



SVRI

# Knowledge Exchange



**Engaging the Private  
Sector to Prevent  
and Address Violence  
Against Women**



BSR | HERrespect





# Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) remains a globally pervasive human rights violation. According to Care International, one-third of women worldwide will experience physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of men at some point in their lives.<sup>i</sup> Much of this happens in the workplace, including the factory environments of global supply chains. In India and Bangladesh, for example, research shows that some 60% of garment workers have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.<sup>ii</sup>

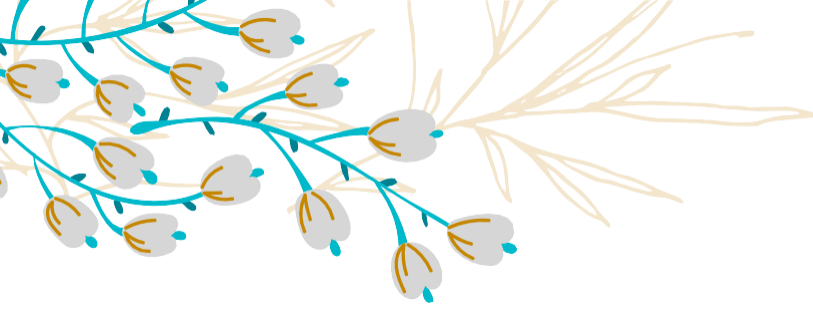
To most effectively respond to VAW – and successfully prevent it – both multi-sectoral and broad societal involvement are required. The initiatives of governments and civil society organisations alone are not sufficient for the effective roll-out of the vast number of programmes required to affect the widespread change in social norms and behaviour that is required. Nor are they sufficient to cater for survivors in need of services. Active engagement with the private sector is required.

The UN's 17 Social Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) represent a plan of action to promote partnerships with the private sector in order to achieve what the UN calls the 2030 Agenda. The International Labour Organization's Violence and Harassment Convention of 2019 ([or ILO's C190](#)) additionally draws attention to how workplace violence, which includes sexual harassment and abuse, is a human rights violation. Global movements such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, #Cuéntalo, #NiUnaMás, and #NiUnaMenos, have further opened the door for millions of women to share their stories, not only of sexual abuse, harassment and rape, but also of everyday sexism, including sexism in the workplace. These conventions and movements are helping to leverage impetus for a wider discussion of the role of the private sector in not only responding to violence against women, but ending it.

Private sector engagement in the VAW terrain is not new, but it is also by no means exhaustive. This Knowledge Exchange is based on a SVRI/BSR joint [webinar](#)<sup>iii</sup> discussing the role of the private sector in VAW prevention and response. It uses NGO and workplace case studies, as well as examples of best practice, to address a few of the key issues that should be considered when engaging the private sector in order to address and prevent VAW. It includes tips and recommendations for effective private sector partnership with due consideration for the ongoing prevalence of violence and harassment of women in the workplace. It also considers the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath which present new challenges and opportunities for organisations and private sector companies interested in brokering partnerships in the field.

## Pick the Right Partner: Lessons from an International Non-Governmental Organisation Working with the Private Sector

[Promundo](#) is a leading International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) that focuses on engaging men and boys for gender equality. It has established the [Workplace Advisors](#) programme from which many useful lessons for working with the private sector can be gleaned. Through this programme, Promundo works with the private sector to advance gender equality in the workplace through climate assessments, policy updates, advisory services, and trainings. The organisation partners with business leaders to engage men in workplace gender equality initiatives in order to create and sustain workplace environments that are gender equitable, respectful, and safe.



Working with brands Promundo also develops responsible and impactful social impact programmes, and promotes global policies that advance gender equality. Its work includes delivering consumer insights with specific relevance to gender equality and masculinities, for example, and aims to develop awareness of these issues and initiate behaviour change campaigns that can potentially mobilise audiences in major markets.

