

# Preventing Abuse, Harassment & Discrimination

Harassment is not just a conduct issue — it is a business risk that directly affects productivity, workforce stability, buyer confidence, and legal compliance.



**READING TIME**

~10 minutes

**DOCUMENT**

Full text + self-assessment

**INCLUDES**

12 Categories · Prevention ·  
Response

## WHY RESPECTFUL WORKPLACES MATTER FOR YOUR BUSINESS

# 1 Harassment is a business risk — not just a conduct issue

Abuse, harassment and discrimination are not only workplace conduct issues — they are business risks that directly affect productivity, workforce stability, buyer confidence, and legal compliance.

In many sectors, production pressure, labour shortages, and tight margins can place significant strain on supervisors and workers alike. Where management systems are weak or oversight is limited, this pressure can translate into verbal abuse, intimidation, discriminatory practices, or sexual harassment. These behaviours may be informal, normalised, or dismissed as "management style," yet their impact on workers and operations can be significant.

At the same time, buyer expectations and regulatory frameworks are evolving. International standards increasingly recognise violence and harassment — including gender-based violence — as serious human rights risks within the world of work. Audit findings related to harassment, bullying or discrimination can lead to corrective action plans, damage to a company's reputation, or even contract termination.

Abusive or discriminatory treatment undermines dignity and trust. Workers who experience harassment are more likely to disengage, leave abruptly, or escalate complaints externally. Respectful management practices are not simply about compliance — they strengthen workforce stability and operational performance.

Identifying how abuse and harassment arise in your operations and addressing the underlying drivers gives suppliers greater control over outcomes and reduces the likelihood of crisis-driven responses.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ABUSE, HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION

# 2 Definitions, international standards, and what this looks like in practice

Abuse, harassment and discrimination in the workplace refer to unacceptable behaviours that harm, intimidate, exclude, or unfairly disadvantage workers.

Harassment is often described as isolated misconduct. In practice, however, it is frequently linked to how work is organised and supervised. Production targets, shift allocation, overtime control, line assignments, and promotion decisions are important management tools. When combined with power imbalances and weak oversight, they can create conditions where intimidation, humiliation, discriminatory treatment, or sexual coercion become normalised.

International expectations are clear. **ILO Convention No. 190** defines violence and harassment as:

*"A range of unacceptable behaviours or threats, whether isolated or repeated, that cause or are likely to cause physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm"*

This definition aligns with standards reflected in ILO fundamental principles, the UN human rights framework, and the OECD Guidelines. Together, they establish that employers are expected to prevent and address harassment and discrimination — regardless of intent, local norms, or production pressure.

In practical terms, workplace abuse and harassment may include physical intimidation, verbal humiliation, threats tied to performance, sexual harassment, discriminatory treatment, or retaliation against workers who raise concerns. Importantly, these behaviours do not need to be extreme or repeated to create harm. Even single incidents, particularly where power imbalances exist, can undermine dignity, safety, and trust in the workplace.

### WHAT HARASSMENT LOOKS LIKE IN THE WORKPLACE

## 3 Forms of abuse, harassment and discrimination across 12 categories

A single incident — an unwanted touch, a sexually suggestive "joke," a threat tied to shifts or appraisals — is never trivial, but it can also be a symptom of wider risk.

In facilities where production pressure is high, and supervisors control access to overtime, evaluations, or line assignments, isolated acts can quickly repeat and spread if they are minimised as "tough management", handled informally, or met with inaction.

Workplace harassment can take many forms. The table below illustrates how these behaviours may appear in practice across different roles and settings.

<b>Verbal harassment</b>	Shouting, insults, swearing, mocking accents or backgrounds; gendered slurs; sexual comments, jokes, or rumours; threats linked to jobs, shifts, overtime, or appraisals
<b>Non-verbal and visual harassment</b>	Staring, leering, suggestive gestures; blocking someone's path; displaying or sharing sexual images, posters, or memes at work; sending unwanted texts/DMs/photos (including sexual content)
<b>Physical harassment</b>	Unwanted touching, grabbing, brushing, or "accidental" contact; cornering, blocking exits, following/stalking; assault or attempted assault
<b>Sexual harassment (explicit)</b>	Unwelcome sexual advances; requests for dates or sexual contact; comments about body/appearance/sexual life; sending or soliciting sexual messages or images; indecent exposure; repeatedly asking for contact after refusal. Harassment can occur even where there was a previous relationship or earlier consent.

