

ATTITUDE TOWARDS SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN VIETNAM'S CONSERVATION SECTOR



WILDACT REPORT

Attitude towards sexual harassment in Vietnam's conservation sector

Founded in 2015, WildAct is a Vietnamese charity, non-profit, non-governmental organisation which aims to educate, empower and inspire individuals and society in Vietnam to act for the benefit of its ecosystems, environment and wildlife.

This report is within the framework of WildAct's Empowering Women in Conservation program. Starting by tackling workplace sexual harassment, recognised as the most prevalent form of gender-based violence, the program ultimately aims to empower women, leaders, organisations and society to address the gender inequality, harassment and unsafe working environments that women face in wildlife conservation and other allied sectors.

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Cover picture: Karl Magnuson



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Summary

Conservation's key goals of biodiversity protection and ecological stewardship are undermined by workplace gender inequality. The challenges that such inequality presents may prove career-limiting in Vietnam, as elsewhere: research demonstrates that female scientists are more likely to resign than women in other professions, especially when they are having to work in unfair, unsafe working environments due to GBV issues such as sexual harassment. In this project, we aim to identify wildlife conservationists' and government officers' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours regarding harassment, in both office and fieldwork environments.

114 wildlife conservationists, environmentalists and government officers

were surveyed from 16th July to 10th August 2020. Despite most participants felt that their work environment was generally free from sexual harassment, 5 out of 6 respondents had directly experienced sexual harassment in some forms from their working environment. The most frequently reported types of sexual harassment were verbal, but physical forms, including attempted or actual sexual assaults, were also reported. Sexual harassment occurred regardless of gender or position within an organisation, although women are more likely to experience it than their male counterparts.

Based on the results of this research, we highlight several opportunities to address this issue, and outline a strategy to improve the working environment for all wildlife conservationists in Vietnam.



Background

Gender inequality and environmental degradation are two of the most pressing contemporary challenges we face, but they are not always seen as linked (Camey et al., 2020). Conservation researchers, and especially those who are women, face threats in the workplace which include gender-based violence (GBV), harassment, physical violence, and sexual assault (Rinkus et al., 2018).

The overtly male-dominated environment of biodiversity conservation fieldwork can also present safety issues both for women and men who do not conform to normative forms of masculinity, which in turn may expose them to harassment and violence (Clancy et al., 2014). These challenges can prove to be career limiting: female scientists are more likely to resign early than women in other professions (Glass et al., 2013), especially when they are having to work in unfair, unsafe environments due to issues such as sexual harassment (Clancy et al., 2014).

Ultimately, these issues of inequality undermine our ability within the conservation sector to achieve our key goals of biodiversity protection and ecological stewardship (Matulis & Moyer, 2016; Tallis & Lubchenco, 2014).

Projects that include a diversity of gender bring more benefits for biodiversity conservation (Tallis & Lubchenco, 2014).

WildAct has been working to improve the country's performance with regard to biodiversity conservation through our National Capacity Building Program. Recognising the importance of educating women and their vital role in conservation activities, we encourage applications from women in other sectors to attend to our training courses. However, we cannot responsibly encourage women to pursue careers in biodiversity conservation if the working environment they are entering is unsafe.

There is a pressing need to evaluate and understand the scale of sexual harassment in Vietnam's conservation and environment sectors, in order to inform interventions aimed at reducing the incidence of GBV and sexual harassment, and to create a safer working environment for both men and women.



Goals & Objectives

The goal of this research is to understand the contemporary situation of workplace sexual harassment within the conservation and environmental protection sphere in Vietnam, the perceptions and responses to sexual harassment of people working in those sectors, and the organisational policies which seek to address it.

Our objectives are to:

1. Identify the demographic profiles of wildlife conservationists and environmentalists living and working in Vietnam.
2. Investigate their understanding of sexual harassment policy within their organisations, as well as their attitudes and behaviours toward sexual harassment in the working environment.
3. Synthesise these findings into strategic opportunities to design innovative prevention and intervention programs to end workplace sexual harassment in our sector.