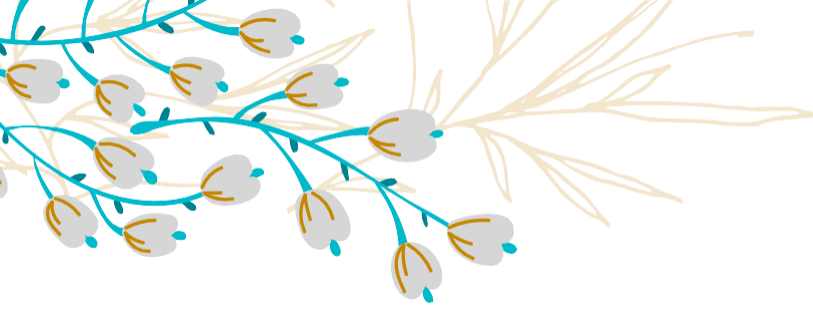
The [programme](#) recommends the following guidelines when exploring partnerships with the private sector:

- **Protect Your Brand.** Would affiliation with the prospective partner run counter to your mission? Would such affiliation harm your credibility in the key areas in which your organisation operates? Always be guided by your organisation's mission and values. If a partnership seems problematic at the outset, it will likely prove more damaging than advantageous over time.
- **Stick to the Plan.** Does that potential partner's target market align with your strategic plan? Consider where and how you show up. You want to be certain that you will be working with a partner that is genuinely interested in engaging with and supporting the same communities (i.e. region, demographics, institutions, etc.) as your organisation.
- **Be Transparent.** Will the proposed activities and opportunities add value to your work or position you to better advance your mission? As you explore the scope of a potential partnership, be transparent about how you hope to collaborate, what you can bring to the table, and how this partner can add value to your work. Make sure you are aligned on implementation as much as you are aligned in terms of your end goal.
- **Define Success.** Lead with your objectives. Do your proposed partner's business objectives and brand purpose align with your programme objectives? Make sure you have clarity on what this partner hopes to gain from the partnership. Ensure that their objectives align with your vision for success and make sure you have a plan to measure success against these stated objectives.
- **Money isn't everything.** Are there sufficient resources available – and earmarked for the partnership – to do the work well? This includes both in-kind and fiscal resources. Do not limit potential support to monetary contributions. Often, the greatest value to be gained from working with the private sector is in the form of in-kind resources; these might include advocacy campaign amplification, material development, pro bono services, etc. Think about where and how your partner is uniquely positioned to support your organisation, and make it clear that you value those contributions as well.

By taking the time to prioritise alignment with your mission and specific programme goals, you will set both your organisation and your partner up for success and chart a smoother course for the duration of the engagement.

## A Women's Rights Case and a Business Case: Lessons for Working with the Private Sector from BSR's HERrespect Programme

Violence and harassment are widespread problems in global supply chains and there is considerable evidence that such violations have direct consequences for a business's bottom line. For example, in Cambodia, where one-third of female garment workers had been sexually harassed in the 12 months prior to the study<sup>iv</sup>, the cost to the industry's turnover due to VAW-related absenteeism and presenteeism amounts to US\$89 million per year – the equivalent of 0.52% of Cambodia's GDP.<sup>v</sup>



Such statistics certainly strengthen the case for businesses to be actively engaged in empowering women and addressing and preventing violence and harassment against women. Not only in the workplace, but also in the social sphere. But while it makes bottom-line sense for businesses to help eradicate VAW, there are also good reasons for women's organisations to partner with the private sector.

### Why partner with the private sector?

- Companies can bring assets and incentives to women's empowerment programmes – these include not only financial resources but also skills and other incentives in their supply chain.
- Partnerships with companies enable programmes to be scaled up so that they reach a wider audience; this can include opportunities to reach women who might not be reached through community-based programmes.
- Workplace based GBV programmes have a potential spillover effect within the community.

### What are some of the challenges?

- Some companies still perceive GBV as a private matter because they don't understand how it also impacts business performance.
- Companies may be hesitant to broach this issue due to fears that raising awareness of it may cause a rise in the number of complaints which might in turn negatively impact their own reputation.
- Companies often do not have the necessary skills or experience to take on sensitive issues like GBV. This can result in inadequate availability of resources for women and can place women at further risk of GBV. This, of course, is precisely why partnership is crucial.