<b>Sexual coercion (quid pro quo)</b>	Linking hiring, shifts, overtime, evaluations, promotions, or bonuses to sexual favours or silence; offering benefits for dates or contact; threatening penalties if refused
<b>Hostile work environment</b>	Ongoing intimidation, humiliation, or degradation (including sexualized jokes/materials); public shaming; targeted "pranks"; exclusion from breaks/meetings; persistent comments or rumours creating an offensive environment
<b>Economic/administrative abuse</b>	Retaliatory shift changes; denial of overtime; punitive appraisals; withholding pay, benefits, or leave as punishment; sudden transfers to less favourable lines or locations
<b>Power misuse by supervisors/gatekeepers</b>	Favouritism for personal access or favours; excessive monitoring; singling out one worker or group; abusive "coaching" that includes yelling or insults
<b>Third-party and perimeter risks</b>	Harassment by security, canteen, cleaning, hostel, or transport staff; extortion for access, seating, or services; unsafe behaviour at gates, parking, stairwells, restrooms, or hostels
<b>Discrimination-based harassment</b>	Targeting based on gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, pregnancy, marital status; or based on migration status, caste, ethnicity, religion, disability, or age
<b>Digital/online harassment</b>	Cyberbullying in work chats or social groups; sharing private images or information without consent (including "revenge porn")
<b>Retaliation for speaking up</b>	Punishing complainants, witnesses, or those who assist; threats, ostracism, or gossip campaigns after a report

#### HIGHER-RISK GROUPS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Harassment risk is not evenly distributed. Young or newly hired workers, migrants, women, night-shift workers, and those on short-term or agency contracts may face higher exposure due to job insecurity and power imbalances.

Some conduct may constitute gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) — behaviour directed at someone because of their sex or gender, or that disproportionately affects them. This includes sexual harassment and coercion.

Understanding where vulnerability is concentrated allows suppliers to design targeted safeguards — rather than relying on policies alone.

These behaviours rarely begin as deliberate attempts to create a culture of abuse. They escalate where production pressure, hierarchical power, and weak oversight intersect. Tight deadlines and chronic overtime heighten supervisory stress and expand informal control over shifts and evaluations. Where grievance systems are weak or worker voice is limited, workers may feel unable to

refuse instructions or report misconduct.

Over time, yelling, insults, "jokes," and discriminatory comments can become normalised. Intimidation, humiliation, coercion, and retaliation then become embedded in everyday management practice — even when policies formally prohibit them.

## 4

### PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING HARASSMENT IN PRACTICE

## Building a culture of prevention

The absence of complaints does not mean the absence of risk. "No cases" may simply reflect fear of retaliation or lack of trust in reporting channels.

Rather than waiting for formal grievances, suppliers should monitor patterns in attendance, turnover, shift allocation, disciplinary actions, and worker feedback. Regular engagement with worker representatives, surveys, informal check-ins, and periodic staff training to raise awareness can surface early warning signs and reinforce expected behaviours. Reviewing how workspaces, shifts, and supervision are organised can also reveal where risk may be concentrated.

Prevention begins with recognising harassment as a workplace risk that can be identified and managed — not as a private dispute between individuals.

### Building a culture of prevention

Sustainable prevention depends on management behaviour. Supervisors, line leaders, and security personnel should receive practical training on respectful leadership, de-escalation, and performance management without intimidation. Short, scenario-based sessions are often more effective than policy briefings alone.

Workers should understand what constitutes harassment, how to raise concerns safely, and what support is available. Induction training and periodic refreshers in local languages help reinforce expectations across the workforce.

Importantly, prevention requires addressing root causes. Regular reviews should examine whether risks cluster in particular departments, shifts, or roles — and whether production targets, supervisory incentives, or power imbalances contribute to misconduct.

### Extending standards to third parties

Prevention systems should not stop at the factory gate. Contracts with labour agents, security providers, transport companies, and hostel operators should include clear anti-harassment expectations, monitoring rights, and consequences for non-compliance. Where third-parties control access to shifts, housing, or transport, oversight is essential. Cascading standards ensures that responsibility is shared — and visible.

### Effective grievance and reporting systems

Trust grows when reporting feels simple, safe, and respectful. Suppliers often provide multiple reporting channels — such as hotlines, messaging platforms, HR desks, peer advocates, union routes,

suggestion boxes, or online forms — available in relevant languages and, where possible, anonymously.

Equally important is transparency. Workers should understand what happens after a report is made. Clear communication builds confidence and reduces fear.

### Worker representation and early intervention

Prevention systems are stronger when workers have trusted representation structures. Worker committees, union representatives, and trained peer advocates can provide safer, earlier reporting channels — particularly where workers hesitate to approach management directly. When concerns surface early, they are easier to address before they escalate.

