

Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) in the Agribusiness Sector



Why is addressing GBVH important to the agribusiness sector?

Agribusiness is a driving force of economic growth, food security, health, employment and exports in many lower- and middle-income countries. Agricultural workers account for 1 billion, or one-third, of the world's workforce. Women make up almost half of the agricultural labour force globally and as much as 70 per cent in some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa. Even though the overall agricultural labour force is shrinking, the growing proportion of women workers has been one of the most striking trends in agribusiness.

GBVH is a serious and systemic form of labour abuse in the agribusiness sector and can often overlap with other forms of labour abuse, including modern slavery, a known and pressing issue. While GBVH can affect anyone, it is rooted in gender inequality and power imbalances, meaning women and gender-nonconforming individuals are disproportionately targeted. In sectors with large female workforces, such as agriculture, the risks of GBVH are high. This vulnerability to exploitation is heightened when women are in casual, low-paid employment with limited security.

This sector brief covers all elements of the agribusiness value chain from production to processing, packaging, logistics and the distribution of agricultural products, including crops, livestock, agroforestry and aquaculture. The agribusiness sector often has complex subcontracting arrangements, or supply chains with informal suppliers and middlemen or brokers, making it harder to monitor and address GBVH risks.

In farming and primary production

Research shows that women agricultural workers experience high levels of violence and harassment by supervisors and colleagues in the fields, plantations and greenhouses of agribusinesses globally. Verbal and physical abuse are often used in an attempt to increase productivity to meet seasonal deadlines.

Asymmetrical power relations, whereby women are more likely to be casually or seasonally employed, can increase the risks of GBVH. Research in the Bangladesh shrimp sector found that many female workers are hired as casual workers through third-party contractors and paid on a piece-rate basis. Women are often silenced or

forced to tolerate harassment to obtain or keep employment or prevent the withholding of wages. Women also report being threatened with sexual violence by middlemen, to coerce them into accepting lower rates for their shrimp fry.

Agricultural work can often be in remote, rural locations, increasing the opportunities for men to perpetrate sexual assault and harassment. Their low visibility and limited options to report GBVH and receive support services increase the risks women agricultural workers face. Men working on commercial fishing boats with women for long periods often exploit the situation to perpetrate GBVH and women on board struggle to report it, due to fear of backlash from the largely male workforce.



Source: [Jacobs et al \(2015\)](#) survey of 160 female workers in 16 cut-flower and horticultural farms in Ethiopia

Migrant and seasonal workers are particularly vulnerable to GBVH due to power imbalances, especially where they depend on employers for housing, transport and often the right to stay in a country. Seasonal women farmworkers in grape and vegetable export farms in Mexico, for example, have reported cases of supervisors perpetrating sexual harassment and abuse. Migrant workers are often dispersed across farms, do not know their rights, have limited social networks, experience language barriers, fear retaliation or deportation, or fear that if they report an incident, they will be blacklisted and unable to return the following season.

In processing and packing

GBVH is widespread in the processing and packing stages of agribusiness, where male supervisors frequently oversee the process and control decisions concerning work performance and, hence, remuneration. Workers



often have little job security and are in temporary or seasonal roles. Research in the [banana export industry in Cameroon](#) found that women working on the packing line fear that their pay will be cut or they will lose their job if they refuse supervisors' requests for sexual favours.



MORE THAN 8 IN 10 (86 PER CENT) FEMALE WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES SAID THEY HAD EXPERIENCED HARASSMENT IN MEATPACKING PLANTS.

Source: [ASISTA \(2015\)](#) survey of 100 female workers in Iowa, United States

In studies of the [cut-flower industry in Kenya](#), women working in processing and packaging said supervisors required sexual favours for job security and that refusal could lead to dismissal. This harassment occurs despite company codes of conduct that prohibit such behaviour.

In logistics and distribution

Male drivers transporting agricultural goods over long distances can pose a risk of perpetrating GBVH on routes and at truck stops along the way, particularly if they are travelling through poor and remote communities. Research in [Brazil](#) found that child and adolescent sexual exploitation by male transport drivers was common on roadways and truck stops, with one in five truck drivers admitting to having had sex with a child under the age of 18 while they were transporting goods. In [Uganda](#), truck drivers on the Kampala–Mombasa trucking route set up a regional association to stop the widespread sexual exploitation of adolescent girls by truck drivers.