### BSR's HERrespect Programme

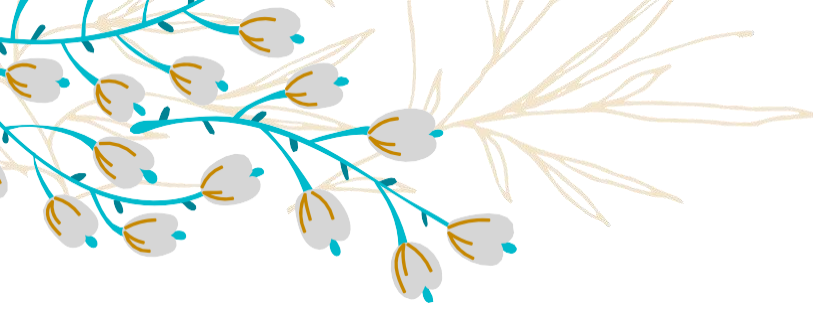
BSR's [HERproject](#) is a collaborative initiative that strives to empower low-income women working in global supply chains. By bringing together international companies, their suppliers, and local NGOs, [HERproject](#) uses workplace-based interventions around health, financial inclusion, and gender equality in order to meaningfully benefit women and business. HERproject has three flagship programmes, namely:

- HERhealth, aimed at increasing the ability of low-income women to take charge of their health;
- HERfinance, aimed at expanding financial inclusion of low-income workers; and
- HERrespect, aimed at promoting gender equality and tackling violence against women.

[HERrespect](#) seeks to encourage gender-equitable attitudes and relationships between women and men. These shifts in attitude can ultimately help prevent violence and harassment in the workplace and in intimate relationships. The programme is delivered by building the capacity of workers and managers in four key ways, namely:

- By using training to change attitudes towards gender norms;
- By building skills to prevent and address violence;
- By developing assertive communication skills by conducting joint sessions between workers (women and men) and management; and
- By improving policies and practices at the workplace. Such improvements include reviewing policies and processes to address and prevent workplace violence; informing workers of policies and processes applicable in the factory; informing workers of local laws; and creating links to community services and local initiatives.

The programme has partnerships with NGOs/gender experts in each country of operation in order to ensure that implementation is adapted to accommodate local contexts and gender dynamics.



### Key HERrespect outcomes

- Reduced acceptance of violence against women;
- Reduced acceptance of gender-unequal statements;
- Increased awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment;
- Increased awareness of internal support mechanisms for affected women (e.g. policies and processes);
- Increased male engagement, which contributes to greater and more sustainable shifts in gender equity; and
- Increased sense of empowerment because participants feel they can play a role in preventing violence.

**Key Take Away: HERrespect supports shifts in attitudes, which are often the most engrained.**

### Tips for engaging with the private sector

- Understand the industry and the environment where the company operates.
- Showcase relevant experiences and share the quantitative and qualitative impacts of your interventions.
- Build trust by providing references that can vouch for your work and integrity.
- Prepare a business and social case of a GBV intervention. Companies might be sceptical of the relevance of a GBV-prevention programme for their business. Clearly communicating both the business and social benefits of the programme can help ensure buy-in.
- Link to business commitments and broader company strategy and objectives, especially when those relate to women's empowerment or worker safety and wellbeing.
- Offer your expertise. NGOs can provide legal and gender expertise on prevention of sexual harassment and play an advisory role in companies. For example, in India it is mandatory to have an external representative (mostly from an NGO or a legal expert) in the Internal Committee.
- Speak their language. Always look and act professional. Adapt your vocabulary: avoid jargon and don't assume they understand all concepts.
- Respect their time. Companies operate under very thin margins, and each minute counts. Always be on time and give notice if any changes arise.
- Be flexible. Be ready to change plans and to adapt to their constraints. Identify the essential pieces of your programme, and the "nice to haves". This will result in more efficient negotiations. If it's not possible for a private sector company to fund a programme in its entirety, explore cost-share agreements or consortiums.





