insecurity (which often prompts migration in the first place), and the pressure to send remittances home, making it harder to leave a job ([ILO, 2021](#)). For example, in Phuket, Thailand, many hotel housekeepers are female migrant workers from Myanmar. Few of these workers have written contracts or work permits, which increases their risk of forced or exploitative labour. In Thailand and other countries where work permits are linked to a specific employer or sponsor, migrant workers are less likely to report sexual harassment and other forms of abuse, making it easier for perpetrators to act with impunity and, therefore, more likely to perpetrate ([IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020](#)).
- **Temporary and agency workers** are less likely to report workplace abuse due to employment precarity and lack of familiarity with workplace regulations, making them targets for perpetrators ([IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020](#)).
- **Women working in traditionally male-dominated sectors** are at higher risk when the workplace culture is hostile and there are gendered stereotypes about the sexual availability of women. Trade apprentices (as well as in other sectors) experience significant sexual harassment and other forms of harassment, which does not necessarily stop once the apprenticeship has finished ([Quay, 2014](#); [Bridges et al., 2022](#)). In the United States, harassment occurs despite these sectors often being unionised (and therefore, in theory, more inclined towards protecting workers). One tradeswoman commented: "*Our unions, they are broken. Women and people of color, we don't get treated as a brother in the brotherhood... We are the distant cousin, and nobody wants to talk about us*" ([Preston, 2021](#)).
- **Women working in manual jobs** in sectors such as agriculture or construction may be at higher risk of sexual exploitation if they rely on male supervisors to be transferred to lighter duties. Male supervisors may use a woman's request for alternative job responsibilities to demand sex ([BBC Panorama, 2023](#)). Risks are likely to increase during pregnancy and menstruation due to increased tiredness commonly experienced then.

- **Workers with pay structures that rely on tips** can be at higher risk of sexual exploitation and less likely to report it. This situation is more common in the Americas, Africa and the Middle East ([IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020](#)). Employers that pay their staff under the minimum wage are contributing to an enabling environment for sexual exploitation and harassment. A study in the United States found that women restaurant workers experience twice as much sexual harassment in states that rely on tips to meet minimum wage levels than in states that require minimum wages before tips ([ROC, 2019](#)).
- **Women informal workers** are at higher risk of corruption and sextortion than women in the formal economy because public officials can threaten to close their businesses. Public officials can also demand bribes and, in some cases, sexual favours. Women may also be seen as easier targets for corruption than men ([Transparency International, 2020](#); [Eldén et al., 2020](#)).
- **Domestic workers** who work and often live in other people's homes (e.g., as cooks, housekeepers and nannies) are at higher risk of sexual harassment and exploitation. Dependency on their employer for housing and food and isolation from their support networks increase their risk of physical and sexual violence, including rape; non-payment of wages; limitations on freedom of movement and forced labour ([Filmer and Fox, 2014](#); [IDS, 2022](#); [BIGD, 2022](#)). Furthermore, since abuse of domestic workers happens in the private sphere, it is less visible than that experienced by other workers, which makes it harder to protest. Domestic workers are often migrant workers, which compounds their risks.
- **Women with diverse sexual and gender identities** are at increased risk in countries where homosexuality or gender transitions are criminalised or severely marginalised. The fear of reporting sexual harassment or abuse because doing so may reveal one's sexual or gender identity can make it easier for perpetrators to act with impunity ([Mkono, 2012](#)).⁷
- **Women with disabilities** encounter higher power imbalances and barriers to reporting at work in comparison to women without disabilities, which increase their risk of sexual exploitation. Younger women with disabilities are even more likely to experience sexual harassment or exploitation in the workplace ([TUC, 2021](#); [Webster, 2021](#); [UN Women, 2020](#)). In some contexts, women with disabilities or conditions such as albinism may be particularly targeted for rape due to cultural beliefs that having sex with them can bring the perpetrator good luck ([Eldén et al., 2020](#)).

⁷ Whilst this report focuses on women's experiences, this situation applies to people of all sexual and gender identities.

3. What are some best practice examples of where employers and other actors have taken action to prevent and respond to incidences of sexual exploitation and harassment of women?

Employers do not tend to track the impact of actions that they take to prevent or respond to sexual harassment and exploitation of any employees, including younger women in early-career jobs, meaning it is challenging to identify best practices. In addition, since it is good practice to use a range of actions to tackle harassment (e.g., creating workplace training, protective policies and reporting mechanisms), it is difficult to identify the impact of any individual action. Accounting for this caveat, this study has identified the following promising practices to tackle sexual exploitation and harassment.

Sector	Country	Actor	Evidence
Entrepreneurship	Malawi	Civil society organisation (CSO)	<p>Businesswomen have identified the Centre for Human Rights, Education, Advice and Assistance (CHREAA) as a promising platform to report their experiences of sexual corruption/sexortion.</p> <p>CHREAA is a CSO that advocates for gender rights and offers legal assistance to women who have experienced sexual violence and other human rights issues. Businesswomen interviewed noted that they preferred to report via CSOs rather than to the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare or the Human Rights Commission because they feared state reporting mechanisms could be untrustworthy or ineffective (Stahl, 2021).</p>
Mining	South Africa	Employer and non-governmental organisation (NGO)	<p>The mining company Anglo American has created the Living with Dignity programme to build safe spaces for its staff at work.</p> <p>Anglo American already had hotlines which had revealed isolated incidences of GBVH but no large-scale problem (BSR, 2019). Recognising that GBVH was likely to be affecting its staff beyond the levels reported, it partnered with the NGO International Alert to undertake GBVH baseline studies at two mines in 2019. The findings were concerning.</p> <p>The Living with Dignity programme aims to respond to these findings in the following ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocal commitment and modelling from leadership. Every senior leadership team member has received coaching on GBVH, and sexual harassment is a standing agenda item at Executive Committee meetings and regularly features on leadership calls and town halls. • Working with unions to tackle GBVH collaboratively. Coal South Africa (one of the two mines in the baseline) now includes a module on GBVH in its induction programmes.