At home

GBVH risks also stem from within workers' families and intimate relationships; this is commonly known as domestic violence. More and more companies have recognised the cost of domestic violence and facilitated support for abused women as a social good, but also to offset social and economic costs to the business. In [Europe, for example](#), women working in agriculture and fisheries have the highest rates of partner violence of any occupational group – 14 per cent in the last year, compared with an average of 4 per cent across all industries.

While domestic violence can happen throughout the agricultural supply chain, it is a particular risk on family farms, which produce [over 80 per cent of the world's](#)

[food](#) in value terms. Research by the [Gender, Agriculture and Assets Project](#) in Nepal, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania found that domestic violence is widespread on small family farms, impacting people and agricultural production.

What are the benefits of addressing GBVH?

Addressing GBVH in the agribusiness sector can have the following benefits:

- Provides a safe and healthy workplace that maintains workers' physical and emotional health and wellbeing. Safety and health concerns for women include violence and sexual harassment in the workplace, exposure to HIV and AIDS, and other occupational safety issues surrounding, for example, the safety of agricultural equipment and agrochemicals, tools and workstations. The [International Labour Organisation's Code of Practice on Safety and Health in Agriculture](#) includes GBVH.
- Increases financial benefits for companies due to lower absenteeism, staff turnover and improved productivity. In the Solomon Islands, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) supported tuna processing company [SolTuna](#) in developing a respectful workplace policy to address sexual harassment. The policy is estimated to have generated an additional \$1.58 million a year in revenue thanks to increased productivity.
- Increases the ability of agribusinesses to recruit and retain female workers who might be wary about GBVH risks, as well as attract women into non-traditional roles. For companies that rely on seasonal workers, there are financial benefits to ensuring experienced workers feel safe returning to the company every year. In Brazil, sugarcane processing company [Biosev](#) has built a strong reputation as a good employer for women, partly due to its visibly proactive approach to tackling sexual harassment.
- Strengthens companies' reputation and avoid financial and legal risks for companies and investors if there are allegations of GBVH. For example, in 2020, several British supermarkets suspended purchases from a [Kenyan avocado supplier](#) during an investigation into 79 allegations of violence and rape by security guards against local community members over a 10-year period.



What are the risk factors?


Risk factors that increase the potential for GBVH in the agribusiness sector include:

- Seasonal deadlines that put companies and their workers under intense pressure and can increase the risk that supervisors and managers abuse positions of trust to boost productivity and deliver on time.
- Incentive structures, such as performance-related pay, bonus schemes and piece-rate systems to assess workers' productivity, which can be abused to create opportunities for sexual harassment and exploitation, especially when decision-making rests with an individual manager or supervisor.
- Workers in areas that lack alternative employment options, meaning they may be less likely to report GBVH and less likely to leave their jobs, even if they are experiencing violence or harassment.
- Remote locations where people have limited access to places to report GBVH and receive support services.
- Isolated locations that require long journeys to and from work through remote areas. Agricultural sites that are spread over large areas can create opportunities to perpetrate GBVH out of view of others and where risks of detection may be low.
- Worker accommodation, particularly common in primary agriculture, where perpetrators can gain access to sleeping areas. There are also child-protection risks to workers' children that accompany them.

- Poorly designed or maintained physical spaces on agricultural sites and in worker accommodation. For example, a lack of sex-segregated, separate, lockable sanitary facilities, changing facilities or living areas, bad lighting and dark or isolated access routes.
- Large-scale acquisitions of farmland, which increase the risks of exploitation or abuse of vulnerable landowners or users, in particular those without formal legal title, female-headed households or people with disabilities.
- Agricultural areas experiencing environmental degradation, slow-onset climate-related crises (such as drought) and sudden natural disasters, often exacerbated by climate change. Research shows direct [links between environmental pressures and GBVH](#), including early marriage, domestic violence, sexual exploitation and trafficking.