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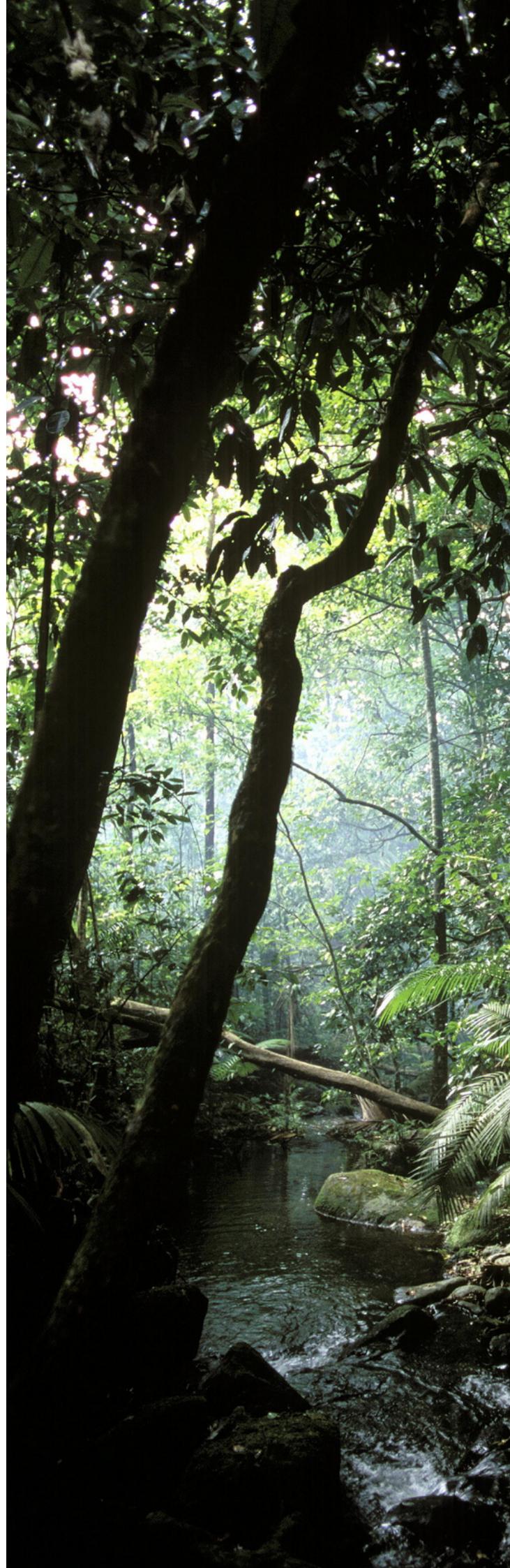
Note: In this report, sexual harassment is defined accordingly to the Vietnam's Labour Law (2019) as “any act or conduct of a sexual nature by a person aimed at another which is unwanted, unwelcome and unaccepted by the latter”

Methodology

This research used a questionnaire containing mostly closed questions, presented in an online survey format. The survey instrument was prepared in English with input from international and local experts, including CARE International - Vietnam. The questionnaire was then translated into Vietnamese and back-translated to English to ensure the contents were correct. The survey instrument was piloted in Hanoi, and final adjustments were made accordingly.

The online survey ran from 16th July to 10th August 2020 on Google's online survey platform. This was chosen as it satisfied our needs relating to question types, budget, anonymity and data security. We directly invited participation from approximately 150 people within the relevant sectors through email, including staff from non-government organisations, National Parks and Protected Areas and research institutes. We also asked if they could share the survey with their colleagues. Links to the survey were also advertised on our social media, including both Facebook and Twitter.

In order to capture a snapshot of the current situation, the invitation to participate was extended to local and international conservationists and environmentalists who were working or who had been working in Vietnam within the past two years.



Potential participants were informed that taking part was voluntary and that they could stop the survey at any time, as well as that the survey was confidential, and their identity was never associated with their responses, nor made public. Participant consent was recorded by ticking a box on the online questionnaire. The questionnaire itself was organised into four main sections: (1) demographic questions; (2) situation of workplace sexual harassment (both experienced personally and as a witness); (3) organisational measures against workplace sexual harassment; and (4) additional demographic questions. The majority of questions were multiple choice, meaning the participants would not have to dwell on potentially triggering events in order to answer. For questions that might be considered intrusive or sensitive, a “prefer not to say” option was listed.

Prior to the online survey, background research was conducted online, and through contacting organisations in Vietnam, in order to assess existing policies regarding sexual harassment. A total of nine such policies were reviewed, which varied widely. Some international organisations have comprehensive anti-harassment policies, developed in their overseas headquarters, whereas others may have a harassment policy included in other documentation, such as in codes of conduct, disciplinary, grievance or whistle-blowing procedures. The

remainder have no specific policies or regulations in place regarding sexual harassment.

Analysis

Sexual harassment behaviours were categorised into three main types and were analysed within these groups, or by the severity of the behaviours, where relevant. Whether a participant had been sexually harassed or not was determined by their responses to the behavioural list of 12 items and by a direct question: having never been sexually harassed meant choosing “never” to all 12 items, as well as answering “no” to the direct question. Comparison and interpretation were then made between those two question types. The frequency of such behaviours was also recorded, as determined by the respondents, and graded on a Likert-type scale, with prevalence being that with the greatest number of responses. Additional comments from “Other, please specify” and from the final question were evaluated and manually coded into their respective themes.

Key Findings

Respondents demographic

A total of 114 respondents completed the survey. This sample population does not mirror the demographics of the conservation sector nor Vietnam. The majority of respondents were female (61.4%, n=70), and belonged to the 20-40 age group (78.1%, n=89). Bachelor's degree was the most common education level achieved by the respondents (50.9%, n=58), and most of the respondents were working in international non-governmental organisations (51.7%, n=59). Details of the demographics can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondent's demographic

Respondent's demographic	n=114	
Nationality	Vietnamese	74.6%, n=85
	Non-Vietnamese	25.4%, n=29
Gender	Male	36.8%, n=42
	Female	61.4%, n=70
	Prefer not to say	1.8%, n=1
Common highest education level	Bachelor degree: 50.9%, n=58	
Most common work experience	≤ 2 years: 31.1%, n=33	
Working bodies	NGO: 78%, n=89	Gov. agency: 8.8%, n=10
	Academia: 11.1%, n=13	Private: 1.8%, n=1
Fieldwork (as a proportion of total working time)	0%: 8.8%, n=10	1-25%: 52.2%, n=59
	26-50%: 31.9%, n=36	51-100%: 7%, n=8
Position	Director/Manager: 34.2%, n=39	
	Compliance/HR: 9.6%, n=11	
	Non-management: 36.8%, n=42	
	Contract staff: 14%, n=16	
	Intern/volunteer: 5.3%, n=6	

Sexual harassment in the working environment

82.5% of survey participants (n=94) of both men and women indicated experiencing sexual harassment in some form in the previous two years. This mean, 6 in every 7 respondents experienced sexual harassment in workplace. Of which, 4 in every 7 men and 6 in every 7 women respondents experienced harassment.