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overhaul of policies and procedures to align with the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 190 on violence and harassment at work. These policies are supported by staff with expertise in conducting investigations and providing counselling. • Physical changes in the workplace, including safer changing areas for women, improved security, fit-for-purpose lactation rooms, and a buddy system meaning a woman never works without another female colleague present. <p>There has since been increased GBVH reporting, suggesting staff feel safer speaking up (Anglo American, 2020).</p>
Manufacturing	Bangladesh	Donor	<p>The World Bank-funded NARI project provides targeted training, awareness raising on sexual harassment and how and where to report it, and job placements in garment factories to migrant women aged 18-26 from remote areas of the country. The women stay in dormitories close to two Export Processing Zones in Dhaka (Karnaphuli and Ishwardi) for four months, where they receive this training. The scheme also helps build young women’s support networks, which is important for increasing GBVH reporting (World Bank, 2017).</p>
Hospitality	Pakistan	Donor	<p>Supported by IFC, Serena Hotels has completed a 12-month certification process Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE), comprising a peer-to-peer learning programme for over 335 senior executives on anti-sexual harassment policies, female employee retention and women in leadership. Serena Hotels became the first Pakistani company to receive this certification and was recognised as a top performer in the 2018 ‘Employer of Choice for Gender Balance’ awards (IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020).</p>
	Global	Employer, trade union	<p>French hotel chain AccorInvest has signed an agreement with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF) to address sexual harassment, including creating a zero-tolerance policy, in more than 900 hotels across 31 countries. The agreement ensures that all staff, customers, and suppliers are informed of the zero-tolerance policy. It also notes that if an employee is found guilty of sexual harassment, measures beyond those provided by law, including expulsion, may be taken. AccorInvest also provides training and awareness-raising on the policy. The agreement recognises the key role of unions in implementing and evaluating the policy regularly (IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020).</p>

4. What are the impacts of sexual exploitation and harassment in transitions to the labour market/early career work schemes on women's economic empowerment?

There is a range of impacts at the individual, institutional and national levels of sexual exploitation and harassment during transitions to the labour market on women's economic empowerment.

4.1 Individual level

Loss of earnings and jobs

- **Women who leave well-paid, male-dominated sectors due to sexual exploitation or harassment are likely to experience significantly reduced economic outcomes over their lifetimes, including reduced pension savings and social security benefits (Hegewisch et al., 2021).** Qualitative research with 16⁸ survivors of workplace sexual harassment in the United States found that the lifetime cost to an apprentice who left a well-paid occupation in the construction industry after experiencing sexual harassment and then worked as a private sector bus driver was estimated to be USD 1.3 million. Box 2⁹ illustrates this case.

Box 2: Lost wages from leaving an apprenticeship in construction

Jane*, a union construction apprentice, was on a high-wage job trajectory, earning USD 48,339 a year, and due to make USD 64,459 a year as a fully qualified worker after completing her five-year apprenticeship. Her benefits included health insurance and a pension.

When she was sexually harassed by her colleagues, she left her apprenticeship and was unemployed for seven months, during which time she did not receive unemployment benefits.

She later found a job as a private sector bus driver earning an annual salary of USD 34,320. This offered fewer benefits than her construction job and did not include a pension. If Jane remains a bus driver until retirement, she will have lost:

- Lost lifetime wages and benefits = USD 1,306,170, including:
 - Lost pension value = USD 92,705
 - Lost social security benefits = USD 51,567
 - Unemployment insurance = None
 - Medical and psychiatric costs = USD 617

Total lifetime costs: USD 1,306,787 plus physical strain, depression, and psychological trauma.

Source: Adapted from [Hegewisch et al \(2021\)](#).

⁸ Comprising 15 women, including one transgender woman, and one man.

⁹ Name has been changed to protect anonymity. Cost calculations have been discounted to present value for the date of harassment and are inflation-adjusted to 2020 USD, per the industry standard. Detailed calculations can be accessed at https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Lifetime-Costs-of-Sexual-Harassment-Estimates_2021.xlsx.

