



ASK THE EXPERT: HAYLEY SAMU

Hayley Samu, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Principal, shares Engendering Industries best practices in using survivor-centered approaches to prevent and address workplace sexual harassment and other forms of GBV.

WHAT IS A SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACH TO WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE?

A survivor-centered approach puts the survivor’s best interest, dignity, experience, and needs at the center of the workplace’s response to any incident. An act of sexual harassment or other form of GBV takes away a victim’s power and agency so the response that follows should focus on helping restore the victim’s power so they can heal. Victims should control every aspect of decision-making and investigation that follows their experience with GBV. This process helps a victim to become a survivor. Under the USAID Engendering Industries program, we support 109 partners in 43 countries to implement survivor-centered approaches to sexual harassment and GBV.

MANY ORGANIZATIONS RESIST IMPLEMENTING SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACHES, FIND THEM RADICAL, OR SEEM NERVOUS ABOUT THE APPROACH. WHY IS THAT?

The initial reaction of most organizations is to protect themselves legally and keep their reputation intact. Many organizations have spent decades practicing well-intentioned policies, but these practices can retraumatize and further harm victims. Mandatory reporting of GBV is an example of this. Many organizations feel they have a moral or ethical responsibility to protect the victim from future harm, but with mandatory reporting, you’re making decisions for the victim, which takes more of their power

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away. Survivor-centered approaches seem radical because they are a sharp departure from these traditional practices. In reality they protect both the survivor and company in the long run, and are the most reasonable. Survivor-centered approaches require an organization to cede control over the process to the victim. This requires deep mindset shifts about the purpose of preventing and responding to sexual harassment and other forms of GBV. At the end of the day, the needs and choices of the individual that has experienced harm should be prioritized over the needs of the organization.

WHILE INCIDENTS OF WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GBV REMAIN HIGH GLOBALLY, REPORTING IS LOW. ORGANIZATIONS SOMETIMES ASSUME THAT LOW LEVELS OF REPORTING REPRESENT LOW LEVELS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GBV. WHY IS THIS WRONG?

Around 85 percent of women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace,¹ but only seven percent report it.² These numbers are staggering. Some organizations believe that low rates of reporting mean that sexual harassment and other forms of GBV are not taking place within the company. However, through our work with organizations around the world under Engendering Industries, we know that low reporting tells a different story. Victims might lack trust and confidence in the organization’s grievance mechanism process. They might feel ashamed or blame themselves for the incident, even though sexual harassment is never their fault. Sometimes a victim might not fully understand that a particular behavior is considered sexual harassment or another form of GBV. Others might understand that what happened to them was wrong, but don’t know how to report the incident. They may fear retribution from the perpetrator or the company such as losing their job or being demoted, or even retribution from their colleagues who may have sided with the perpetrator or stigmatize them. They may have concerns about their physical safety, including harm from the perpetrator, or even their family members depending on the cultural context. These are all justifiable concerns.

Creating a survivor-centered grievance process ensures victims feel safe and comfortable reporting an incident, but it must also be accompanied with corporate culture change that addresses prohibited behaviors and communicates the consequences of prohibited actions. With time, this should increase the rate of reporting. Companies should welcome increased rates of reporting because it shows that victims feel safe and comfortable using the established grievance process.

TRUST IN THE GRIEVANCE AND INVESTIGATION PROCESS IS A HUGE BARRIER TO REPORTING FOR MANY PEOPLE. TELL US ABOUT THE ATTRIBUTES OF AN EFFECTIVE GRIEVANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM. WHAT WORKS?

We need to understand that first and foremost, experiencing GBV is traumatizing, and that the trauma must be addressed first. This is why the first response is to provide the victim with internal or external psychological support services. This comes before any formal reporting or investigation process. When a victim chooses to enter the grievance process, we consider them a survivor. It’s critical that whoever is handling the process consults the survivor before any action is taken, only takes steps with the

¹ Daley, Lauren P., Travis, Dnika J., Shaffer, Emily S. (2018). *Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: How Companies Can Prepare, Prevent, Respond, and Transform Their Culture*. Catalyst. ([Link](#))

² Palermo, T., Bleck, J., & Peterman, A. (2014). “Tip of the Iceberg: Reporting and Gender-based Violence in Developing Countries.” *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 179(5), 602–612. ([Link](#))

survivor's consent, consistently offers the survivor additional psychological support, and allows the survivor to lead the process. Approaching the grievance process in this way can help avoid retraumatizing a survivor.