GBVH risks vary according to workers' gender or sexual orientation, age, membership of a minority group, levels of education/literacy and other factors. Risks also vary depending on country-level or local factors, such as how women are treated in society, rates of violence in the wider community, legal and regulatory frameworks, and whether there are prevention and response measures (see accompanying note on [Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector](#) for further guidance on risk factors).

What can investors and companies do?

	Examples of entry points	Case studies
 <p>Leadership and company culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop policies and procedures to address GBVH in the company's own operations, as well as in supply chains, either as a separate policy or part of wider company policies. • Establish a top-tier focal point or well-trained committee tasked with addressing GBVH. • Involve workers' organisations, cooperatives or trade unions in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and procedures. • Engage experts to map out GBVH risks in the sector; this is particularly important for complex agribusiness supply chains. • Regularly report on GBVH, for example, through workplace occupational health and safety monitoring systems. • Support or engage with sector-wide initiatives or global framework agreements to address GBVH in supply chains, such as the Joint Understanding on Sexual Harassment (2013) in the banana industry between the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), the Coordinating Body of Latin American Banana and Agro-industrial Unions (COLSIBA) and Chiquita. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sierra Leone and Ghana: CDC is supporting Miro Forestry, a sustainable forestry and timber products company, in developing a gender action plan. The plan aims to improve Miro's workforce gender balance and reduce absenteeism and attrition. The initial plan includes upskilling programmes for women to advance their careers in the timber business and unconscious bias training for senior management to help increase hiring of women. CDC is also supporting Miro in developing a safeguarding policy to adequately monitor, address and review these risks at a local level. • Sri Lanka and Malawi: The tea company, Twinings, is taking action to address GBVH in the wider community around tea estates. It has joined forces with international non-government organisation CARE International to set up community development fora. These fora provide a space for workers and management to share information and resolve any issues, with a focus on women's voice and leadership. The groups receive training in life skills, such as communication, leadership, conflict negotiation and gender equality, which is having a positive impact on violence in the home and community.





	Examples of entry points	Case studies
 <p>Policies and procedures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish codes of conduct, policies and protocols to address GBVH for all workers and third parties in the supply chain, including seasonal workers, and provide training once developed (see section below on working with contractors and suppliers with regard to the inclusion of clauses in contracts on protection from GBVH and committing contractors and suppliers to address GBVH risks). Widely communicate codes of conduct to all workers, including seasonal and casual workers. Widely communicate company codes of conduct to local communities so they know what behaviour is expected of company workers and can hold them accountable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global: Through the Women@Work programme, Hivos has been working with flower growers to develop a sector-wide model sexual harassment policy for more than 100 flower farms. The policy was developed collaboratively with farm management, workers and trade unions, civil-society and certification bodies. It defines sexual harassment and sets out workplace structures and measures for implementing the policy, as well as sanctions for violating it. Training on the policy is provided for workers, supervisors and managers, and gender committees are tasked with monitoring compliance. An evaluation in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Kenya found that workers had a clearer understanding of sexual harassment and how to report it. In Kenya, the sexual harassment policy has been endorsed by the export association, the Kenya Flower Council, and included in other standards by certification bodies such as Fairtrade International.
 <p>Grievance mechanisms and investigation procedures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and communicate confidential reporting, referral and support systems for workers and local communities, with the option to report anonymously if preferred. Ensure temporary and casual workers can participate in collective bargaining and access grievance mechanisms. Map local services (healthcare, counselling, legal) and organisations (women's and workers' organisations) to provide support to those who have experienced GBVH. Provide support and advice to survivors (for example, Unilever's legal aid centres in tea estates in India, or 'caravans' hosting local support organisations for strawberry workers in Morocco). Ensure that workers in remote work environments (on isolated farms, in forests or on boats, for instance) have access to reporting mechanisms. Create mechanisms for isolated workers to connect with each other in person or online to share concerns. Be prepared to receive reports from survivors and witnesses and be ready to implement a survivor-centred approach in line with section 6.1 of the accompanying note Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethiopia: As part of the Empowering the Source project, the Ethiopian Horticulture Producers and Exporters Association has established farm-level gender committees on horticultural farms. The gender committees act as a grievance mechanism for reporting and handling incidents. They also help raise awareness on gender and sexual harassment through a peer-to-peer approach. An evaluation found an initial rise in reported GBVH cases, which could be related to increased awareness of sexual harassment and self-confidence to report. There was a 32 per cent reduction in cases over a two-year period.