- **Women can suffer financial loss even if they return to a skilled trades apprenticeship after taking a break because they may miss pay rises and take longer to qualify.** For example, a skilled trades apprentice in the United States who left her apprenticeship due to workplace harassment, was unemployed for over a year and then returned to her role, is estimated to have incurred a lifetime loss of USD 230,864. This is due to missing out on two six-monthly wage increases that apprentices receive after completion of specific milestones of training and which are worth more than an additional 30% of an apprentice's first-year earnings ([Hegewisch et al., 2021](#)).
- **Sexual harassment can lead to lost shifts, promotions, bonuses, and jobs.** This can be due to workers' performance being affected by harassment and retaliation for speaking out ([Hegewisch et al., 2021](#)). A survey of 311 members of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found that 38% of the respondents who reported experiencing harassment said that it contributed to their decision to leave their position or job prematurely. Furthermore, 37% percent of respondents reported that sexual harassment they faced disrupted their advancement in their job ([AAUW, 2019](#)).
- **Financial loss from sexual exploitation can be considerable, even in less lucrative sectors.** In addition, the knock-on economic effects are worse for women in low-paid and precarious jobs because their loss of earnings often leads to higher financial charges, lower credit ratings, mounting student loan debt, repossession of cars, evictions from housing, and reduced retirement security. For example, a fast-food worker forced out of her job calculated her lifetime lost earnings as USD 125,600¹⁰ ([Hegewisch et al., 2021](#)).
- **Lower credit ratings resulting from loss of earnings can have a negative effect on a woman's upward mobility due to the inability to attract credit to buy a home or set up a business, higher insurance costs, and, sometimes, difficulty getting a job, especially in a management role** ([Kurt, 2021](#); [Career Builder, n.d.](#)). This makes it more likely that she will remain in a lower-paid job which may have been intended to be transitional. This demonstrates that sexual exploitation and harassment at work can present unforeseen opportunity costs later in life.

Deterring women from pursuing employment and training opportunities

Box 3: Fear of sexual exploitation

Fear of sexual exploitation or harassment can deter women and girls from certain career paths. 62% of 800 respondents to GFF's global online survey reported that they had stopped pursuing an academic or career opportunity because of a fear of sexual exploitation in that specific environment (data provided by GFF).

- **Anticipation of experiencing sexual exploitation in the workplace prevents some women from joining male-dominated industries, which are often more lucrative than female-dominated ones.** Research in sub-Saharan Africa has shown that the perceived risk of harassment from bosses and other authority figures is a strong consideration in a woman's choice of workplace. In a study conducted in Liberia before a job training programme, 20% of the 200 girls and young women surveyed reported that a reason for preferring self-employment was wanting to avoid sexual harassment. However, many could not start a business due to a lack of starting capital ([Ruiz-Abril, 2008](#)). Potential female entrepreneurs

¹⁰ This comprised lost salary and benefits (USD 118,860), lost social security (USD 4,537), medical costs due to stress and medication needs (USD 3,155), late fees on rent (USD 3,153), and legal fees to prevent harm to her credit score due to the unpaid rent (USD 398) ([Hegewisch et al., 2021](#)).

frequently struggle to access business financing, increasing their risk of sexual exploitation from potential lenders/investors and employers ([Dioh Simpa, 2022](#); [Roderick, 2023](#)).

- **Sexual exploitation at school (such as teachers offering good grades in exchange for sex) reduces the willingness of girls/women to participate in training programmes** ([Filmer and Fox, 2014](#)). This demonstrates how sexual exploitation in early life can have long-term effects on women's lives, causing them to opt out of training opportunities that restrict their economic opportunities.

Cost of retraining

- **Some women who leave their jobs due to sexual harassment may need to retrain, which can lead to further costs.** In one case in the United States, a woman incurred tuition fees of almost USD 70,000 for a two-year community college degree, plus lost earnings over two years while studying ([Hegewisch et al., 2021](#)). The lack of savings common to many people in their early careers means this cost would likely be particularly hard to cover.

Costs related to women's physical and mental health

- **Research in Australia estimated the cost in lost well-being due to actual or attempted workplace sexual assault or rape to be AUD 4,989 on average per survivor**, totalling AUD 249.6 million across the population in 2018 ([Deloitte, 2019](#)). The direct costs¹¹ to women of workplace violence in Ghana were estimated at Ghanaian Cedi (GHS) 10,003,395 or USD 2,574,015 in 2016 ([Asante et al., 2019](#)). A study in the United States estimated the lifetime marginal¹² cost of rape to be USD 122,461 per survivor in 2014 USD¹³ ([Peterson et al., 2016](#)).
- **Sexual exploitation can lead to women contracting HIV (or other sexually transmitted infections) whilst seeking a job or during employment.** This has been a concern in Zambia ([Gough et al., 2016](#)) and Kenya ([BBC Panorama, 2023](#)). This has potential negative consequences for women's health, which could affect their earnings. It is also likely to lead to women incurring healthcare costs in countries lacking publicly funded healthcare systems. Furthermore, a lack of testing and treatment can lead to premature death.
- **Ill health and stigma related to HIV/AIDS can lead to lower earnings.** A survey of over 12,000 men, women and transgender people living with HIV across 13 countries spanning Africa, Europe, Latin America and Asia showed that in all countries, respondents had lost jobs or other opportunities to earn income because of their HIV status (due to both ill health and stigma). This ranged from 80% of respondents in Belize to 15% in Ukraine. In many countries, discrimination was a more common factor in job loss than ill health ([GNP+, 2018](#)). A cross-sectional, structured, face-to-face survey of 415 people living with HIV/AIDS across six districts of Nepal found that the total costs¹⁴ due to HIV/AIDS were Nepalese Rupees (NRs) 2233 per

¹¹ Direct costs comprised healthcare expenses, police fees (formal and informal), costs of arrest, shelter, filing cases, costs incurred in courts and replacement costs for property damaged ([Asante et al., 2019](#)).

¹² The study estimated the cost of rape using a model whose inputs included the number of US adult women and men (aged 18+) with any lifetime (including childhood) and past 12-month incidence of rape; selected attributable—or marginal—health and other outcomes associated with rape from administrative data and previous studies; and the marginal cost of those outcomes. Marginal outcome refers to the proportion of survivors with an outcome beyond the proportion among individuals who have not been raped, and was used to calculate the attributable cost of rape ([Peterson et al., 2016](#)).

