

Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) in the Hotels, Catering and Tourism (HCT) Sector



Why is addressing GBVH important to the HCT sector?

The HCT sector¹ is a large, rapidly growing sector with an average female participation rate of 56 per cent globally and up to 70 per cent at regional level. Women are employed temporarily, seasonally or informally, typically in shifts, in a wide variety of roles, from cleaners, kitchen staff, and frontline customer-service workers to senior management. Addressing GBVH is important to create a safe, respectful environment for workers and service users in a range of places, including hotels, bars, restaurants, catering services, and tourist and leisure facilities.

GBVH against workers

Women working in the HCT sector experience some of the highest levels of sexual harassment of any sector, with the perpetrators most commonly being customers, supervisors or colleagues. Women working in low-paying frontline services, such as housekeeping, waiting and bartending, are most likely to experience sexual harassment at work.



ONE IN THREE WOMEN HOTEL WORKERS SURVEYED IN MACAO, CHINA HAVE EXPERIENCED WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT. ONLY ONE IN SIX REPORTED THE INCIDENT.

Source: [Lourenço \(2019\)](#) survey of 296 women hotel workers.

Power asymmetries exacerbate the risk of GBVH: higher risk groups include students, junior employees and migrant workers. For example, students doing internships or work placements in the sector are at high risk of GBVH from male supervisors and co-workers due to power imbalances and a lack of knowledge of their rights.



ONE IN THREE OF ALL 12–18 YEAR OLDS LIVING IN THE COASTAL AREAS OF KENYA ARE SEXUALLY EXPLOITED IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY.

This corresponds to an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 girls on a seasonal/intermittent basis. A further 2,000 to 3,000 girls and boys are sexually assaulted on a full-time basis.

Source: [UNICEF and Government of Kenya \(2006\)](#) research comprising 230 key informant interviews, 23 focus-group discussions and 112 sex-worker diaries.



FOUR IN FIVE FEMALE HOSPITALITY STUDENTS IN ZIMBABWE SAID THEY HAD BEEN VICTIMS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT DURING THEIR INTERNSHIP IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY.

Source: [Mkono \(2010\)](#) survey of 77 hospitality students in Zimbabwe.

Migrant workers are at greater risk of experiencing GBVH in the HCT sector due to discrimination, job insecurity and the lack of a support network. For example, on the island of Phuket in Thailand, many hotel housekeepers are women migrant workers from Myanmar. Their employment situation is precarious, as few have written contracts or work permits, which also increases the risk of forced labour. In countries where work permits are linked to a specific employer or sponsor, such as in Thailand, migrant workers are more prone to exploitation and less likely to report GBVH and other abuses.

Non-sexual verbal and physical abuse are also common in the sector. Abusive supervision is often used to increase productivity in high-pressure environments where speed and quality of service are important, such as in bars and restaurants.

Children and the HCT industry

The HCT sector is a high-risk environment for child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as the forced prostitution of women and children. In West Bengal, India, research found that children were frequently sexually exploited or abused by adult guests in hotel rooms, but none of the 65 hotels surveyed had any policy or preventative measures in place.

¹ The HCT sector, as defined by the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#), includes accommodation (hotels, boarding houses, motels, tourist camps and holiday centres); food and entertainment (restaurants, bars, cafeterias, snack bars, pubs, nightclubs and other similar establishments); institutions that provide meals and refreshments in hospitals, factory and office canteens, schools, aircraft and ships); travel management and activities (travel agencies and tourist guides, tourism information offices and conference and exhibition centres); and tourist attractions (national parks, museums and their facilities).



Hotels are uniquely placed to help prevent and respond to child sexual exploitation. They can train staff to identify signs and put in place procedures. Industry standards have also been developed, such as the [Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism](#).