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 <p>Recruitment and performance assessment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and revise all human resources policies, materials and training so they address GBVH. Ensure all workers have background checks, including references from most recent employers. Provide written contracts for all workers, including seasonal workers, to ease concerns that they may lose their job if they report GBVH. Clearly establish fair and transparent processes and criteria for bonus and reward schemes, making sure decision-making does not rest with an individual unless there is oversight by others. Provide opportunities for training and mentorship so that women can advance to supervisory and leadership roles and avail of opportunities in non-traditional roles (such as operating machinery). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brazil: IFC has supported sugarcane production and processing company, Biosev, to create a safe and supportive environment for women. All new workers participate in induction training that strongly promotes a culture of mutual respect and a work environment free of harassment. It has a free third-party operated hotline, 'Talk to Biosev', so that all employees and community members can report incidents confidentially. The company also provides training and opportunities for women in non-traditional occupations (such as mechanics) and management positions. These actions are helping Biosev to improve its recruitment and retention of staff, as fear of sexual harassment is a key barrier to women seeking work in the sugarcane industry in Brazil. Morocco: The Better Strawberries Group initiative was prompted by Oxfam research, which found that female strawberry pickers experienced high levels of sexual harassment and verbal abuse from labour intermediaries (<i>waqqaf</i>). The women were particularly at risk of GBVH, as many did not have the identity documents needed to establish formal contracts. 'Caravan' tents were set up near strawberry farms, pack houses and factories to assist women in obtaining national identity cards and thereby help formalise strawberry pickers' work. Each caravan also housed an 'observatory' where local organisations raised awareness of labour rights and provided advice on specific cases. In total, more than 9,000 women received identity cards and 362 human rights violations were recorded.
 <p>Training and awareness raising</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide all new recruits with mandatory training or induction sessions on relevant GBVH policies, codes of conduct and grievance mechanisms. Provide targeted training to managers and supervisors on how to respond to reports. Ensure that casual workers and community members know what unacceptable behaviour is and how to report it. Display information, for example, by hanging posters in key places. Conduct outreach in local communities (for instance, around plantations, estates and farms) to raise awareness about reporting mechanisms and to change attitudes and behaviour with regard to GBVH. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kenya: The Ethical Tea Partnership has developed a training programme for supervisors with a strong emphasis on anti-discrimination and harassment. More than 1,000 managers and supervisors have been trained in 68 factories belonging to Kenya Tea Development Agency Holdings Ltd. The training uses role-play and interactive sessions to develop supervisors' skills to create a workplace culture of respect and to identify and address GBVH. As well as the supervisor training, gender committees have been established to help women workers speak up on a range of issues, including sexual harassment and working conditions. India: Unilever and UN Women are currently raising awareness about GBVH among workers and local communities in and around tea estates in Assam as part of the Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls Programme. The innovative programme includes women survivors as agents of change in <i>Jugnu</i> clubs (<i>Jugnu</i> means 'fireflies', as the women are seen as torchbearers in preventing violence). Interactive capacity-building sessions have been held with senior management, supervisors and workers. Clear messages about GBVH risks have also been shared on tea estates, including through dance, theatre and songs, with a view to involving young people. <i>Jugnu</i> members have conducted women's safety-audit training to identify areas in and around tea estates that are considered unsafe. A legal aid centre is also being set up on one of the tea estates to provide response services to survivors and to raise awareness about rights and state-funded entitlements.