## The HERrespect Programme in Action: Insights from The Children's Place

The Children's Place is an international clothing company that considers gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) to be a human rights violation. It believes that GBVH can negatively impact its commitment to gender equity and undermine its sustainable business ethos. The company is aware that GBVH can lead to reputational and prosecution risks. The expectation is that individually and collectively the company should address and prevent GBVH in the workplace. The company works with industry partners and vendors that promote workplace programmes to improve the lives of workers in the apparel industry. This has provided the company with an opportunity to address several root causes of GBVH.

The Children's Place implemented the HERproject (a blend of HERhealth and HERrespect) in two factories in Kenya and one factory in Ethiopia. The company later expanded the programme in Ethiopia to five factories and is expected to reach an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 workers.

### Impact of the HERrespect programme at The Children's Place

- Shift in attitudes of management and workers towards gender-based violence and harassment.
- Improved worker to management relationships, resulting in some participants being promoted to supervisory roles.
- Decreased acceptance of GBVH overall; both managers and workers no longer accept the use of violence and harassment as normal. What was once considered normal in the workplace is not normal anymore.
- Improvement in workplace policies and grievance redress mechanisms to ensure safe workplaces.
- Improved self-confidence among workers who are now willing and able to express themselves to their superiors and engage in mature dialogue with managers. Some participants cited that this also assisted them with efforts to engage their partners at home. There has been progress, but there is still work to be done.

### Partnerships between NGOs and the private sector: Reflections and learnings from The Children's Place

- Partnerships are critical in the efforts to eliminate GBVH from the workplace.
- Businesses can play a meaningful role in promoting gender equality and diversity in the workplace. This can be achieved by providing supportive workplace policies and procedures, and by working collaboratively with other parties beyond the immediate workplace.
- NGO partners, with their rich grassroots experience, help businesses bring about transformative social change much quicker than they can achieve on their own.
- NGOs are critical for delivering trainings and facilitating mature industrial relations. They understand local settings and can therefore develop trainings that are tailor-made for specific environments.
- Business might be sceptical about the intentions of the NGOs, so they need to win over the confidence of businesses and show that they share common ground and have the same concerns. NGOs should demonstrate that they are there to help in a constructive way.
- "Project fatigue" can set in when there is an overload of initiatives being offered to private sector companies. To reduce such fatigue, it's advisable to collaborate with other organisations and initiatives.



## Engaging the Private Sector to End Violence Against Women is a Donor's Business: The DFID Experience

The UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) is committed to the implementation of the SDGs. Worth highlighting here are SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and SDG 8, which promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Implementing these SDGs requires that the pervasiveness of GBV is addressed in both the domestic sphere and the workplace. The DFID is considering the effect of VAW across its programmes and is working to include due consideration of GBV in all of these. The DFID's Private Sector Department (PSD) encourages its partners to adhere to the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and it also monitors them to ensure such adherence. The DFID's five-year, multi-million pound [What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Programme](#) has shown us that violence is preventable. In countries like Pakistan and the DRC, for example, interventions with the faith sector and in schools have shown how VAWG can be reduced by changing social norms in schools, homes and communities. Effective interventions implemented and evaluated through the What Works programme need to be scaled up in different settings and the private sector must be included in these efforts.

As has already been discussed, the [economic costs](#) of VAW are enormous. ILO's C190 convention to address violence and harassment in the working world was adopted in June 2019. The convention is groundbreaking and underlines the importance of a private sector response to VAWG/GBV and will indeed require a comprehensive response from private companies should the convention be ratified. The UK is strongly considering ratification.

It is also important to acknowledge the profound impact of COVID-19 on global supply chains, particularly in the garment industry and agricultural sector. In response, the DFID has funded the Business Fight Poverty [toolkit](#) aimed at accelerating global learning and local action to support the most vulnerable in company supply chains, communities, and beyond.