¹³ This comprised USD 48,029 in medical costs, USD 63,744 in lost productivity, USD 9,250 in criminal justice costs, and USD 1438 in other costs ([Peterson et al., 2016](#)).

¹⁴ The total costs were calculated as the sum of average total direct and average productivity costs before adjustment for coping strategies ([Poudel et al., 2017](#)).

month (USD 30.2), which was 29% of the sample households' average monthly income.¹⁵ The average monthly productivity losses (before adjustment for coping strategies) were 5.05 days per person ([Poudel et al., 2017](#)). Global lost earnings following withdrawal from the workforce due to disability or death related to AIDS were estimated to be USD 7.2 billion in 2020 ([ILO, 2018b](#)).¹⁶

- **Interns who feel undervalued by their organisations because they lack a (fair) salary and/or organisational protection from sexual harassment may experience adverse mental health outcomes.** The combination of providing labour without remuneration, feeling unsafe at work and being unable to seek redressal – especially when these occur at a formative career stage – can signal to women that they are not welcome or valued ([Snaathorst, 2018](#)). This may exacerbate the 'confidence gap' between men and women, leading to women having less success in securing promotions and pay rises later in their careers ([UNDP, 2019](#)).

4.2 Institutional level

Companies with more diverse leadership teams (in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and other characteristics) tend to have a lower risk of sexual harassment in the workplace ([Theodore et al., 2018](#)). Reduced worker productivity related to experiencing harassment and exploitation, in addition to the exclusion of women from the workplace following these experiences, can lead to financial losses for companies. Workers that leave must be replaced, which entails significant recruitment and onboarding costs.

Furthermore, companies where men dominate boards and executive teams often have reduced profits due to limited diversity of experiences and viewpoints. Across the 2,000 most influential companies globally, the majority are dominated by men at board and executive level, with women comprising only 21% of directors and 15% of executives ([Ndiwalana, 2020](#)). Below are examples of the estimated financial losses to companies arising from the sexual harassment and exploitation against women in two male-dominated sectors (technology and finance) and one female-dominated sector (garments).

Technology

- **The technology sector has a high staff turnover rate which is partly caused by sexual harassment.** A nationally representative study of 2006¹⁷ people in the United States – 53% of whom had left a job in the tech sector in the past three years – found that 'unfairness' at work was cited by 37% of employees as a key driver in their decision to leave their job. 'Unfairness' included four categories of experiences: (1) Unfair people management practices, (2) Stereotyping, (3) Sexual Harassment, and (4) Bullying/Hostility. Sexual harassment was defined as "unwanted sexual attention" and was experienced by 10% of women (compared to 8% of men) in the job they had most recently left. Unwanted sexual attention was also reported by 10% of *all* employees (of all genders) who had left a job in the tech industry compared to 6% of employees who had left a job not in the tech industry, which suggests that

¹⁵ This comprised average total direct costs for seeking HIV/AIDS treatment of NRs 1512 per month (USD 20.4), and average productivity costs (before adjustment for coping strategies) of NRs 721 per month (USD 9.7) ([Poudel et al., 2017](#)).

¹⁶ This study assumed that the population of those withdrawn from the labour force by death or disability had the same average earnings as the general population in each country. This assumption implicitly recognises the contribution of work in the informal economy ([ILO, 2018b](#)).

¹⁷ The demographic profile of respondents was as follows: Gender: Male (63%), Female (36%), Other (1%); Race/Ethnicity: White (73%), Latinx (11%), Black (7%), South/East Asian/Pacific Islander (6%), Native American/Alaskan Native (1%); LGBTQ-Identified: Yes (8%), No (91%); Age: 18-35 (37%), 36-45 (19%), 46-65 (33%).

sexual harassment is higher in the tech industry compared to other sectors. The recruitment cost to replace the percentage of employees leaving the tech sector due to unfairness is estimated to be USD 16 billion annually. Reputational damage to a company can lead to further financial loss from reduced sales revenue ([Scott et al., 2017](#)).

Financial institutions

- **Sexual harassment of women is a common occurrence expected in the asset management sector.** A 2017 survey of almost 600 asset management industry staff found that nearly a third of women reported experiencing sexual harassment at work ([Gambetta, 2023](#)). Meanwhile, female representation amongst asset managers has stalled at 12% globally, an increase of just 1.7% since 2016 ([Thomas, 2022](#)). Research suggests that asset management companies whose investment teams have greater gender and ethnic diversity enjoy improved investment outcomes. For example, a study of 543 investment products found that investment teams in the top quartile of gender diversity outperformed¹⁸ those in the bottom quartile by 45 basis points¹⁹ per annum in 2022 ([WTS, 2023](#); [Robinson and Sen, 2023](#)).
- **Sexual harassment of women is also common in private equity.** In a survey of nearly 600 professionals (90 of whom were women) in the private capital industry, 80% reported that sexual assault, harassment, and gender bias were problems in the sector ([Whyte, 2018](#)). Research shows that where women comprised at least 30% of investment decision-making teams at private equity firms, there were 10 to 20% higher rates of return on investments compared to firms where women were not well represented. However, despite the clear advantage of gender diversity in private equity, women comprise only 10% of senior investment professionals in development markets and only 11%²⁰ in emerging markets ([IFC, 2019](#)). In addition, the same study found that female investment partners invested in almost twice as many female-led businesses as male investment partners, demonstrating the importance of gender diversity in private equity for female entrepreneurship ([Ibid.](#)).