The most common form of reported sexual harassment was verbal, with “being told sexual stories or jokes” ranked as the most frequent (38.1%). Alarmingly, 4.8% of respondents reported experiencing attempted rape or rape in their workplace. Other misconduct, such as discussion of sexual matters (9.5%), sexual remarks (9.5%), gestures, sounds or body languages of a sexual nature (9.5%) and touching (9.5%) were also reported as occurring frequently (Figure 1).

28.1% respondents (n=32) shared that they had witnessed sexual harassment in their working environment, with the verbal form, such as telling sexual jokes, again being the most common type. Nearly one in ten participants (9.4%) stated they had occasionally witnessed rape or attempted rape. Other types of misconduct, including discussion of sexual matters (19%) and making sexual remarks (16%) were also reported (Figure 2). Respondents who witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace indicated that 88% of these incidents were directed at women.

The results revealed that misconduct is most frequently performed by a colleague within the respondent’s organisation (36.4%, n=52), who could be peers, juniors or seniors of the respondents. Perpetrators could also be from outside their organisation (28.7%, n=41) or in some cases even strangers who happened to be within the workplace (3%, n=5).

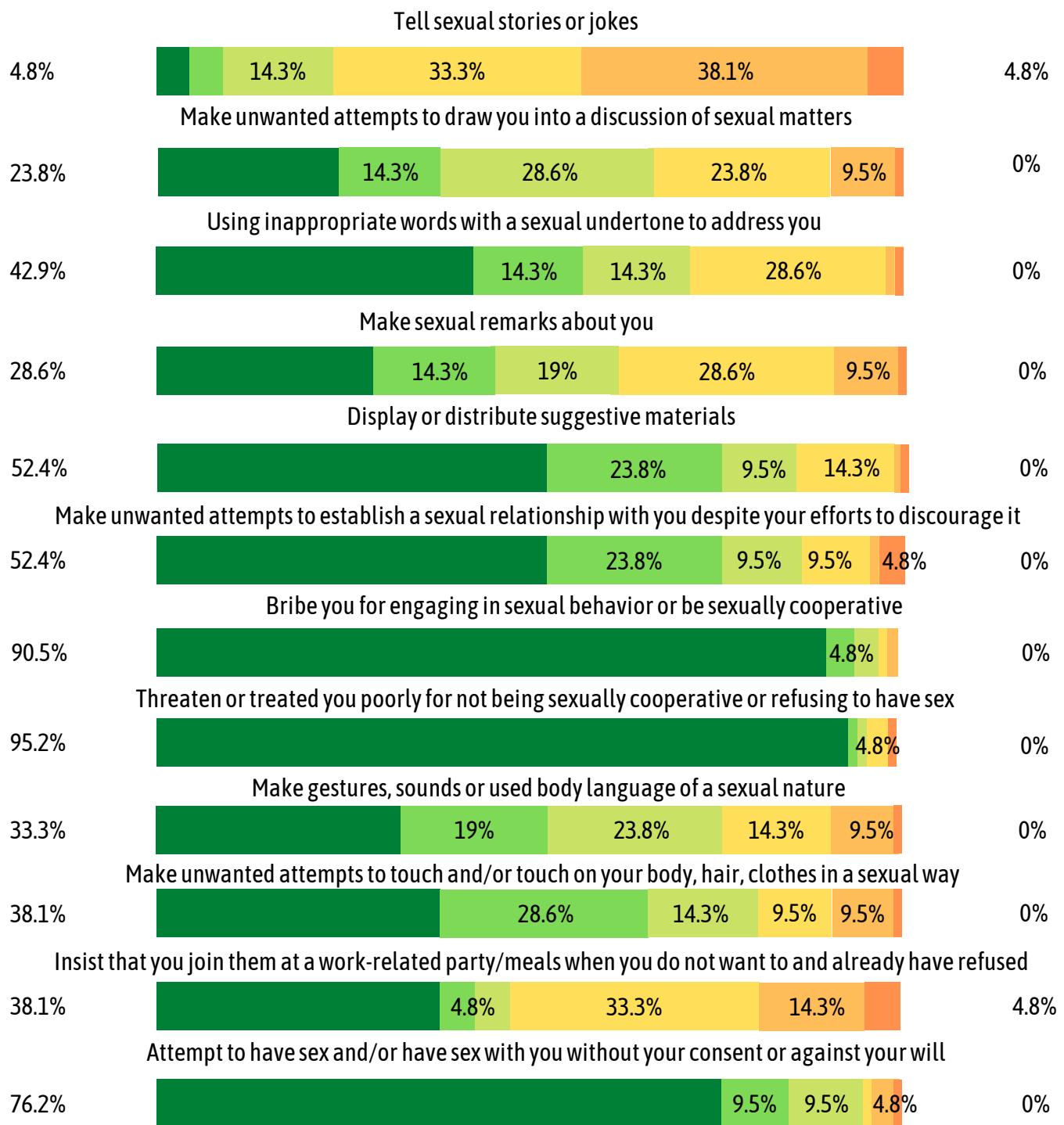


Figure 1: Frequency of sexual harassment conducts reported by respondents (n=114), by percentage of respondents for each Linkert category, from "Never", "very rarely", "rarely" to "occasionally", "frequently" and "very frequently"

