 **Workplace violence and sexual harassment in *global* food systems**

**Power relations.** Violence and harassment are abuses of power and they are linked to inequalities and discrimination. According to the European Trade Union Confederation, “It is the tolerance of discrimination in the workplace that has the effect of creating an environment where violence and harassment are likely to occur”.[[1]](#footnote-1) The world of work in food systems reflects the dynamics of violence and harassment in society. Many employers use their power to hire and fire and ask sexual favors from workers, especially seasonal workers, as a condition for employment or for renewal of their employment contracts. Violence and harassment particularly affect workers in the most vulnerable work situations who have **poor or no access to fundamental labour rights** such as freedom of association and collective bargaining.

**Economic vulnerability** is another important risk factor for violence and harassment. Women workers are disproportionately affected by violence at work, because they tend to be paid less than men and are more likely to be employed in non-managerial positions. Not earning a living wage increases the risk of violence and harassment. In rural areas, women workers affected by debt bondage face a higher risk of exploitation and trafficking as they are considered someone’s “property.” The needs of migrant workers and indigenous people, and particularly workers at risk of trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation, also need to be considered.

ILO [Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:::NO:12100:P12100_ILO_CODE:C190:NO) and [Recommendation 206](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO:12100:P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:4000085:NO)–reference instruments for trade unions–point out **work organization and work pressure** are growing psychosocial risks, leading to higher levels of stress, violence and harassment at work. According to [an ILO report](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms_546645.pdf) by Dr. Jane Pillinger, “Changes in work organization and work pressure are seen by unions as growing psychosocial risks, leading to higher levels of stress and harassment at work. They encompass new forms of work organization, work pressures, unrealistic work targets, staffing shortages and stress at work, coupled with growing levels of technology-based workplace surveillance and performance monitoring.”

Working in **male-dominated environment** or, as it is often the case on farms and plantations, in workplace managed by male supervisors increase the risk of violence as well.

**In agriculture,** [trade union rights](https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/C11-anniversary-study.pdf) are often restricted or repressed; few agricultural workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements. [According to ILO statistics](https://www.ilo.org/global/industries-and-sectors/agriculture-plantations-other-rural-sectors/lang--en/index.htm), of the estimated one billion people working in agriculture, approximately 40% are wage workers. Sexual violence and harassment of female agricultural workers can occur in fields, plantations, greenhouses and packing areas. Most permanent and supervisory jobs are usually held by men who can exert coercive power over those with lower status. Moreover, the pervasive poverty and vulnerable conditions in much agricultural work disempowers the victims of harassment and can prevent witnesses from coming forward.

[ILO Recommendation 206](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R206) urges member States to adopt appropriate measures for sectors or occupations and work arrangements in which exposure to violence and harassment may be more likely, such as work in isolation. IUF affiliates have exposed the vulnerabilities of isolated workers such as plantation workers due to **poor working conditions and a poor working environment**. For instance, lack of access to proper sanitation systems on plantations increase workers’ risk of being sexually harassed or abused. Travel to and from plantations can also expose women workers to violence and harassment when there is no safe and adequate transport as it forces women to walk long distance or hitch-hike to and from fields. Moreover, violence and harassment can happen in crowded mixed public transport, even that provided by employers.

A 2018 [ILO](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_630672.pdf) working paper pointed out that, because of the conditions in which they work, “agricultural workers can be more exposed to violence and harassment,” and adds that capturing their incidence is difficult though studies that have been carried out have made alarming findings. The working paper cites several investigations in various countries and branches of agribusiness, noting that sexual harassment occurs in packhouses of Kenya’s horticulture, tea and rubber plantations in Sri Lanka, on grape and vegetable export farms in Mexico and in the cut flower industry in Ecuador. The literature search for the working paper “did not uncover global figures, but case studies are suggestive. In Ecuador 55.45 per cent of women agricultural workers had experienced sexual violence and harassment by supervisors and other workers. For workers between the ages of 20 and 24, the figure was 70.97 per cent. Some 18.81 per cent of workers interviewed had been forced to have sex with a co-worker or hierarchical superior.”

IUF’s affiliate in Malawi has been attempting to combat widespread sexual abuse at the country’s tea plantations where, in some cases, women workers are forced to have sexual relations with supervisors in order to be employed on a seasonal basis. One employer’s refusal to address complaints about the practice led to an out-of-court settlement for workers represented by the British law firm Leigh Day, who were able to bring a case under English jurisdiction because the product was sold in the UK. The details of the settlement are subject to a confidentiality clause and no admission of liability from the employer was made. The IUF has filed a complaint with the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) on Malawi’s failure to protect women workers from sexual harassment under ILO Convention [111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation)](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C111) and [Convention 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:::NO:12100:P12100_ILO_CODE:C184:NO).