GBVH by and against customers

Women and girls encounter multiple and interconnected manifestations of GBVH as customers or service users. They can experience violence and harassment from other users or from hospitality workers. In-flight sexual harassment and assault is increasingly widespread for both passengers and aircrew. One in five flight attendants has received a report of [passenger-on-passenger sexual assault](#), while two in three have personally experienced sexual harassment in their flying career, mostly from passengers, but also from pilots and other air crew.

Women comprise a large and growing proportion of the hotel industry's client base as more women travel for business and leisure. This has implications for safety. Technology is increasingly used to perpetrate sexual abuse and voyeurism in hotels. For example, an estimated 1,600 people were secretly filmed by hidden cameras in [motel rooms in South Korea](#), with the footage live-streamed for people to watch.

What are the benefits of addressing GBVH?

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

- Improves workers' health and safety, as well as their morale and stress levels, enabling them to perform better at work. In [China](#), a study found that women hotel workers who were sexually harassed reported being demotivated at work and less likely to provide good customer service.
- Increases the ability of companies to recruit and retain female workers in a sector that has a [turnover rate of 70–80 per cent](#) annually (compared with an average of 10–15 per cent in all industries). For example, the [Hilton hotel group](#) regularly wins awards for 'diversity', 'best company to work for' and 'best workplace for women', partly due to its commitment to creating a respectful workplace culture and 'harassment-free workplace'.
- Avoids reputational damage, financial risks and legal liabilities if there are allegations of GBVH. For example, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (IUF) regularly campaigns to end sexual exploitation against hotel housekeepers, with a global week of action every year. The campaign recently

focused attention on the Marriott global hotel chain and, in 2019, [Marriott workers across Africa](#) demanded that the company take action to combat sexual harassment.

What are the risk factors?

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

- Lone workers, such as front-of-house hotel, bar and nightclub staff or cleaners, who can face abusive or violent situations on their own.
- Shift workers travelling to or from work during the night, particularly when alone and where transport services may be limited.
- Migrant, temporary and agency workers, who have more precarious employment conditions and may be less likely to report GBVH for fear of losing their jobs.
- Workers with pay structures that rely on customers for income may be less likely to report harassment; this is more common in the Americas, Africa and the Middle East. Research in the [United States](#) found that women restaurant workers experience twice as much sexual harassment in states that rely on the gratuity system to meet minimum wage than in states that require minimum wage before tips.
- A workplace culture where workers are expected to be friendly to service users, which can be misinterpreted by customers as an invitation to make sexual advances.
- Customer–worker power imbalances, where there is a culture of '[the customer is always right](#)', which can be exploited by customers to harass or abuse hospitality workers.
- Environments where alcohol is served are more likely to have intoxicated customers who can be abusive to staff or other customers.
- Female employees cleaning or servicing hotel rooms are at higher risk of sexual harassment, due to the isolated nature of the work and the intimate, personal space of a hotel bedroom.
- Intimate working environments, where workers are in close contact with customers, such as hotel spas, or where there may be stereotypes about the sexual availability of workers, such as flight attendants.
- Roles where women are objectified through company advertising, marketing or uniforms, such as female flight attendants or housekeepers.
- Some service users who are away from home can feel freed of the usual constraints on their sense of sexual entitlement, making them more likely to perpetrate GBVH.



- The presence of security personnel, who can provide protection but can also abuse their positions of power and status to perpetrate GBVH.
- Third-party recruitment agencies who engage in GBVH or enabling behaviour.