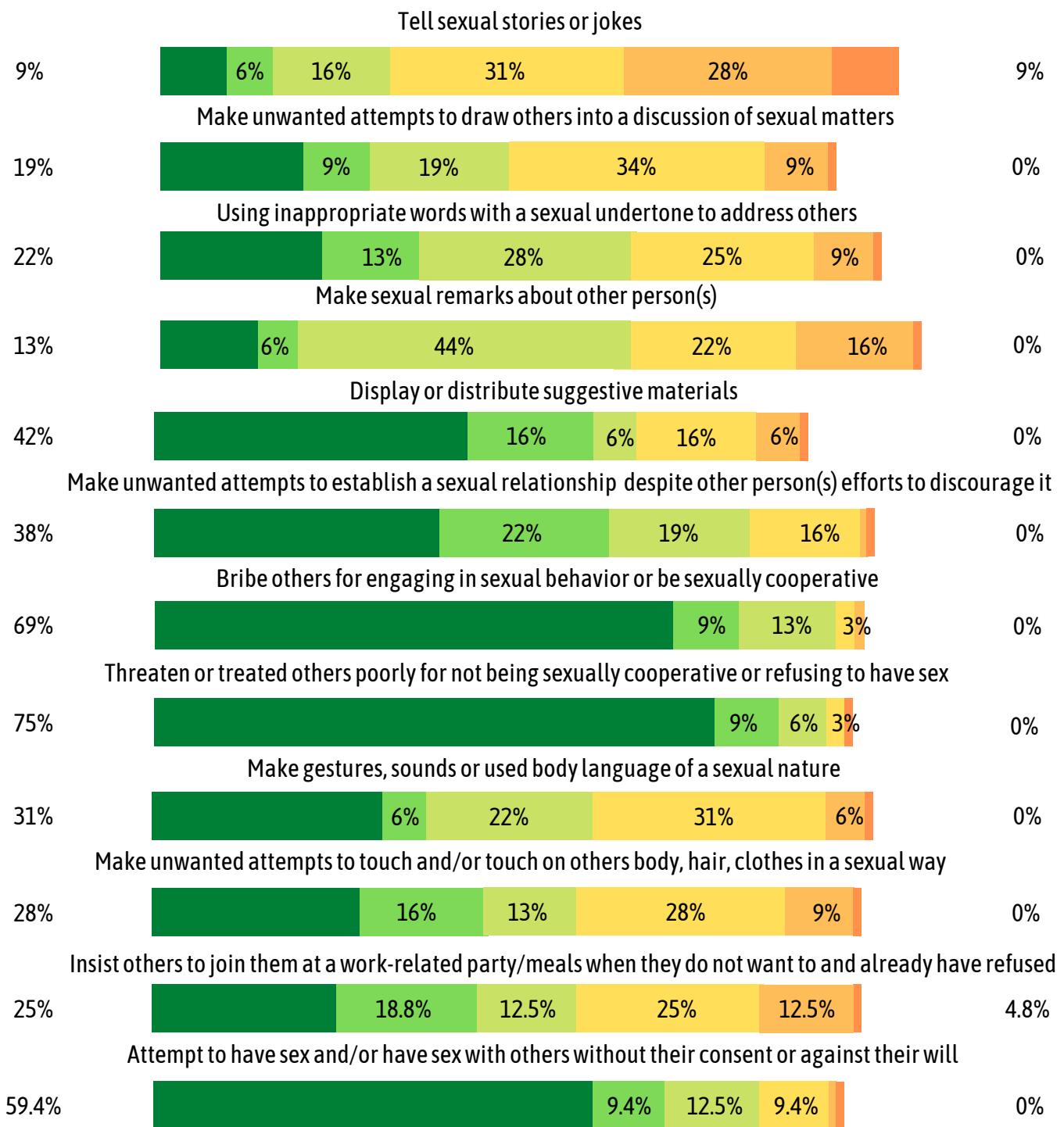


Figure 2: Frequency of sexual harassment witnessed by respondents (n=32), by percentage of respondents for each Linkert category, from "Never", "very rarely", "rarely" to "occasionally", "frequently" and "very frequently"

Harassment settings

Fieldwork constituted 1-25% of respondents' total work time, and 30.1% (n=43) of them reported it as carrying risk of sexual harassment. The situations where respondents appeared most vulnerable to sexual harassment were those where alcohol was being served (47.6%, n=68), which may be during fieldwork, conferences or training workshops (Figure 3).

