

Global standards on sexual violence will get more women into work

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It has been said that the glass ceiling is not glass, it is [a very thick layer of men](#). On a basic level, we all know that means women are drastically underrepresented in the workplace. According to [the OECD](#), 82.84% of men participated in the labour force in 2013, compared with 68.68% of women. In response to the problem, the G20 nations have signed up to the goal of reducing the gap by [25% by 2025](#).

It is commonly accepted that there are three key levers to ensuring women are equally represented in the workforce. These come under social change (changing norms and stereotypes about work), policy change (in relation to incentives and child care) and workplace change (closing wage gaps and increasing the number of women in leadership positions).

But a [fourth dimension](#) needs to be added. If women are to be truly represented in the world of work, sexual exploitation needs to be addressed too. Sexual exploitation, whether through domestic violence, commercial exploitation of women (through trafficking, for instance) or gender-based violence in society, are barriers to full and free female participation in the workplace.

The economic argument

The fundamental concept that women's rights are human rights needs to be effectively enforced. But a different argument is also possible – this is an economic problem as well as a social issue.

For all countries, be they stable democracies or emerging economic powerhouses, the economic argument is the most powerful. “It isn't fair” will only get you so far. “It costs too much” takes you further.

Sexual violence in general, and domestic violence in particular, is linked to female employment and education – though not always in a linear way. When women initially become educated and employed, their risks of domestic violence increase, but as they progress up the educational and employment ladder the risks decrease as their independence – practically and particularly economically – acts as a [preventative against sexual exploitation](#).

Poverty can force women into high-risk, poorly paid occupations [such as sex work](#). That puts them at more risk of sexual violence and makes it all the harder for them to get into other, better paid, employment.

Sexual exploitation needs to be tackled to enable women to work and improve the work they do. And as female employment levels increase, that in itself operates to reduce sexual exploitation.

Making it happen

Currently we have international norms in relation to aspects of sexual exploitation in the form of worthy declarations and communiqués, but they lack legal backing, [making them ineffective](#) for individual women.

International conventions can only work meaningfully if different countries agree on uniform legal definitions of sexual violence and their cross-border responsibilities for tackling it. Sexual exploitation, after all, does not respect state boundaries. In fact, its perpetrators profit from the territorial limits of national law by operating across borders.

Nor does the responsibility for stopping global exploitation end with governments. International corporations need to be engaged. Many now have economies that dwarf countries (Walmart's [annual revenue](#) overshadows [South Africa's GDP](#) by a considerable margin) and they need to take corporate responsibility seriously rather than leaving it to nation states to tackle sexual exploitation.

There are signs that they are starting to do this: for example, Walmart devotes a section of its [corporate responsibility policy](#) to women's economic empowerment, but there is no mention of tackling sexual exploitation.

It is, in the long run, in corporations' interests for the law to be uniform. They and their competitors are then on a level playing field so that turning a blind eye to sexual exploitation cannot be a choice to cut costs at any level. A clothing retailer sourcing its garments in Bangladesh may impose its rules against the use of bonded female labour in its own factories, or as domestic workers in its executives' homes, but its competitors might not, giving them the financial edge. The difficulties and costs of complying with numerous different regimes would be curtailed. More than this, empowering women to be more economically active also means a greater number of potential customers for them.

If the G20 wants to achieve its goal of getting more women into work, it should think beyond the obvious. Sexual exploitation and violence play a huge part in holding women back in their working lives and the global economy is the worse for it.