

Background:

The prevalence of sexual harassment of women workers in countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, and India, which together form the manufacturing hubs for many multi-national garment companies, has created a lot of international news in the past decade. The industry contributes to 4% of the national GDP and 17% to India's total export earnings. Moreover, being a labour intensive industry, it is the second largest employer of workers in India after agriculture. It directly employs around 45 million people, of which, 60% of the actual labour force is women.

According to a new factory level research report released on May 28, 2018, female garment workers who are concentrated in the production department in subordinate roles as machine operators, checkers and helpers in other departments, experience violence and harassment not only in physical workplaces but also during the commute and/or in housing provided by employers. Some of the risk factors in the supply chain are use of short-term contracts, production targets, industrial discipline practices, wage-related abuses, excessive working hours, and unsafe work places. The structure of production in global production networks involving several companies across multiple countries allows brands and retailers to dictate sourcing and production patterns while deflecting accountability for how purchasing practices drive violence and harassment at work.¹

About the Project:

Marks & Spencer and British High Commission had partnered a pilot-phase implementation of Gender Equality Program at Workplace in two factories of Bengaluru in 2016-2017. Due to its success and based on its key learnings, the High Commission along with UK's three major apparel brands Marks & Spencer, Superdry, and Mothercare decided to implement a larger program in its other factories across India. The program was later also supported by Levi Strauss & Co.

Apart from international pressure due to media reports, there are other reasons for implementation of such a program.

- As per UK's Modern Slavery Act (2015), businesses with a turnover of over £36 million need to publish an annual report on transparency in their supply chains
- Compliance with India's Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) or POSH Act, 2013
- International Labour Organisation (ILO) studies proved impact of gender equality programmes lead to increased productivity and better working conditions

The program was implemented with the aim of introducing good management systems and practices in factories, create a positive influence on aspects like reduced attrition and absenteeism, create better working conditions for higher productivity and profitability, increased business due to commitment to international and national workplace policies and directives.

The project was implemented by Change Alliance as lead partner and Treble Partners as technology partner along with service providers for technology and IVR by Goodera (formerly NextGen) and Vodafone (through Infobip) in 11 factories - five in North, six in South - across three key garment manufacturing locations of Delhi-NCR, Bangalore and Chennai.

¹ Workers Voices from the Global Supply Chain : A Report to the ILO 2018

Processes Undertaken:

To achieve the objective of promoting gender equality in garment factories, and empowering women workers by creating a safe working environment, Change Alliance initiated a three-pronged strategy: Engagement, Accountability, and Responsiveness.

Engagement: A baseline study and factory profiling was conducted to understand the working condition in the factories, create factory and workers' profiles as well as compliance with the POSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) Act, 2013. A series of training sessions were held with the male and female workers and management on topics such as gender stereotypes, roles, behaviour and attitude of men and women, and gender equality before intensive training on the POSH Act, its meaning and provisions. The project focussed on breaking the norms/culture of silence by women. The training modules, posters, visuals were all designed and displayed in four languages (English, Hindi, Kannada and Tamil).

Accountability: The status of Internal Committees (ICs) as per the POSH Act were reviewed and established/reconstituted to make them functional. In factories where there were no ICs, new committees were formed (2 factories) and trained on its processes, while in nine of the factories ICs was reconstituted. Peer Trainers were identified through a three-layered process based on their response, a list by factory management and finally through focussed group discussions/face to face interactions. Using the Training-the-Trainers model, these selected Peer Trainers further trained the workforce in the factories. The policy of 'Do No Harm' and 'No Retaliation' to complainants was also initiated.

Responsiveness: The analysis and recommendations of workplace policies were shared with an emphasis on keeping them aligned to gender needs, human rights and business framework so that a positive ripple effect on factory workers in general and women workers in particular could be effected. The ICs of the factories were made to respond and redress to the cases of sexual harassment. At the same time, to make the internal grievance registering and redressal mechanism easily accessible and user-friendly, an IVR based system has been set up in all these factories. This system provided options for all types of harassment complaints including verbal, physical, sexual and payment related with an assurance on confidentiality and job security. This system is available in four regional languages.

About Change Alliance:

Change Alliance is a for-profit organisation providing CSR consultancy and other development sector services to both companies and civil society organisations. Our services include end-to-end CSR strategy, design, implementation and management of large programs, in-depth research, baselines and end-term impact assessments, mid-term evaluations, and training and capacity building across sectors and industries. We have expertise and a successful track-record in conducting large-scale research, monitoring and evaluations, trainings, and implementing campaigns especially in education, gender, livelihoods, and climate change. And our 60 years legacy of developmental work, engaging with civil societies across the globe, and working with over 300 partner organisations in India has helped clients reach the remotest corners of the country.

Change Alliance is a wholly owned subsidiary of Christian Aid UK, an international non-profit organisation supporting development and humanitarian work in India for over 60 years.