	Examples of entry points	Case studies
 <p>Work with contractors and suppliers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage experts to map GBVH risks in the supply chain, identify areas of influence (for example, around seasonal deadlines) and monitor risks. Include clauses in contracts on protection from GBVH, committing contractors and suppliers to address it (such as transparent grievance mechanisms and representation in unions and workers' associations). Put in place a supplier code of conduct that includes expectations in relation to GBVH. Incentivise good practice and build long-term relationships with contractors and suppliers with good track records. Work collaboratively with companies, suppliers and workers to tackle systemic issues in the sector, for example, through company-worker agreements, such as the Fair Food Program, which addresses GBVH and human trafficking in supply chains. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Latin America, with a pilot project in Panama: Global banana company Chiquita has introduced a policy on sexual harassment as part of a joint regional framework agreement with the IUF and COLSIBA trade unions. The collective bargaining agreement includes a specific clause on sexual harassment, with a sample sexual harassment policy. Chiquita requires its suppliers, contract growers and joint-venture partners to provide reasonable evidence that they respect national legislation and the minimum labour standards outlined in the framework agreement, including the clause on sexual harassment. Chiquita has also introduced a free 24-hour helpline to report any discrimination or harassment, including GBVH. In addition, a pilot gender project in Panama has increased female participation in the farm workforce by 8 per cent, improved women's working conditions and built awareness of sexual harassment. Myanmar: The United States Agency for International Development and Walmart Foundation supported the Issara Institute in developing a Burmese-language smartphone app, Golden Dreams, to address risks from abusive recruitment agencies in the Thai fishing industry, including risks of trafficking and GBVH. The app allows migrant workers to review and rate recruiters, employers and service providers. It also provides information about workers' rights and a 24-hour helpline and private messaging service for the 9 in 10 Burmese migrant workers in Thailand who have smartphones with data packages. The app works alongside other reporting mechanisms for those without a smartphone. Geographic information system (GIS) mapping is used to analyse the data, identify high-risk areas for abusive practices and conduct targeted outreach.
 <p>Physical design</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct regular gender-sensitive safety audits to identify potential areas where workers feel unsafe (such as in isolated spaces or enclosures). Consider restructuring the physical work environment and schedules to reduce isolated spaces. Consider safety in the design and maintenance of farms, processing plants and living accommodation, such as good lighting and separate, lockable sanitary and washing facilities. Provide safe transportation options to and from worksites. Provide safe and secure living accommodation for male and female workers and their children, where appropriate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> South Africa: Agricultural company Country Bird has introduced a range of measures to improve physical safety and reduce GBVH risks during and after work. Following a series of incidents, Country Bird provided a minibus service for workers after their night shift and increased the number of closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras around the processing plant. Both male and female workers say they feel safer and believe that any sexual harassment incidents will be taken seriously. Mexico: IFC has supported tomato producer Bioparques de Occidente in preventing GBVH within its tomato plantations and worker housing complexes. The company provides free, secure transportation to and from the worksite for workers who live in local communities. It also employs security guards at its work locations and accommodation sites to help ensure worker safety. These measures are part of a broader company approach to addressing GBVH, which includes a code of ethics, grievance mechanisms and on-site support services.



Resources for addressing GBVH in agribusiness

[Spotlight on Sexual Violence and Harassment in Commercial Agriculture: Lower and Middle Income Countries](#), International Labour Organisation, 2018. Working paper summarising research on sexual violence and harassment among commercial agricultural workers.

[Guide to Support the Implementation of the Global Women's Safety Framework in Rural Spaces](#), UN Women and Unilever, 2019. Guidance on the Global Women's Safety Framework for producers in the tea sector and other agricultural value chains.

[Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook](#), World Bank, Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2009. Guide on how to address gender issues and integrate gender-responsive actions into agricultural operations.

[Addressing Worker Vulnerability in Agricultural and Food Supply Chains: Pilot Toolkit](#), Ergon Associates Ltd, 2016. Toolkit for companies on how to conduct due diligence to both identify and act upon human rights risks in agricultural and food supply chains, including risks of GBVH.

[Case Study: Gender-Smart Solutions Reduce Employee Absenteeism and Turnover in Solomon Islands](#), IFC, 2018. Case study exploring the impact of domestic violence on absenteeism at SolTuna, a tuna processing plant in the Solomon Islands.

To find out more, please see [Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment: Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector](#).

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