



Preventing Gender-Based Harassment and Discrimination in the Workplace

Uniterra is a Canadian volunteer cooperation and international development program that is jointly operated by WUSC (World University Service of Canada) and CECI (the Centre for International Studies and Cooperation). The program supports inclusive economic development to benefit women and youth in 14 countries across Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Uniterra works with key private, public, and civil society partners to facilitate growth and change in markets that have the greatest impact on the marginalized.

International Volunteering and Gender Within Market Systems

When a market system is inclusive, marginalized groups are able to access opportunities, skills, and resources. Gaining access is necessary if they are to take advantage of innovations and changes which thereby improve their living conditions and economic status. However, one of the biggest constraints for women entering the workforce and advancing into decision-making positions is the discrimination and gender-based harassment that they encounter every day.

Thus, Uniterra works with a wide variety of partner organizations, including producer groups, private businesses,

training centres, financial intermediaries, and women's and youth groups to raise awareness with both employers and employees. Capacity building and training is offered by skilled Canadian, Southern and National volunteers regarding the realities that women face in the workplace.

A safe, harassment-free workplace benefits not only women who will remain at work, but also the performance of an organisation, as women will be able to fully develop their potential and thereby contribute to the successful growth of organisations.

Introduction

The recent surge of gender-based sexual harassment denunciations, brought about by the #METoo movement, has contributed to raising awareness as to the ongoing structural violence and barriers faced by women globally. Widespread gender-based harassment and discrimination in the workplace is a common experience for women that makes their working environments unsafe, limits their opportunities for career advancement, and stifles their ability to influence equitable working conditions.

Globally, sexual harassment is the most frequently reported form of harassment in the workplace (International Labour Organization, 2019¹). This is compounded by a lack of female representation in management: only 27% of

managers and leaders worldwide are women, a figure that has seen little change over the last 30 years (International Labour Organization, 2019). Racialized women, or those who experience intersecting forms of oppression or exclusion (such as LGBTQ+, disabled women, or ethnic minorities) are even more at risk of experiencing harassment and discrimination at work. It is essential to consider the impact of power dynamics when discussing sexual harassment and discrimination. Strong policies and procedures are helpful, but ultimately, may not be sufficient. Literature on the subject highlights the need for cultural change of institutions and organizations in order to prevent gender-based harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

Main Issues & Constraints

The Unitererra Program works in **Malawi, Sri Lanka, Guatemala, Nepal** and **Ghana** to support a wide range of partners — including private sector employers, government offices, civil society organizations and women's organizations — to develop policies and strategies to eliminate gender-based harassment and discrimination from workplaces. The program has worked in agricultural sectors such as tea and coffee, in manufacturing sectors such as textiles, and within skills training and educational institutions. The focus has been on the following issues:

- **Non-existent or insufficient gender policies** — When a workplace does not have explicit guidelines for appropriate conduct between men and women, or a system for reporting harassment, both workers and managers may not understand what expectations are.



- **Changing gender norms** — It is fundamentally important to challenge patriarchal gender norms and cultural values that categorize women as an inferior status to men. In the workplace, these norms translate into few women occupying management and leadership roles and a significant number of women experiencing harassment.
- **Lack of understanding of the value that women bring to the workplace** — Involving more women in decision-making roles is a productive way to utilize untapped potential. By increasing diversity within leadership roles, organizations access unique ideas, skills, and perspectives on organizational strategy and problem-solving.

1. International Labour Organization. (2019). *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work For All*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/--publ/documents/publication/wcms_674831.pdf

Uniterra's Approach to the Problem

The Uniterra Program uses a market systems approach to volunteer cooperation by supporting partners across value chains that have the potential to provide employment, income or services for marginalized women, young women and young men. The program works not only to develop the capacity of key economic actors, including private businesses, but also to increase the inclusivity of the economic development sector, through the support of women's groups, government offices and civil society. In this context, the Program sought to influence the behavior of employers by understanding the root causes of exclusion, including social norms, and the incentives that could create safer and more equitable workplaces.

The Uniterra Program supported partners in Malawi, Sri Lanka, Guatemala, Nepal, and Ghana to develop and implement policies on Gender Equality, Harassment and Discrimination in the workplace; to promote women's economic empowerment through career advancement and HR policies aimed at changing the perceptions around traditional gender roles; and to introduce the concept of positive masculinities to help men better understand how they can play a positive role within the household and the workplace. This work was promoted through engaging volunteers for capacity building and knowledge transfer.

In Malawi, the tea sector employs over 50,000 workers, 40% of whom are women. Gender-based discrimination and harassment have been widely reported by women on plantations. Men dominate managerial roles, leaving little opportunity for women's career advancement. The Tea Association of Malawi (TAML) worked alongside other partners involved in the Malawi Tea 2020 initiative to develop a new Gender Equality, Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Policy, launched in 2017, to address the need to foster a safer and more equitable tea industry and workplace for women. The purpose of the policy is to eliminate discrimination and harassment and to boost women's access to leadership positions, by providing practical guidelines on how to address and prevent gender inequality, harassment and discrimination.