What are some common misconceptions in our understanding of sexual harassment? We often think of workplace sexual harassment as an event that takes place between two employees. A common scenario used in sexual harassment trainings depicts a male supervisor asking his young female employee out on a date. While this is certainly sexual harassment, there are many other ways that sexual harassment and other forms of GBV can manifest in an organization. Unfortunately, we often turn a blind eye to less obvious forms of sexual harassment. For example, microaggressions, like calling a woman "sweetheart" or telling her she "looks prettier with her hair down" are often overlooked forms of sexual harassment. A perpetrator might argue that they did not intend to sexually harass someone by calling them "sweetheart," but sexual harassment is determined by the impact on the victim, not the perpetrator's intention.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER FORMS OF GBV BEYOND SEXUAL HARASSMENT? DO COMPANIES HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO ADDRESS THEM AS WELL?

We often overlook other forms of GBV when they happen outside of the workplace. For example, if an incident takes place between an employee and a customer while the employee is in the community – this is a workplace issue and should be addressed whether the employee or the customer is the one who experienced harm. Another common form of GBV is domestic violence, which is often considered a personal matter and not a workplace issue. It can be very taboo to discuss domestic violence, but if an employee is experiencing or perpetrating harm, even at home, it affects their performance and wellbeing at work. Employees who are victims of domestic violence are likely to experience post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and might have difficulty focusing on work. On the other hand, perpetrators might bring unsafe behaviors into the workplace. Regardless of who is perpetuating or experiencing harm, when GBV affects employees, it is a workplace issue.

HOW DO SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND OTHER FORMS OF GBV AFFECT BUSINESS PERFORMANCE?

GBV can have real and significant costs to businesses. They can lead to lost productivity, turnover, and sometimes legal or insurance fees due to litigation. When sexual harassment occurs within a team, companies lose an estimated \$22,500 in lost productivity per harassed individual.³ Poorly handled incidents cause significant brand and reputational damage that make it harder to attract and retain top talent. A study estimates that recruitment costs to replace employees who leave a company due to GBV range from \$5,000 - \$211,000 per employee, depending on the type of industry and level of the employee.⁴ These costs are significant. However, if a company handles cases appropriately and with a survivor-centered approach, businesses can mitigate some of these costs and create an environment where employees feel safe and want to remain.

³ Willness, Steel, and Lee. (2007). A Meta-Analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Workplace Sexual Harassment. ([Link](#))

⁴ ICRW. (2018). The Costs of Sex-based Harassment to Businesses: An In-depth Look at the Workplace. ([Link](#))

HOW WOULD YOU ADVISE AN ORGANIZATION THAT HAS DECIDED TO IMPLEMENT A SURVIVOR-CENTERED APPROACH BUT IS UNSURE WHERE TO START?

There are two key factors that an organization should consider—how to prevent incidents from occurring and how to respond if they do. On the prevention side, an organization should have clear, transparent, and survivor-centered policies that are regularly communicated and accompanied by sexual harassment and GBV training facilitated by a trained professional. Organizations also can take other practical measures such as installing sex-segregated toilets or maintaining security equipment and adequate lighting in workplaces. Managers and other leaders should also be held accountable for ensuring that employees understand prohibited behaviors, policies, and procedures related to sexual harassment and GBV.

On the other side, we also need to acknowledge that incidents will still happen despite efforts to create a culture of prevention. When they do happen, it's critical to ensure that the immediate response prioritizes psychological and emotional support for the victim, and allows the victim to maintain control over if, when, and how to report. If a victim chooses to report, there should be multiple, confidential reporting channels and a fair and respectful investigation process that treats the survivor with dignity. The grievance process should end with clear disciplinary action for perpetrators. It's also important to recognize that we might not get everything right the first time. Implementing survivor-centered approaches might require an iterative process and will require honest, transparent conversations with those who implement the policy. It might take time to see what is working in an organization and what isn't working, but being willing to iterate, improve, and reinvent ultimately creates a better response mechanism for future victims.

WHAT IS A REALISTIC VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND OTHER FORMS OF GBV?

I don't think it's realistic to say that we will reach a point in the future where sexual harassment and other forms of GBV cease to exist. As long as there are power differentials in a company and society-at-large, and people who are willing to abuse their power, incidents will always occur. However, we can choose to create a future where victims are provided the support and healing that they need in a respectful and empowering way that allows them to become survivors. We can also create a future where perpetrators are held to account and that sexual harassment and GBV no longer go unpunished or unnoticed. These things are possible if organizations are willing to put in the difficult work to create a better future.

ABOUT ENGENDERING INDUSTRIES

USAID's Engendering Industries program increases economic opportunities for women in traditionally male-dominated sectors. Expanding women's workforce participation in male-dominated industries leads to tangible economic outcomes for women, such as formal employment opportunities and higher income. Increased gender equality in the workforce also improves business performance by increasing employee retention and satisfaction, reducing turnover, driving productivity, and enhancing an organization's resilience to crises and economic shocks. USAID's Engendering Industries program works with 98 organizations across 38 countries to improve gender equality in male-dominated sectors. In addition, Engendering Industries supports companies in designing and implementing survivor-centered approaches to preventing and responding to workplace sexual harassment and other forms of GBV. Learn more about Engendering Industries [here](#).