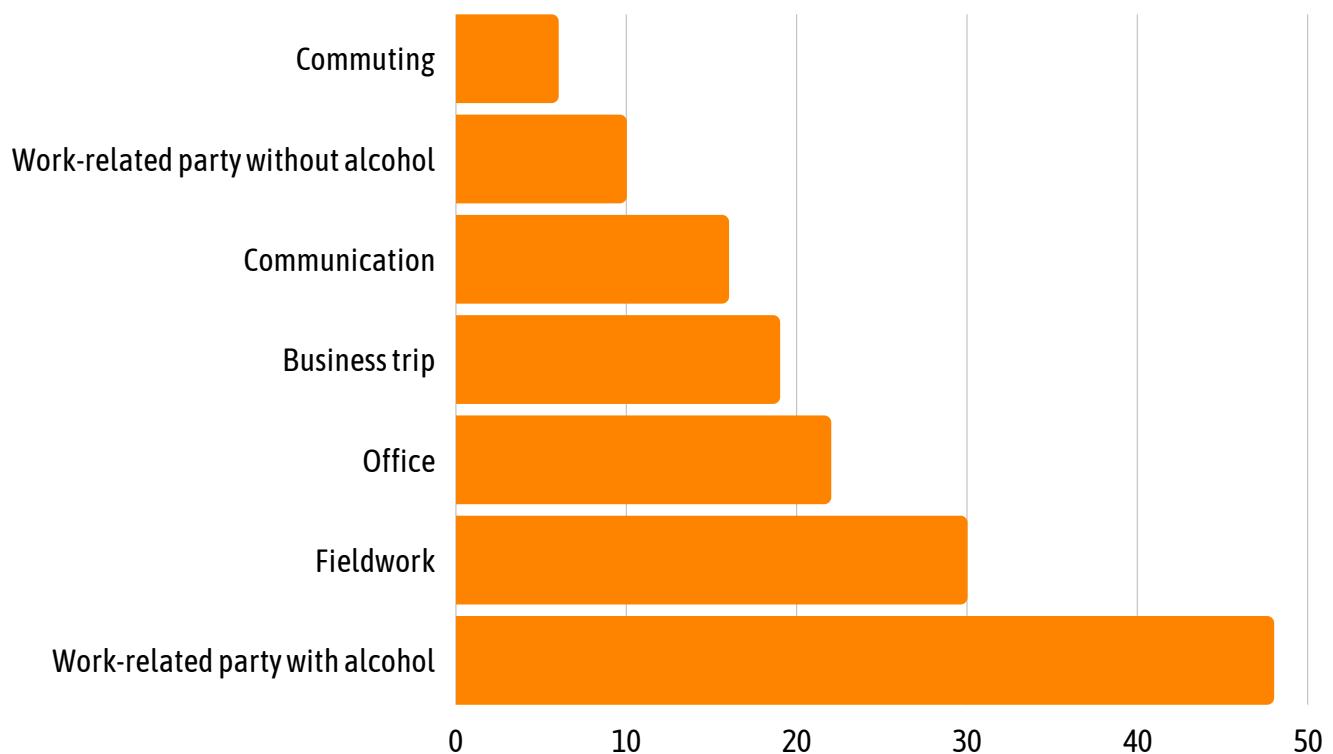


Figure 3: Workplace situations where sexual harassment tends to happen, n= 43

Understanding of organisational policy

Respondents (44.7%, n=51) were largely unaware of their organisation's policy against sexual harassment. Among those aware of a policy, only 10.5% (n=12) had actually read and understood the terms, while 6.1% (n=7) had read but not understand them, and 16.6% (n=19) were aware of the policy, but had never read it (Figure 4)

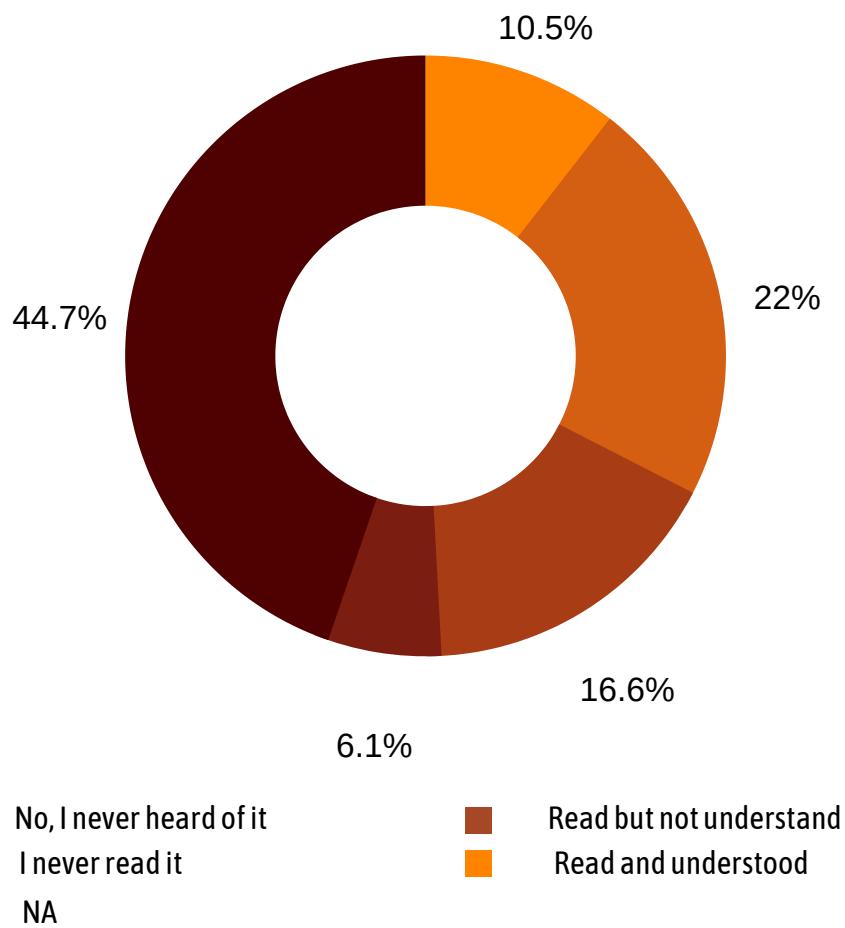


Figure 4: Respondents' awareness of their organisation's anti-sexual policy, n=114

A majority of responders (59.8%, n=52) expressed they were unaware of or their organisation do not have any measure in place to address sexual harassment. 29% of respondents were aware of their organisation's reporting process of sexual harassment, and 25% knew that there was a policy against sexual harassment at their organisation (Figure 5). 22% were aware of training being available on sexual harassment for all staff, whereas only 9% were aware of any specific training being available for staff appointed to handle cases of harassment.