Garments

- **A mixed methods study into sexual harassment in the garment industry in Cambodia estimated the annual productivity cost to be USD 88,742,695²¹ across the industry due to lower turnover costs, absenteeism²², and presenteeism ([CARE International, 2017](#)).**

¹⁸ Net performance was calculated by subtracting funds' largest investment fee from gross performance ([Robinson and Sen, 2023](#)).

¹⁹ A basis point is a common unit of measure for interest rates and other percentages in finance. One basis point is equal to 1/100th of 1%, or 0.01%. Basis points are used to show the change in the value or rate of a financial instrument, e.g., a 1% change equals a change of 100 basis points and a 0.01% change equals a change of one basis point ([Fernando, 2023](#)).

²⁰ This statistic is skewed by China, where 15% of senior investment professionals are women. Excluding China, female representation in emerging markets falls to 8% ([IFC, 2019](#)).

²¹ This comprised turnover costs of USD 85,184, absenteeism costs of USD 545,000, and presenteeism costs of USD 88,112,511. Turnover costs comprised the cost of training and reduced productivity costs, absenteeism costs equated to 69,550 work-days missed across the sector per year (102 work-days per factory), whilst presenteeism costs arose from the 13.5% of workers who stated their productivity was significantly affected by sexual harassment, with that group estimating that they were able to work on average 47% less effectively. This equates to an estimated USD 99.38 in lost value per worker per month ([CARE International, 2017](#)).

²² Absences were generally very low due to a work culture that punished absence through public criticism, formal warnings and high proportions of salary being cut. 3.3% of workers took an average of 3.9 days off in the last 12-months as a direct result of sexual harassment ([CARE International, 2017](#)).

4.3 National level

Cambodia

- **Sexual harassment and exploitation at work have a shrinking effect on a country's overall economy** ([AAUW, 2019](#)). The previous research in Cambodia's garment industry estimated that the total cost of workplace sexual harassment in that sector equated to 0.52% of Cambodia's GDP in 2015 (USD 88,742,695) ([CARE International, 2017](#)).

Australia

- **Research in Australia found that workplace sexual harassment in 2018 cost AUD 2.6 billion in lost productivity²³ (or AUD 1,053 on average per survivor) and AUD 0.9 billion in other expenses (or AUD 375 on average per survivor).** Assuming an average weekly wage of AUD 1,244 across the economy, each case of workplace sexual harassment represented approximately four working days of lost output ([Deloitte, 2019](#)).

United States

- **The majority of American women who reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment in the private sector left their companies within two years, which is higher than average** ([Beras, 2018](#)). This may lead to financial losses if women take lower-paid jobs to escape harassment, and some may leave without having a replacement job. If any workers are unemployed or facing lower or stagnating wages, there will be a negative effect on a country's gross domestic product (GDP) and tax revenue. If women had received equal pay to men in 2016, the United States economy would have produced an additional USD 512.6 billion in income. This represented almost 3% of the United States' GDP in 2016 ([Ibid.](#)). Although the entire gender pay gap in the United States cannot be attributed to women's experience of workplace sexual harassment, this figure can indicate the financial loss incurred by nations when women are underemployed and underpaid.
- **Research into the economic cost of rape found that, at the population level, the financial burden was estimated to be nearly USD 3.1 trillion²⁴ over survivors' lifetimes**, based on data indicating that 25 million adults in the United States had been raped. Government sources were estimated to pay USD 1 trillion (32%) of the lifetime economic burden ([Peterson et al., 2016](#)).

Ghana

- **Research into the cost of women experiencing any type of violence²⁵ was estimated at GHS 73.5 million or USD 18.9 million in 2016** ([Asante et al., 2019](#)).

²³ Productivity comprised the following categories: absenteeism, presenteeism, staff turnover and manager time to respond to reports of sexual harassment.

²⁴ This estimate included USD 1.2 trillion (39% of total) in medical costs; USD 1.6 trillion (52% of total) in lost work productivity among survivors and perpetrators; USD 234 billion (8% of total) in criminal justice activities; and USD 36 billion (1% of total) in other costs, including property loss or damage incurred by survivors ([Peterson et al., 2016](#)).

²⁵ This comprised intimate partner violence, family violence, workplace violence and public space violence ([Asante et al., 2019](#)).

5. What are the key evidence gaps which can be filled with primary data collection?

This study has identified several evidence gaps which more in-depth research could explore. Funding for more detailed research is essential to identify this evidence, some of which will be held by civil society organisations and women's rights organisations that may not have documented their findings formally. Some key evidence gaps found during research for this report include:

- Evidence of the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment of young women in **formal work schemes** such as internships, apprenticeships and work placements in low-income settings. This may be due to a lack of such schemes in many countries, but primary research could investigate this further.
- Evidence of the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment and exploitation of women in their early careers from **large-scale, nationally representative studies**, particularly in low-income countries.
- More robust evidence from low- and middle-income countries of workplace sexual harassment and exploitation of women in their early careers, particularly the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Pacific regions.
- Support LGBTQI+ organisations and researchers to build the evidence base on workplace sexual exploitation and harassment of young women with diverse sexual and gender identities, ensuring that any research follows [ethical recommendations for a do-no-harm approach](#).
- Evidence on which kinds of interventions are most effective in preventing sexual exploitation in the workplace, particularly for the groups of young women at highest risk.
- Calculations of the economic cost of workplace sexual exploitation and harassment over women's lifetimes.
- The extent to which the [IFC standards](#) on sexual exploitation are consistently applied across international finance institutions and their clients in the private sector.