GBVH risks also vary according to national or local factors, such as how women are treated in society, and legal and regulatory frameworks, as well as a lack of prevention and response measures (see accompanying note on [Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector](#) for further guidance on assessing 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, either as a separate policy or integrated into wider company policies. • Draw on expertise, including from GBVH, child protection and legal experts, to help identify risks and support responses. For example, several hotel chains map locations where there are risks of child and sex tourism or human rights abuses. • Proactively support career development and management opportunities for women workers in the HCT sector. • Support or collaborate with public-sector agencies (such as tourism and trade ministries) and local initiatives or organisations that promote gender equality and address GBVH. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pakistan: The International Finance Corporation (IFC) has supported Serena Hotels in improving gender equality and addressing GBVH. Serena Hotels became the first Pakistani company to receive certification from Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE), recognising that the hotel chain was committed to improving gender equality. The 12-month certification process involved a peer-to-peer learning programme for senior management on topics such as anti-sexual harassment policies, female employee retention and women in leadership. More than 335 executives took part. As a result, the hotel chain was recognised as a top performer in the 2018 ‘Employer of Choice for Gender Balance’ awards. • Uganda: The Uganda Hotel Owners’ Association is now led by its first female CEO and 5 out of 15 board members are women. As part of a programme aimed at strengthening the hotel industry’s response to HIV and AIDS in Uganda, the association developed policies to protect hotel workers from sexual harassment. It also provides training for more than 1,000 hotel managers and supervisors, covering issues of violence, sexual harassment, and occupational health and safety. |
|  <p>Policies and procedures</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish written codes of conduct, policies and protocols to address GBVH for all HCT workers and third parties and provide training once they are in place. • Widely communicate codes of conduct to all workers, customers and suppliers. • Develop clear policies on alcohol and drugs and how to deal with intoxicated customers in areas such as hotels, bars and restaurants. • Develop and communicate a company policy on prostitution, particularly where there are heightened risks of sexual exploitation (for example, in hotels). • Establish policies and procedures to prevent the sexual exploitation of children. Clearly state that sex with children under the age of 18 is not tolerated. • Develop and communicate a company-wide anti-trafficking policy. • Establish a whistleblowing policy. • Put in place performance indicators and monitoring systems to regularly report on the effectiveness of policies relating to GBVH. Report annually on the implementation of activities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global: In 2019, French hotel chain AccorInvest signed an agreement with the IUF to introduce measures to address sexual harassment. The agreement sets out a zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment in more than 900 hotels in 31 countries. It commits to ensuring that all customers are informed of the zero-tolerance policy and that measures are taken that go beyond those provided by law, including expulsion following a complaint of sexual harassment by a worker or customer. AccorInvest also provides training and awareness-raising on the policy. The agreement recognises the key role of unions in implementing and evaluating the policy on a regular basis. |



Examples of entry points

Case studies



Grievance mechanisms and investigation procedures

- Establish safe and confidential systems for workers and customers to report concerns without the fear of retaliation, with the option to report anonymously if preferred.
- Ensure reporting mechanisms take into account access barriers, for example, by providing multilingual reporting options for international guests, customers or migrant workers.
- Provide referral and support systems for workers who experience GBVH.
- Report suspicious activity related to child sexual exploitation or human trafficking to local police.
- Maintain an incident logbook and keep records of customers who have been refused entrance or asked to leave.
- 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](#).

- **Pakistan:** The World Bank has committed \$70 million to the [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Integrated Tourism Development Project \(KITE\)](#), which includes a range of gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms and a protocol for handling GBVH complaints. It will link with existing local complaints mechanisms for sexual harassment and abuse, including helplines and reporting apps. Tourists and local community members will be able to lodge complaints at tourist information centres and the project appraisal document recommends the digital monitoring of visitor feedback or complaints through a tourism management information system. In addition, local communities and individuals can submit complaints to a project-level grievance redress mechanism or the World Bank's Grievance Redress Service.



Recruitment and performance assessment

- Review and revise all human resources policies, materials and training so they address GBVH.
- Ensure recruitment agencies have written policies and procedures on preventing GBVH, forced labour and a commitment to fair recruitment.
- Clearly prohibit worker-paid recruitment fees and related costs in agreements with all service providers and recruiters.
- Ensure all hospitality students doing internships or work placements understand their rights and know how to report GBVH.
- Ensure all workers have contracts that provide a level of job security that does not dissuade survivors from reporting incidents.
- Ensure all workers have background checks, including references from most recent employers.
- Provide mentoring schemes for women workers in male-dominated roles.
- Ensure all workers have a fair wage, independent of tips, to reduce sexual harassment.
- Use robust recruitment processes to select, train, manage and monitor security companies and personnel.