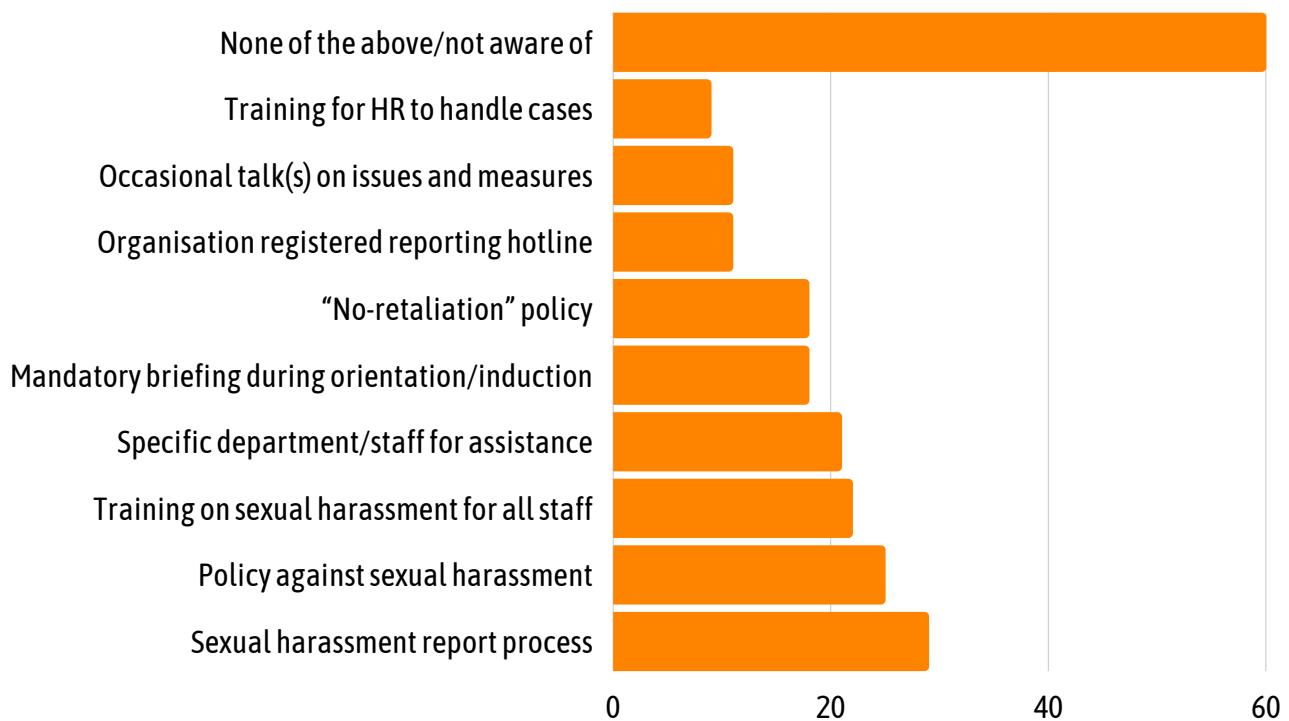


Figure 5: Respondents' awareness regarding measure in place to address sexual harassment at their organisations, n=87

Reporting issues

Of the 18.6% (n=21) participants who reported having been sexually harassed, a majority (72.2%, n=13) chose not to inform their organisation. Fear of damaging their organisation's relationship with partners was the most frequently cited explanation (53.4%), indicating that sexual harassment committed by people from outside their organisations may often go unreported. Fear of negative consequences and of being blamed were relatively high (both at 38.4%), as were excuses being made for the harasser's behaviour (e.g. that's just in their nature, but they are a good person). Worryingly, 30.7% of respondents reported that they have been told "it's normal" to experience sexual harassment at work.



Figure 6: Reasons for not reporting sexual harassment (n=13)

Sexual harassment prevention

Most respondents suggested that training on prevention of sexual harassment should be required for all employees (92%, n=100), and that an organisational policy should be in place (82%, n=89). They also recommended that commitment to create a sexual harassment-free working environment must be met from all employees within the organisations (82%, n=89), and organisation's partners (72%, n=78). Respondents valued the support more from within the organisations than those from outside their own organisations (Figure 7).