6. Conclusion

This report demonstrates that sexual exploitation and harassment of young women in the workplace is a widespread global problem. There are significant adverse effects on women's career opportunities and trajectories (including for entrepreneurs), earnings, and personal finances to recover from abuse, in addition to the psychological and emotional burden that sexual exploitation and harassment can impose on survivors over their lifetimes. The loss to companies and national economies from lost productivity and missing out on talent is also significant.

The findings of this report will be discussed at the GFF/FCDO-hosted conference in June 2023. This will explore how women and girls are affected by sexual exploitation in the workplace and earlier in life whilst enrolled at school and other education establishments, demonstrating how this issue affects women and girls across their lifespans.

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Annex 1 – Evidence of the prevalence of sexual exploitation and harassment of young women in early career transitions

Sector	Countries	Research method	Evidence
Not specified	Global	Online survey (n=800)	81% of respondents said they had felt pressured to engage in sexual acts in their lifetime, with 57% experiencing this in the last 12 months. Of those exploited, 6.5% cited the need for a job as the reason, 1.7% cited career advancement, and 1.2% cited a fear of retribution at work if they did not comply with perpetrators' wishes. Of those pressured into sexually exploitative relationships, 6.6% reported that their perpetrators were their work supervisors. 62% of respondents stopped pursuing an academic or career opportunity because of a fear of sexual exploitation in that specific environment. Of those who sought support after being exploited, less than 1% reported this formally, whilst 2% spoke to another authority figure (data shared by GFF following responses to this survey).
United Nations	Global, especially USA and Switzerland	Survey (n=471)	Nearly 50% of interns at 27 UN duty stations worldwide have reported having no access to formal rights and entitlements, including UN formal justice systems, so they could not report the sexual harassment they had experienced. In addition, 83% of UN interns received no financial support from their employers, which increased the risks that perpetrators would sexually exploit them with impunity (Fair Internship Initiative, 2018).
Transport	Global	Survey (n=100)	Nearly 50% of women seafarers have reported experiencing sexual harassment at work. The incidence was much higher among women working in cruise shipping (approximately 60% of respondents) compared to cargo shipping (approximately 15%) and ferries (approximately 1%) (Stannard et al., 2015).
Tea	Kenya	Documentary	Male plantation managers, supervisors and owners of contracting firms have reportedly exploited their power over young female tea workers. This manifests as requests for sex during recruitment interviews (including conducting job interviews in hotel rooms) or prolonging the hiring process until sexual advances are accepted. In one case, a manager arrived at a woman's home outside working hours to pressure her for sex (BBC Panorama 2023).

Fishing	Kenya	Focus group discussion (FGD) (n=12)	Fisherwomen in Busia County have experienced sexual exploitation. Dwindling fish levels in Lake Victoria mean that women fish sellers are coerced into having sex with male fishermen in exchange for fish or to buy fish at discounted rates (the fishing sector in Lake Victoria is sex-segregated, with nearly all fishing done by men and selling of fish done by women). Women who received cash transfers reportedly avoided this exploitation (FSD Kenya, 2022).
Small scale traders	Kenya	FGDs (n=24, aged 21-50)	Bureaucracy at borders can increase the risk of exploitation for small-scale women traders. Research with women traders in three cities and three municipalities revealed they had low awareness of documentation for imports which could lead them to use illegal, risky and expensive transit routes, sometimes leading to exploitation by smugglers (FSD Kenya, 2021).
Not specified	Kenya	Interviews & workshops (n=63)	Men and women aged 15-24 from various socio-economic backgrounds in Nairobi, Mombasa, Turkana and Siaya report that sexual harassment from customers, colleagues and bosses frequently affects young women. A few young women reported being asked for sexual favours as a condition of employment (British Council, 2018). ²⁶
Tailoring, hairdressing	Ghana	Survey (n=200)	4% of female apprentices have reported being sexually abused by their 'masters' (Ibrahim, 2018).
Hospitality	Zimbabwe	Survey (n=77)	80% of female hospitality students in Zimbabwe reported being sexually harassed during internships (Mkono, 2010 , cited in IFC/EBRD/CDC, 2020).
	Dominican Republic	Interview	A trade union leader in the Dominican Republic stated that, anecdotally, at least 90% of female hotel workers are harassed by customers and hotel owners. Most incidents are not reported because women perceive the police and the courts as hostile to their complaints (Oxfam Canada, 2017).
Not specified	Zimbabwe	Mixed methods (survey: n=1680 women, of which 739 were aged 18-30)	Sexual exploitation can occur in the context of sextortion. ²⁷ Sextortion is part of a bribery culture in Zimbabwe, and young women who cannot afford to pay bribes are frequently forced to use sex as a form of payment, including in employment settings. 58% of women surveyed across four provinces in Zimbabwe noted they had experienced 'sexual favours' as a non-monetary bribe. In an FGD,

²⁶ The research included a mix of individual in-depth interviews, half-day group workshops, community immersions (where researchers interviewed men and women from the young people's friends and family groups, and conducted 'walk-arounds' in their local neighbourhoods and communities), as well as follow-up WhatsApp conversations with about 20 participants to gather in-depth data on young men and women's lives and perspectives ([British Council, 2018](#)).