- **India:** Tour operator [Peak DMC](#) has proactively tried to recruit more women as tour leaders in the male-dominated adventure tourism sector. Due to safety concerns about women travelling alone in India, the company has developed a range of measures to create a safe working environment and prevent harassment. It introduced a mentoring system to support women when they first start working for the company, as well as more family-friendly policies, such as shorter trips. The company also developed a written zero-tolerance policy on sexual misconduct and harassment. The number of women tour leaders has increased from 2 in 2016 to 16 in 2020.
- **Qatar:** Several hotel chains have put in place [due-diligence processes for safe recruitment](#) in the run-up to the 2020 World Cup. For example, all recruitment agencies working with Radisson Blu Doha are required to state in job adverts that applicants should not be charged recruitment or placement fees. The hotel also conducts interviews with all workers after six months to identify any issues they have had during the recruitment process.
- **Sweden:** The [Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union \(HRF\)](#) has campaigned strongly for secure job contracts after it identified a link between sexual harassment and short-term temporary contracts in the sector. Ongoing dialogue with the Swedish Association of Hospitality Employers has led to the agreement of policies on sexual harassment and training.



Training and awareness raising

Examples of entry points

- Provide all new workers with mandatory training on relevant GBVH policies, codes of conduct, disciplinary processes and grievance mechanisms.
- Train hotel staff to recognise warning signs of sexual exploitation or trafficking, including of children (for example, guests checking in with an unrelated child or a child who appears to be unfamiliar with the adult), minimal luggage, paying for the room in cash, guests who insist on little or no housekeeping, multiple men visiting a hotel room, or guests who seem fearful or cannot speak freely).
- Provide targeted training to managers and supervisors on how to respond to reports of GBVH, as well as any suspected cases of sexual exploitation or trafficking, including of children.
- Ensure that service users know that the harassment and abuse of staff is not tolerated and that consequences may include, for example, having them removed from the premises.
- Distribute and share awareness-raising materials about GBVH and child sexual exploitation in staff areas, hotel rooms, public toilets and on websites.
- Avoid sexualising women workers in advertising and marketing materials. For example, the International Transport Workers' Federation have criticised some [airlines](#) for using images of flight attendants in lingerie in their company advertising.

Case studies

- **Cambodia:** The alcoholic beverage company, Diageo, worked with [CARE International](#) on a project to raise awareness about the risks of sexual harassment for women beer sellers and workers in the tourism industry. CARE helped set up the Solidarity Association of Beer Promoters (SABC), run by women working in the beer-promotion industry. SABC provide peer-to-peer training and education on GBVH to women who promote beer, serve in restaurants and act as hostesses in karaoke bars. The project also raises awareness among customers in beer gardens about female workers' rights and trains employers on Cambodian labour law, sexual harassment policies, gender and women's rights. Following the training, a [study](#) found that over 90 per cent of beer promoters were willing to report sexual harassment and 95 per cent knew how to report an incident to the free hotline. Beer promoters also reported significant decreases in the amount of sexual harassment experienced.
- **Brazil:** Hotel chain [Atlantica Hotels](#) partnered with charity Childhood Brazil to prevent the sexual exploitation of children in Brazil's hotel sector. Training has been given to more than 5,000 hotel workers and awareness-raising messages delivered to more than 25 million guests. More than 8,000 suppliers signed a code of conduct and the hotel chain supported the building of seven shelters for survivors of child sexual exploitation. A key success factor was the recruitment of 'mentors' and 'champions' in each hotel to keep staff engaged, given the challenge of high staff turnover in the sector.
- **Egypt:** In partnership with the Sawiris Foundation, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is supporting [skills development in the tourism and hospitality sector in Egypt](#). One of the main challenges the sector faces is achieving gender equity in the hotel industry, as reflected in the ratio of male to female students. As part of a new project, the EBRD and the Sawiris Foundation will jointly develop and launch a public awareness-raising documentary and gender campaign with a view to enhancing female enrolment and changing negative perceptions of women's employment in the sector. The campaign will be complemented by an inclusive outreach plan, a supervisor training programme and new female-only student accommodation halls.