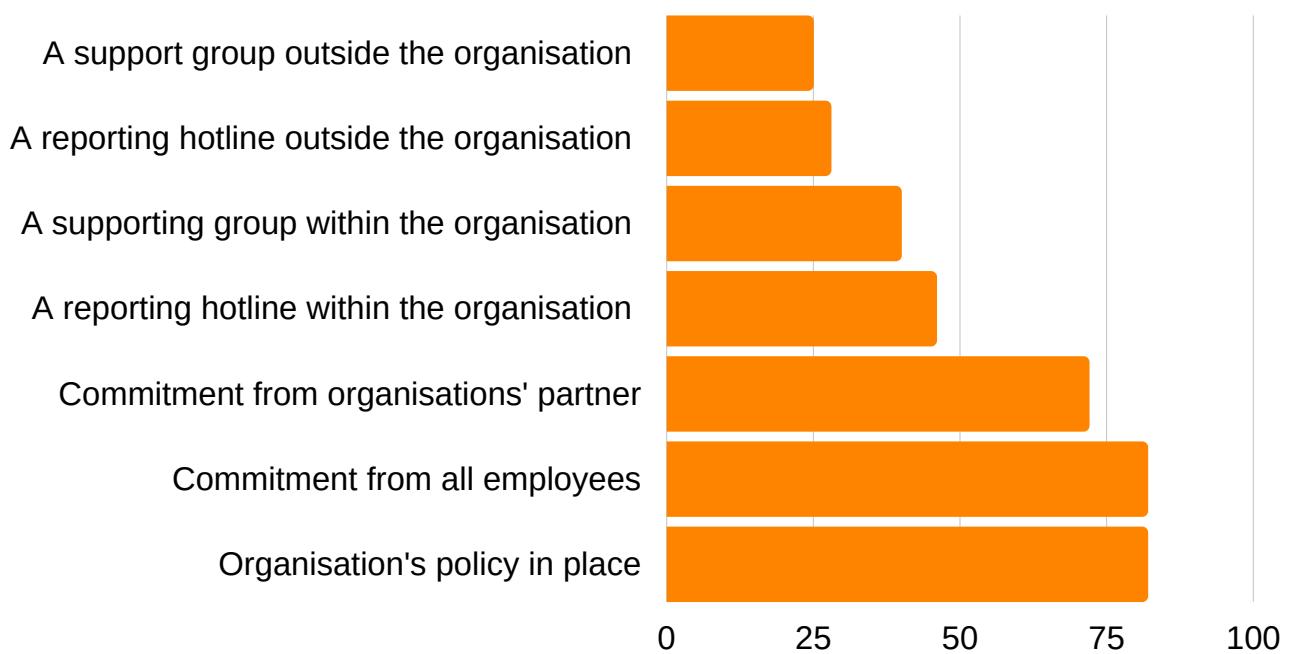
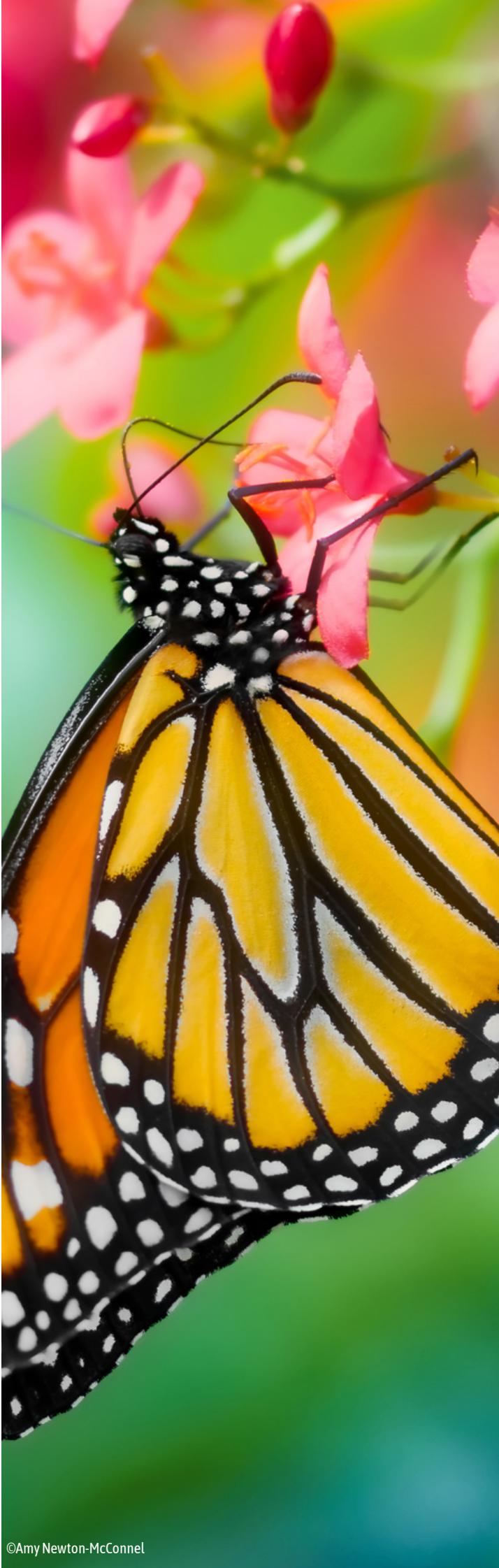


Figure 7: Respondents' recommendations to create a sexual harassment-free working environment (n=109)