***Hospitality sector.*** ILO Convention 190 calls for member States – when adopting an approach for the prevention and elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work – that the approach should take into account violence and harassment involving **third parties** (such as clients, customers, users, service providers, and others). The hospitality sector is among the concerned sectors and listed as such in [article 9 of R206](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:4000085). “Tipping” culture can also contribute to higher risk of sexual harassment. A disproportionate number of staff in the hospitality industry are victims of sexual harassment and abuse. The aim of the hospitality business is to please the customer, and workers are encouraged to be courteous and friendly even when they are the subject of improper behavior or unwelcome sexual comments or approaches. In hotels, there is often a significant power imbalance between the client and the worker in terms of social and economic status, which leads to a higher probability of incidents taking place. Although men can be the victims of sexual harassment, it is women who experience it the most. The vast majority of hotel workers are women in low-status occupations, while management positions are dominated by males who can abuse their authority to gain sexual favours. In other parts of the hospitality industry, women are encouraged, or even required, to look alluring and attractive to male customers, a practice that can lead to the objectification of women by clients and result in harassment.

A website advertising hospitality management degrees in the United States published on its pages an [infographic](https://hospitalitymanagementdegrees.net/features/sexual-harassment-in-hospitality-infographic/) containing a summary of studies on sexual harassment there. Among the findings were the startling statistic that 3 out of 10 female employees had been sexually harassed at work but in the hospitality sector the figure jumped to 9 out of 10. Restaurant workers were the most likely to be affected and surveys have shown that a significant proportion of employers do not take sexual harassment seriously, let alone have a formal policy for dealing with it.

Before the *‘Me too*’ movement took hold, trade unions were at the forefront of initiatives to combat sexual harassment in the hospitality sector. IUF affiliate *Unite Here* published a 2016 [report](https://www.handsoffpantson.org/) about sexual harassment in Chicago’s hospitality industry, finding that “49% of housekeepers surveyed had experienced guests expose themselves, flash them, or answer the door naked.” The union’s answer to this issue was to include in its bargaining agenda the requirement for employers to issue panic alarms to hotel staff. These are now widespread across the hotel industry in the United States.

In the same year, the Nordic Union for Hotels, Restaurants, Catering and Tourism produced a [report](https://www.nordichrct.org/nyheder/report-on-sexual-harassment) on sexual harassment in the Nordic countries. The key finding from their data was that, as in the US study, the problem was endemic across the hospitality industry. “Young women in insecure jobs with frequent customer contact are the most vulnerable,” the study said, adding that “An analysis of risk factors relative to sexual harassment shows that many of the factors at play are related to the work environment: alcohol consumption, the tipping culture, irregular working hours and the notion that the customer is always right.” The union’s recommendations for resolving the issue included a call for zero tolerance of sexual harassment and a recognition by employers that they are ultimately responsible for what happens to their staff and should therefore take measures to prevent them from exposure to it.

**Fast Food.** Thousands of fast food workers around the world have testified to cases of sexual harassment and gender based violence, and far too often their complaints are met with silence from their workers. The research firm [Hart Research](https://hartresearch.com/fast-food-worker-harassment-survey-findings/) interviewed 1,217 women in non-management positions and [found that](https://hartresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Fast-Food-Worker-Survey-Memo-10-5-16.pdf) “40% of women in the fast food industry had experienced unwanted sexual behaviors on the job, including 28% who have experienced multiple forms of harassment.” The report’s findings, continued, were also that “Among women subjected to unwanted sexual behavior at their fast food job, 45% report health problems as a result, including stress (34%), anxiety about coming to work (21%), depression (17%), sleep disruption (11%) and loss of appetite (9%). One in five women who suffered harassment reported that, instead of dealing with the issue properly, the employer took action against them by cutting or changing their hours, transferring them to another location or, in 2% of cases, simply dismissing them. Women of color were especially likely to experience these negative consequences compared to white women.

The fast food sector is notorious for precarious working conditions, has a relatively young workforce and employs a large number of migrant workers or other vulnerable groups of people. Employers take advantage by paying poverty wages and creating a hierarchical environment that allows bullying and harassment to flourish. One of the worst offenders, though by no means the only one, is McDonald’s, the world’s biggest hamburger restaurant chain. In May 2020, the American magazine [*The Nation*](https://www.thenation.com/article/society/mcdonalds-sexual-harassment/) published an article about sexual harassment at McDonald’s, writing that a survey conducted in April of 782 female McDonald’s employees found that three-quarters of those surveyed reported experiencing sexual harassment on the job and only 20% said they worked at a location where neither they nor their colleagues had been harassed. 12% stated that they had been sexually assaulted or raped. In response, McDonald’s said that the poll was unrepresentative of its 800,000 employees in the United States, an argument that it has found difficult to sustain given the various class actions that have been brought against them, including one from 5,000 women in its 100 Florida locations.