| | Examples of entry points | Case studies |
|---|---|--|
|  <p>Work with contractors and suppliers</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish due diligence processes that identify and mitigate risks of GBVH, including with service providers and recruitment agencies. • Put in place a code of conduct on expected behaviour related to GBVH that includes hotel or restaurant franchises, security services, recruitment agencies, service providers and the delivery of goods. • Include suppliers and contractors in training sessions and awareness-raising activities. • Continuously engage with contractors and suppliers to monitor and respond to risks, with regular audits and on-site visits. • Work collaboratively with global hotel or restaurant brands, tour operators, companies, suppliers and workers to tackle systemic issues in the HCT sector, and promote standards such as the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism and the Principles on Forced Labour by the International Tourism Partnership. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global: The Radisson Hotel Group has introduced a supplier code of conduct outlining minimum standards for suppliers, also in relation to harassment and violence. All suppliers are expected to follow the code of conduct and request the same from their supply chain, including third-party labour agencies. It explicitly prohibits threats of violence, physical punishment, confinement or other forms of physical, sexual, psychological or verbal harassment or abuse for all workers, including temporary, migrant, student and contract workers, direct employees or any other type of worker. It also includes clear expectations that suppliers do not engage in discrimination or any form of modern slavery, human trafficking, exploitation of children or forced or compulsory labour. Details of how to report any concerns or incidents are provided at the end of the code. Due to these and other measures, Radisson has been recognised as one of the world's most ethical companies by the Ethisphere Institute, an independent research body that promotes best practice in corporate ethics. |
|  <p>Physical design</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct gender-sensitive safety audits to identify areas, times of day or ways of working when workers feel unsafe (for example, isolated spaces). • Provide emergency buttons for lone workers. • Provide safe transportation options for night-shift workers. • Provide adequate and well-maintained locks and door latches on hotel rooms, staff and customer toilets and changing facilities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United States: The cities of New York, Chicago, Seattle and Santa Monica have passed laws requiring hotels to provide emergency panic buttons to workers who provide in-room services. The buttons are GPS-enabled devices that alert security guards of a worker's location if he or she feels unsafe in a room. Some cities also require hotels to establish sexual harassment policies, conduct mandatory training and provide workers with a list of local services focused on preventing sexual harassment and assault. IDB Invest is exploring the installation of emergency buttons on hotel floors for housekeepers as a way to managing GBVH risks in its HCT investments. |



Resources for addressing GBVH in HCT

[Women and Tourism: Designing for Inclusion](#), World Bank, 2017. Report on how to integrate a gender lens into tourism development projects.

[Tourism's Dirty Secret: The Exploitation of Hotel Housekeepers](#), Oxfam Canada, 2017. Research report on the working lives of hotel housekeepers in Toronto (Canada), Punta Cana (Dominican Republic) and Phuket (Thailand), including sexual harassment and exploitation.

[Child Welfare and the Travel Industry: Global Good Practice Guidelines](#), G-Adventures, ChildSafe Movement and Planeterra Foundation, 2018. Guidelines providing travel companies with advice on how to prevent all forms of exploitation and abuse of children.

[Know How Guide: Human Rights and the Hotel Industry](#), International Tourism Partnership, 2014. Guide for hotel companies on how to implement the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

[Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism](#), a multi-stakeholder initiative initiated by ECPAT International, 1998. The Code commits tour operators and their umbrella organisations, such as travel agents, hotels and airlines, to implementing measures to protect children from sexual exploitation.

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

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