²⁷ Sextortion is a form of corruption whereby a person entrusted with power uses it to sexually exploit someone dependent on that power (this may be instead of or in addition to extracting money from that person) ([Transparency International, 2020](#)).

			respondents noted that job offers are refused unless women agree to engage in sexual activities (Transparency International, 2019).
Mining	Zimbabwe	Mixed methods (survey: n=1680 women, of which 739 were aged 18-30)	Sextortion is prevalent in mining in Zimbabwe, where only a few politically connected, male individuals and investors have benefitted from the sector, with women comprising just 2% of large-scale mining employees and 11% of artisanal and small-scale miners. Women who lack political connections and money to pay large bribes to access mines may experience sextortion to gain access (Transparency International, 2019). There is evidence of women offering sex to security officers to gain access to securitised/militarised diamond fields (Transparency International, 2013 , cited in ibid.).
Mining	South Africa	Mixed methods ²⁸	Sexual exploitation is commonplace during job promotions in the South African mining sector. Workers' opinions across three mines about whether 'sexual favouritism' (the practice of giving sexual favours) is common in their workplace vary, with some workers saying it occurred often and others disagreeing. ²⁹ Some male participants referred to this practice as "falling in love" and suggested that some female miners deliberately offer sexual favours in exchange for job promotions. A female participant commented that the practice makes it harder for other women who are unwilling to offer sexual favours (Botha, 2016). These attitudes reveal that it is the women that are exploited – rather than the male perpetrators – who are blamed, which could increase their risk of further exploitation if their colleagues resent their career advancement.
Government procurement	Zimbabwe	Mixed methods (n= 1680 women, of which 739 were aged 18-30)	Sextortion can affect women entrepreneurs seeking government contracts due to men dominating the control of tendering processes. A female entrepreneur commented: <i>"At times, you get asked for sexual favours in return for tenders or business. What makes the situation difficult, especially for state contracts, is how women in business are perceived by men in control of these processes. When they see a woman, for most of them, sex is the first thing that comes to their mind. Hence women are sexualised and seen as sex-preneurs rather than entrepreneurs"</i> (Transparency International, 2019: 7).
	South Africa	Mixed methods (n=91)	Women entrepreneurs in South Africa and Colombia have reported similar experiences. A female water service provider in South Africa commented: <i>"I'm an entrepreneur, and [if] I want a tender to</i>

²⁸ Research was conducted at three different mines (copper, platinum and phosphate), and included a quantitative survey, individual interviews and FGDs with male and female mine workers in various roles and levels of seniority ([Botha, 2016](#)).

²⁹ For example, in the phosphate mine, 71% of men and 20% of women agreed that it is commonly practised in their mining company). However, in interviews and FGDs, participants generally indicated awareness of sexual favouritism occurring at the mines where they worked ([Botha, 2016](#)).

	Colombia		<i>distribute water, like the pre-paid, I can³⁰ sleep with one of the officials there, and they will give me a tender... If you want a business, you need to bribe with money and sleep around”</i> (UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017: 16).
Police	Colombia	Official investigation (n=10, male)	Between 2004 and 2008, male police cadets were forced into providing sexual services to congressmen and police officers in exchange for gifts, permits for family visits, money, promotions, promises of future career favours, and other benefits. The case included the death of a young woman cadet in 2006 who reportedly knew about the sexual exploitation of other cadets and the rape of a young male cadet by a Colonel in 2005. The case only came to light in 2016, meaning there was an extended period of impunity for the perpetrators (Eldén et al., 2020 ; Brodzinsky, 2016).
Police	Serbia	Interviews (n=30)	Female police officers have experienced verbal and/or sexual harassment from male colleagues, including unwanted physical contact, sexist comments, and indirect humiliation through exposure to pornographic materials. Female officers believed this was done to create a hostile work environment, including in relation to obtaining or keeping a job (deemed ‘sexual cooperation’) (Spasić, 2015).
Government procurement	Malawi	Interviews (n=19)	Sextortion, forced sexual favours, ‘double bribery’ ³¹ and other forms of sexual corruption are perceived to be widespread in Malawi. Women’s risk of being subjected to sexual corruption increases in informal network settings, such as the ‘public-private intersection’ where interactions between male public officials and female entrepreneurs occur in relation to public procurement. Women owners of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) are particularly at risk due to economic insecurity, which means sexual corruption can occur with impunity. There is a reported lack of trustworthy reporting and support mechanisms for sexual corruption (Stahl, 2021).
Public administration	Tanzania	Interviews and workshops (n=17)	Sextortion is reported to be widespread across various sectors in Tanzania, particularly within public administration. The spread of HIV among young professional women has been linked to sexual harassment and sexual exploitation in workplaces. Women and girls with disability or conditions such as albinism may be particularly at risk due to superstitious beliefs that having sex with them can bring the perpetrator good luck (Eldén et al., 2020).
Not specified	Zambia	Mixed methods (n=369)	Both young men and women aged 15-35 in a low-income settlement in Lusaka commented that women could feel pressured to have sex at or even before the interview stage and after being

³⁰ The use of the word “can” here may be misleading. In situations of marked power asymmetry, it can lead women to accept the need to carry out sexual acts or to offer them if they believe they are expected in certain contexts. This creates a false impression of “consensual” sexual activity ([Transparency International, 2020](#)).