## Adaptation and Flexibility When We Need It Most: The Impact of COVID-19 on UN Trust Fund Programmes to Address Violence Against Women

A key funding partner in the VAW field, the [UN Trust Fund To End Violence Against Women](#) (UN Trust Fund), conducted a [rapid assessment](#) among its 144 grantees in sixty nine countries and territories. The study set out to determine, firstly, the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls (VAWG); secondly, what civil society operations and programmes exist and how various civil society organisations (CSOs) are responding in the face of the pandemic; and, thirdly, what these CSOs require in order to offer such response. With a current portfolio of 37% grantees in Africa, 23% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 17% in Asia and the Pacific, the data gathered by the UN Trust Fund demonstrates the impact of the pandemic on VAW programmes and reveals the daily challenges faced by many different types of women's rights organisations in low- and middle-income countries.

Reports from these organisations reveal an alarming increase in VAWG during the pandemic. This includes child abuse and exploitation, sexual abuse, emotional and economic abuse, assault by law enforcement agencies, and femicide. Not only are VAWG risk factors being exacerbated for various reasons during the pandemic, but the crisis is also placing considerable strain on organisational capacity, with many organisations expressing concerns about their ability to maintain staff and frontline workers if the situation continues for longer.



The UN Trust Fund is adjusting its operations and responding swiftly to the evolving crisis. Immediate action taken includes enabling quick reallocation of existing funds to enable grantees to respond efficiently to the most pressing challenges, such as ensuring the safety of their staff, maintaining institutional sustainability, managing potential organisational risks, and making sure that women and girls receive essential support. Moreover, through the establishment of a specific Ending Violence against Women COVID-19 Response Funding Window, the UN Trust Fund is supporting existing grantees with core resources to respond to the challenges created by the pandemic, and it is prioritising small women's organisations. In addition, it intends initiating a global call for proposals for a new COVID-19 Crisis Response Window to fund projects designed to support long-term interventions specific to the context of the pandemic.

**Key Take Away:**  
**The response of the UN Trust Fund to the needs and challenges of its grantees has been exemplary. It is a grant-making practice from which many donors in both the public and private sector could learn.**

# Conclusion

VAW is preventable. However, in order to respond to VAW and prevent it, a multi-stakeholder approach is necessary – one that includes community-based organisations, researchers, the private sector, consumers, and donors. To be successful, partnerships between the private sector and civil society organisations must be based on mutual and beneficial understanding of each other's expectations and must be guided by human rights principles. Picking the right partner and then spending time unpacking the partnership, determining how it will work, and developing trust, are all key to the success and longevity of partnerships. The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on the lives of women means that right now there is a need for even stronger engagements with the private sector. Whether responding to the needs of workers in the workplace or partnering with organisations that conduct research or that implement programmes designed to address VAW in surrounding communities, the private sector can and should be playing a role.



Suggested Citation: Pino, A.1, Dartnall E.1, Shields, L.2, Flores Guevara, L.2, Duma, T.3, Lawrence, T.4, Majumdar, S.5, Rizvi, R.6 (2020). Knowledge Exchange: Engaging the Private Sector to Prevent and Address Violence Against Women. The Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI), Pretoria: South Africa.

Authors' affiliations:

1. Sexual Violence Research Initiative, Pretoria, South Africa.
2. BSR (Business for Social Responsibility), Paris, France.
3. The Children's Place, Durban, South Africa.
4. Promundo, Washington, USA.
5. UN Trust Fund To End Violence Against Women, New York, USA.
6. DFID, London, UK.

---

i [https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Counting\\_the\\_costofViolence.pdf](https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Counting_the_costofViolence.pdf)  
ii <https://api.fairwear.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FWF-ILO-submission-final.pdf>  
iii <https://www.svri.org/Engaging-the-private-sector-to-prevent-and-address-VAW>  
iv [https://www.care.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/SHCS\\_Research\\_Summary\\_March\\_2017.pdf](https://www.care.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/SHCS_Research_Summary_March_2017.pdf)  
v [https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Counting\\_the\\_costofViolence.pdf](https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Counting_the_costofViolence.pdf)