Experience in the garment sector in India illustrates this. Following serious harassment concerns at a Tamil Nadu supplier, the [Dindigul Agreement](#) strengthened elected shop-floor monitors and clarified escalation pathways, helping rebuild trust in reporting. [Fair Wear Foundation's prevention programmes](#) in Indian factories similarly show that strengthening worker committees and independent complaint channels increases awareness and reporting — a necessary first step toward reducing harassment.

An initial rise in complaints is not a failure; it often signals improved trust.

For suppliers, the practical lesson is clear: prevention is more effective when worker representatives are trained, reporting does not depend solely on supervisors, and complaint patterns are reviewed jointly to address root causes.

#### WORKER VOICE MECHANISMS ARE NOT JUST COMPLIANCE TOOLS

They are early warning systems that strengthen oversight and operational stability.

## 5

### RESPONDING TO CASES OF HARASSMENT

## Safety, fairness, and consistency

When a concern is received, the first priority is safety and dignity. Reports should be acknowledged promptly and handled in a way that reduces risk without penalizing the person who came forward. Interim measures may include separating parties or adjusting supervision — without reducing the reporter's pay, hours, or status. Where feasible, reassign the alleged perpetrator rather than the reporter.

Investigations should be impartial, confidential, and conducted by trained staff. Information should be shared strictly on a need-to-know basis, and workers should be able to access language support or a trusted support person where needed. Outcomes should be consistent and protected from favouritism — especially when supervisors or "gatekeepers" are implicated.

After the case is resolved, suppliers should focus on remedy and prevention. This includes checking for retaliation and addressing root causes (e.g., opaque overtime decisions, isolated work areas, weak supervision, or misaligned incentives). A strong response process builds trust and encourages earlier reporting — an essential part of effective due diligence and continuous improvement.

## Moving from reactive to preventative management

Harassment should be managed as an operational risk — similar to safety or quality — with clear ownership, monitoring, and continuous improvement.

### SCENARIO — Repeated complaints, no systemic action

#### SITUATION

Over six months, three complaints are raised about the same line supervisor. Each case is handled informally. The supervisor delivers strong production results, so no formal disciplinary record is created.

#### WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

*What would you do? Treat each case as isolated? Or look for patterns?*

#### PREVENTIVE MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

You identify a systemic risk rather than isolated misconduct. Supervisory incentives are reviewed, behavioural expectations are reinforced, targeted training is provided, and worker feedback in that department is monitored. Prevention focuses on root causes — not just individual incidents.

When misconduct is minimised or handled informally, the impact is both visible and hidden: higher turnover, absenteeism, reduced concentration, quality errors, production disruptions, and strained buyer relationships. What appears to be a "people issue" quickly becomes a performance issue.

When prevention is systematic, the opposite occurs. Attendance stabilises, experienced workers stay, stress decreases, and quality improves. Production planning becomes more predictable, and audit engagement is more constructive.

Treating harassment as a management issue — not a personal dispute — shifts the focus from reacting to incidents toward strengthening systems. This includes accountable supervision, trusted reporting channels, consistent investigations, and regular review of root causes.

Increasingly, buyers expect suppliers to demonstrate not only written policies, but functioning systems that identify risks early, respond fairly, and prevent recurrence. These are core elements of effective human rights due diligence.

Prevention is not a one-time intervention. It is an ongoing leadership responsibility embedded in behaviour, incentives, oversight, and everyday operational decisions. Suppliers that manage harassment proactively strengthen workforce stability, reduce disruption, and build more resilient and competitive operations.

## 6

## SELF-ASSESSMENT

**Is your workplace protected?**

Use this checklist to assess where your business stands. Each unchecked item represents an area to prioritise.

- We have a written policy prohibiting all forms of harassment, abuse, and discrimination — communicated to all workers in their own language
- Supervisors and line leaders have received practical training on respectful management and de-escalation
- Workers have multiple, accessible reporting channels — including anonymous options
- We actively monitor early warning signs: attendance patterns, turnover by department, grievance trends, and shift allocation
- When a complaint is received, we follow a consistent, confidential investigation process — even when supervisors or gatekeepers are implicated
- Anti-harassment expectations are included in contracts with labour agents, security firms, hostel operators, and transport providers
- We review complaint data and turnover patterns periodically to identify systemic risks

Further reading: [ILO Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190](#) · [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) · [OECD Due Diligence Guidance](#)

## Contact us at:

---

[info@themekongclub.org](mailto:info@themekongclub.org)

Email

[www.themekongclub.org](http://www.themekongclub.org)

Website