³¹ ‘Double bribery’ refers to the obligation to render both a monetary payment and a sexual favour ([Stahl, 2021](#)).

			employed. Participants suggested that some men like to be in recruitment roles because it allows them to choose which young women are employed (Gough et al., 2016).
Domestic workers	Bangladesh	Case study	Live-out domestic workers aged 18-24 in Dhaka report that the isolated nature of their jobs intensifies their risks of the most severe forms of abuse, such as rape and assault, and that they have little social support to report or protest it (IDS, 2022 ; BIGD, 2022).
Agro-processing	Bangladesh	Case study	Female agro-processing factory workers aged 18-24 in Dhaka report experiencing sexual harassment and exploitation in their workplaces. However, since they are not isolated like domestic workers, they are able to support each other and access informal complaint mechanisms at work. No workers sought redress through formal complaint mechanisms, such as the police, due to a lack of faith that they would be treated fairly (IDS, 2022 ; BIGD, 2022).
Manufacturing	Egypt	Case study	A 2016 study by a local NGO found that factories have the highest rate of reports of sexual harassment compared to other workplaces (CDC, 2020).
Automotive, mechanical, electrical, manufacturing, processing, construction	Australia	Mixed methods	One in four current and discontinued female apprentices in traditionally male sectors in New South Wales have experienced unwelcome sexual attention at work, mostly unreported. Discontinued female apprentices were much more likely to (1) have experienced harassment or bullying at work (31% compared with 6% of current apprentices); (2) have experienced negative consequences from complaining (44% compared with 24%); and (3) feel that they must accept sexual harassment to survive in their workplaces (44% compared with 26%) (Quay, 2014).
Vocational Education and Training (VET)	Australia	Qualitative	Sexual harassment is a significant barrier to female apprentices in VET institutions. VET courses can also normalise the tokenism of women working in skilled trades (Bridges et al., 2022).
Sports	USA	Survey (n=160)	64% of female sports management interns have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment at least once during their internship. The research distinguished between four types of sexual harassment: (1) sexist hostility, (2) sexual hostility, (3) unwanted sexual attention, and (4) sexual coercion. ³² 34% of sports interns have experienced unwanted sexual attention, whilst 6% have experienced sexual coercion. Most respondents stated that sexual harassment had negatively impacted their overall satisfaction with the internship but that it had only a limited impact on their

³² The study defined these terms thus: (1) sexist hostility: sharing unwanted notes of sexually offensive material; (2) sexual hostility: whistling or making sexual comments or jokes; (3) unwanted sexual attention, which includes unwelcomed sexual advances or requests for sexual favours; (4) sexual coercion: when an individual is threatened, bribed, or tricked into physical sexual activities, including when the perpetrator pressures the survivor as if she owes it to him to engage in sex ([Hardin et al., 2021](#)).

			intention to enter the sports management profession, which suggests they perceive sexual harassment to be normalised in the sports industry (Hardin et al., 2021).
Science, technology, engineering & maths (STEM)	USA	Survey (n=2500)	36% of women working in STEM in majority-male workplaces across the United States have experienced workplace sexual harassment (Pew Research Center, 2018). ³³
Various	UK	Online survey (n=12,131, men and women, nationally representative)	45% of apprentices across sectors had experienced sexual harassment in the previous 12 months (Adams et al., 2020).
Not specified	UK	Online survey (n=1162)	Research into the experiences of women with disabilities found that 68% had experienced some form of sexual harassment at work compared to 52% of women in general. Prevalence was higher for younger women with disabilities: 78% of women with disabilities aged 18-34 reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment. 12% of all women with disabilities polled had left their jobs because of this harassment (TUC, 2021).

³³ The methodology for this survey comprised two parts: (1) Pew Research Center analysis of the Census Bureau's American Community Survey and the 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses; and 2) a nationally representative survey conducted from 11 July to 10 August 2017 with a sample of 4,914 people aged 18+. This sample comprised a group of about 2,500 individuals who said they were employed in a STEM role in a prior survey, a second group of about 1,900 individuals who were employed in a non-STEM role according to prior records, and a third group of about 500 individuals from the general public, including those not in employment. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish.

Annex 2 – Methodology

This rapid review has been undertaken through desk-based research of existing work in this area. Existing evidence reviews (including from the WOW Helpdesk) and mixed-methods studies have been prioritised, using a range of evidence across low-, middle-, and high-income countries. Findings from GFF's [online survey](#) have also been included. The strength of the evidence and any evidence gaps are stated.

There were strict criteria for publications to be selected for this evidence review. Google searches were conducted using search terms such as “internship”, “apprentice*”, “work placement”, “work experience”, “volunteer”, “entry-level job”, “TVET”, “technical/vocational training”, “young women”, “16-25-year-olds” AND “sexual exploitation”, “gender-based violence”, “violence/harassment in the workplace”, “sexual favours”, “transactional sex”, “sextortion”.³⁴ Only publications since 2008 were selected and in the English language. The geographical scope is global.

Limitations

Given its rapid nature, this review does not take a comprehensive or systematic review standard. Its short duration (approximately three weeks) means it has not been possible to access all evidence of sexual harassment and exploitation in early career transitions, especially where this knowledge is held by civil society organisations and other local organisations that may not have documented evidence in published articles.

Some of the evidence reviewed relates to sexual harassment and exploitation of women in the workplace *generally* (i.e., not specifically of women in early career transitions). This is due to some studies not providing a breakdown of data by age.

³⁴ Evidence related to sex work was not included in this review because it is usually done on a voluntary rather than coerced basis. However, given the economic insecurity of many young women and the proliferation of “sugar daddy” websites/arrangements, this issue is not clear cut.

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