Uniterra volunteers worked with member tea companies, establishing committees to promote the Policy on their tea estates and to inform workers of guidelines for reporting incidences of harassment and discrimination. They worked with TAML to create a training program for committee members and tea estate supervisors to educate them on the new policy, and who then delivered these trainings to workers on their

estates to further spread awareness of the policy and workplace expectations.

“Gender-based violence occurs at work, but also at home. Some of us live in employee housing on the plantations. These trainings are empowering us to eliminate violence from our communities. We want to spread the knowledge to everyone in our communities.”

— Susan Ndalira, Early Childhood Educator & Gender, Harassment, and Discrimination Committee Chairperson

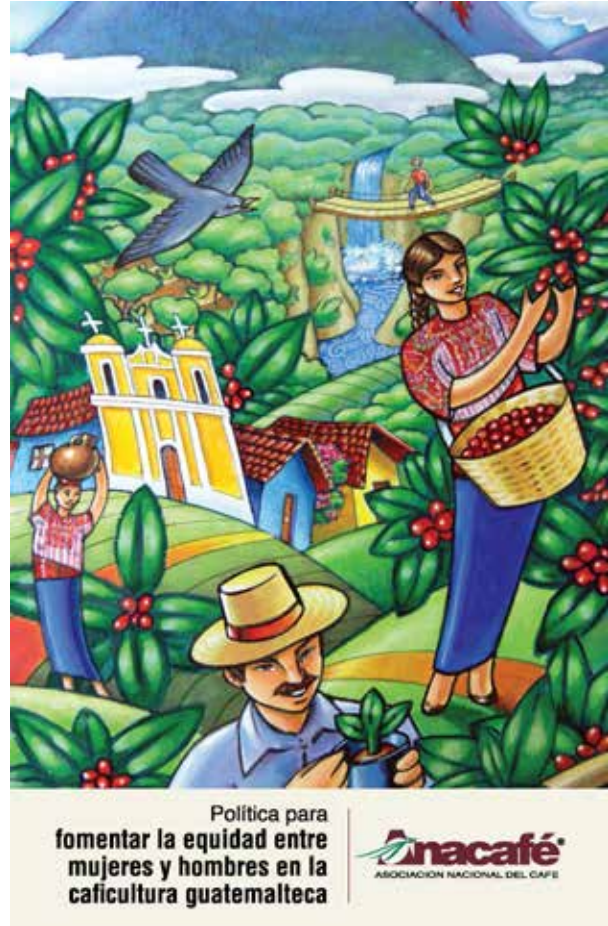
In Sri Lanka, women working in the textile industry face significant discrimination in the workplace. MAS Holdings, a large textile company headquartered in Sri Lanka that employs over 87,000 people in 15 countries, prides itself on providing a safe work environment for workers. However, although women make up 80% of employees at MAS Intimates, the largest division of MAS Holdings, 90% of women were employed as needlepoint workers with few opportunities for advancement. When the Uniterra Program began to partner with MAS in 2015, no women held positions on the corporate management committee. MAS recognized this challenge early in its relationship with Uniterra, in part because of their high staff turnover rates and their difficulty retaining young women who could not see a future for themselves beyond the shop floor.



MAS Intimates, supported by two Uniterra volunteers, developed a gender strategy to promote the understanding among management of the value of diversifying leadership roles to include women. Volunteers later supported research to understand perceptions and behaviour of MAS Intimates staff at all levels, and collaborated with MAS leadership and key change agents to identify ways to educate workers, support women, and change unwanted behavior. With the research findings, an electronic gender and diversity resource center was developed. The company commissioned a gender audit of MAS Intimates (39,458 staff) that was supported by Uniterra volunteers.

“I open up conversations about women’s empowerment. I can offer a framework, share ideas, bring new perspectives to a problem, and give examples from elsewhere. You cannot solve a problem with the same perspective that created it.” — Tamara Fleming, Labour Relations Consultant with the city of Edmonton and Uniterra Gender Volunteer placed with MAS Intimates.

In Guatemala, the coffee sector provides income to some 125,000 coffee producer households, and generates over half a million jobs a year. Since 2018, the National Coffee Association (ANACAFÉ) has been supported by the Uniterra Program in the creation of a Policy to promote equality between women and men in the coffee industry. The policy revolves around three axes : raising awareness, training and developing affirmative actions that promote the equality between women and men in the Guatemalan coffee culture; enhancing the technical and business capacities of women and men working in the coffee value chain; and building the economic, social and



environmental sustainability with a gender approach in the Guatemalan coffee culture. An implementation plan is currently in the making to ensure that the Policy is applied.

Summary of Findings and Innovations

Development of policies

In **Malawi**’s tea sector, volunteers supported the training of 383 people (women managers, supervisors and members of the future Women’s Welfare Committees and Gender, Harassment, and Discrimination Committees) on sexual harassment and women’s leadership. This improved the capacity of the Gender Committees to fully implement the Policy. In total, 291 Gender Committees were formed on private tea estates and 433 trainers were trained on the new Gender Policy. The training aimed specifically to equip women with the skills to identify and report various forms of sexual harassment and how to support other women dealing with harassment.