McDonald’s has attempted to shift the blame onto their franchisees. In the United States, 95% of McDonald’s restaurants are franchises. However, that has not prevented legal action being taken against them, on the grounds that they are jointly liable due to the degree of control they exercise over everything from the restaurants’ decor to what type of tomato sauce should be used.

In September 2022, four former [young McDonald’s workers spoke out at the European Parliament](https://effat.org/in-the-spotlight/mcdonalds-workers-speak-out-at-european-parliament-about-corporate-violence-and-abuse-2/) about the harassment and violence they had suffered at their workplace. Their testimonies underscored that at McDonald’s, a culture of abuse, union-busting and exploitation is a global phenomenon. It must be challenged. At the hearing, the IUF together with a group of trade unions, demanded that the European Union should take concrete steps to end the impunity and adopt a stronger Due Diligence Directive covering companies operating through franchise systems.

**Domestic violence.** The preamble of ILO Convention 190 notes that “domestic violence can affect employment, productivity and health and safety (…).” Workers suffering from domestic violence do not leave their pain and worries caused by it at home. Abused workers can be threatened with dismissal because of perceived poor performance, and their health and safety and even their lives are also at risk. [[2]](#footnote-2) According to [the ILO](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/briefingnote/wcms_738117.pdf), economic violence is also a facet of domestic violence, an attempt to create the victim’s economic dependence on the perpetrator. Women are disproportionately affected, accounting for nearly 8 out of 10 those who experience domestic violence. Domestic violence is more likely to be severe when women are the targets. [According to Women’s Aid](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-is-a-gendered-crime/), a UK charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children, when death is the outcome, almost all victims are women and almost all perpetrators are men. Addressing the impact of domestic violence in food systems is crucial. A list of appropriate measures for ILO member States is detailed in article 18 of the ILO’s Recommendation 206.

**List of relevant ILO Conventions**

ILO Convention [111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation)](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C111)

ILO [Convention 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:::NO:12100:P12100_ILO_CODE:C184:NO)

ILO [Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment Convention](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:::NO:12100:P12100_ILO_CODE:C190:NO)

**List of sexual harassment** [**agreements between IUF and companies**](https://www.iuf.org/what-we-do/fighting-against-sexual-harassment/)

[2013 Chiquita Appendix on Sexual Harassement](https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013-Chiquita-Appendix-on-Sexual-Harassment.pdf)

[IUF-Industriall-Unilever Joint Commitment](https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/1-2016-IUF-IndustriAll-Unilever-Joint-Commitment-on-preventing-sexual-harassment.pdf) on preventing sexual harassment

[2019 AccorInvest – IUF Agreement](https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-AccorInvest-IUF-Agreement-on-Fighting-Against-Sexual-Harassment.pdf) on fighting Against Sexual Harassment

[2017 Sodexo-IUF Joint Commitment](https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017-Sodexo-IUF-Joint-Commitment-on-preventing-sexual-harassment.pdf) on preventing sexual harassment

[IUF-RIU Hotels & Resorts Agreement](https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/IUF_RIU-Agreement-to-eradicate-sexual-harassment-at-workplace-e.pdf) to eradicate sexual harassment

[2019 Melia-IUF Joint Commitment](https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Melia-IUF-Joint-Commitment-on-preventing-sexual-harassment.pdf) on preventing sexual harassment

[2019 Arla-IUF agreement](https://www.iuf.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Arla-IUF-agreement-to-fight-sexual-harassment.pdf) to fight sexual harassment

1. ETUC document “[Safe at home, safe at work](https://www.ituc-csi.org/safe-at-home-safe-at-work-trade)”, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Domestic violence can cause absenteeism, low morale, poor performance and high turnover. It impacts on the victim’s ability to get to work, and abuse can take place at, or close to, the workplace, and also affect co-workers. There has been an increase in reported incidents of domestic violence targeting victims at work, with an impact on the worker, co-workers and the enterprise (increased workloads, stress, calls or visits from their co-worker’s abuser, and other potential safety risks). On the other hand, the workplace can also be a refuge for victims, but could be a place where perpetrators can easily find and harm them. In either case, victims of domestic violence should be able to earn a living as that is essential for them to be able to leave violent relationships. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)