Tea workers have reported that they feel more confident about themselves and their ability to speak up about sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Through the Uniterra Program’s support, the TAML gender policy was translated into the local language of Chichewa to expand the policy’s reach and to increase its awareness and understanding among all workers and supervisors.

In **Sri Lanka**, significant improvements have been made to the inclusion of women in leadership positions at MAS Intimates through the effective implementation of the gender strategy. After three years into Uniterra's partnership with MAS Intimates, there has been a 16% increase in the number of women in junior management positions and 1 woman has joined the Management Committee. MAS has also employed their first female production engineer, a job traditionally held by a man. Senior management is also more conscious of their language and behavior towards female staff as a result of unconscious bias training conducted by Uniterra volunteers.

Senior leadership is committed to achieving 50% female representation in management positions by taking action to prepare women for promotion. MAS has established a mentorship program where young women are paired with a woman from a position above them to build their leadership skills and provide them with job knowledge.

An English program called Encore has also been launched to help achieve women's upward mobility by teaching them basic oral and written communication skills to communicate with foreign buyers.

In **Guatemala**'s coffee sector, the Gender Policy is a major achievement as it will be applied throughout the country by all value chain actors in the coffee industry. ANACAFE is the country's biggest and most powerful private institution representing Guatemala's coffee sector. One thousand printed copies of the Policy have been delivered to the Association for distribution. The Uniterra Program will provide continuous support to the *Asociación Nacional del Café* through the revision of data collecting tools that will guide a National Women and Youth in Coffee Policy in 2020. This Policy will have a national impact in the way women and youth are being treated, recognized, and valued in the coffee industry.

POSITIVE MASCULINITIES An Innovative Approach to Gender Equality

Shifting women's power in the workplace requires engaging with social norms in the community, households and in society at large. One of the Uniterra

Program's recent innovations has been encouraging conversations around positive masculinities. In **Malawi**, Uniterra partners and local stakeholders launched a

Positive Masculinity Platform in Lilongwe district, focusing on combating gender-based violence. The platform serves as a forum for men's engagement through positive empowerment training: men engaging men, men engaging boys, and boys engaging men. Activities are focused on men advocating for greater awareness and civic action to reduce the root causes of gender inequalities and thereby addressing its effects on women, girls and children. The activities are expected to be transformative in encouraging men and boys to abandon harmful practices, negative stereotypes and embrace progressive and supportive behaviors that promote the human rights of all people everywhere, especially of women and girls.



Key Lessons Learned

The Unitererra Program's main approach to the problem was to use a market systems approach to tackling sexual harassment and providing technical assistance through volunteers.

The Program explicitly targeted companies that already showed some commitment to tackling the problem of gender equality and reducing sexual harassment. Although it could be argued that the partner companies worked with in **Sri Lanka**, **Malawi** and **Guatemala** were among the more advanced and that other trailing companies were more in need of assistance, working with

industry leaders allowed for a demonstration effect for other companies. This is most evident with MAS Intimates, which has been able to leverage their successes through social media, corporate communications and other events and has thus provided thought leadership within the industry.

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Thinking about incentives: Working on institutional change in the business environment forced Unitererra Program staff and volunteers to clearly understand the incentives that drive change. In all cases, sexual harassment and gender inequality within the workplace were unacceptable in social terms but also created business risks. In Sri Lanka, MAS Intimates found itself with challenges recruiting and retaining some of the most talented young women in the country, as opportunities for advancement were few. In Malawi, international tea buyers wanted to see progress on gender equality and to work in partnership to transform a global industry in need of social innovation.

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Transforming policies is an early step: Developing policies is not new. Development programs have worked with government and civil society for decades to craft gender policies; policies that often sit unused and unread. Working with private sector associations to develop policies on sexual harassment, however, was but a first step, and an important means to gain buy-in within complex business and social environments. Gender strategies in large enterprises, such as MAS Intimates in Sri Lanka, or in a whole sector composed of large tea estates in Malawi and coffee plantations in Guatemala are extremely meaningful as these entities reach thousands of people at all levels of intervention, whether shop floor workers and factory overseers, or small producers and sellers, to high level management of conglomerates and national policy makers.

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Working in partnership: The Unitererra Program has a long standing principle to work in partnership. In each of the cases explored above, Unitererra worked to leverage resources and talents from multiple stakeholders. Unitererra worked to ensure that partners drove this process, while offering access to technical resources from Canada. For example, in both Malawi and Sri Lanka, early key interventions came from mobilizing highly skilled Canadian volunteers on a short term basis to provide advice to companies and support reviewing their existing strategies and practices.

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The contribution of volunteers: The Unitererra Program has found Canadian and national volunteers to meaningfully contribute to advancing gender equality in workplaces across various sectors through their sharing of knowledge about effective gender policy and resources to support women. Drawing upon the resources and knowledge of experienced volunteers, while leveraging the resources of the local and international private sectors, has shown itself to be a promising means to transform business practices to create safer and more equitable workplaces for women. Volunteer engagement and mobilizing partnerships around change has been the first step. Sustainability of the results will be achieved when organizations remain committed to the gender policies and value that women add to the workplace and continue to transform their businesses and their societies.