Recommendation

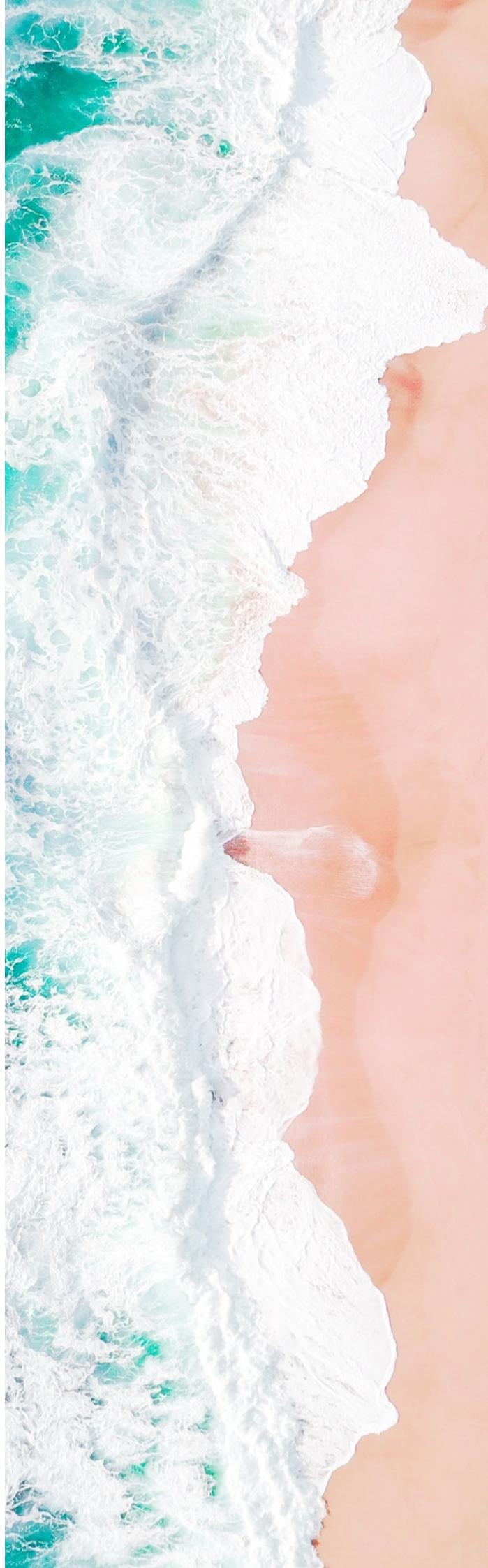
Based on the key research results, obtained via the survey and the review of existing policies, we highlight the following headline findings, and make recommendations for addressing each:

- i) The majority of respondents are unaware of organisational policies on sexual harassment:
 - Provide an overview of the organisation's policies on sexual harassment and misconduct at the orientation session for all new staff;
 - Include the organisation's policies relating to sexual harassment in all employee contracts, including both temporary and permanent staff;
 - Provide sexual harassment prevention and response training for employees, especially those that are required to conduct work away from the office;
- ii) Organisations lack clear and defined policies on sexual harassment, and lack clear pathways for reporting incidents:
 - Immediately create an explicit policy on sexual harassment, with clear definitions of key terms, options for reporting via multiple channels, and both grievance and investigation mechanisms. This must include a definition of 'workplace' which adequately covers staff whether in the office, the field or in between;
 - Provide training for an appointed member of HR staff who will be responsible for addressing inter-organisation sexual harassment cases;

- Organise compulsory training for all employees on issues of sexual harassment, including what constitutes harassment and how to prevent and respond to it. Further training should be considered for personnel who handle sexual harassment incidents and investigations;
- Set out clearly what employees should do if they experience or witness harassment
- Document all complaints methodically and confidentially, and review periodically;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of adopted measures, and make amendments where necessary.

iii) The majority of sexual harassment incidents occurred during fieldwork and on occasions where alcohol is served:

- Ensure partnering organisations, governmental bodies and institutions are aware of your organisation's sexual harassment policy and, where feasible, actively solicit their support in its implementation;
- Prohibit alcohol during fieldwork, and adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward pressuring staff, partners, colleagues etc. to drink alcohol during work, or while otherwise representing their employer;
- Give non-discriminatory consideration to female and LGBTQ+ staff, as they are more likely to be targeted during fieldwork.



Research limitations

The survey was conducted online, meaning it was not possible for the researchers to provide clarification on any questions, or elaborate open-ended answers if needed. Secondly, on account of the anonymous nature of the survey, it was not possible to explore links between organisational policy and number of incidents of harassment. Thirdly, we did not explore workplace sexual harassment from the perspective of perpetrators. Finally, we did not expand the scope of our work to include wider issues around gender harassment and gender discrimination.

References

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Appendices

I. Survey Questionnaire

To see the questionnaire design in English and/or Vietnamese, please contact us at:
info@wildact-vn.org

II. Participant's feedback and our responses

Here we provide respondent's feedback, comments as well as questions on the survey. We also included our respond to the below questions and feedback. Respondents comment were separated into RPD_VN (for local) and RPD_FR (for foreigners), as it may give a glimpse of different views and attitudes towards this issue in our sector.

RPD1_VN: Sexual harassment might happen between male senior and female junior. But it depends on how you see it. If your staff like you then that behaviour is caring, if your staff hate you then they claim it's sexual harassment (Có thể hành vi quấy rối xuất hiện ở các sếp nam đối với nhân viên nữ. Nhưng cũng tùy vào góc nhìn của sự việc. Nếu lính thích sếp thì đó là hành vi ân cần, nếu lính ghét sếp thì đó là quấy rối tình dục).

RPD41_VN: This survey is very meaningful. But what will you do to prevent sexual harassment? (Rất thiết thực. Nhưng sau cùng sẽ có động thái như thế nào nếu như có các hoạt động quấy rối).

Our response: Thank you very much for your feedback. This is the first step of our Empowering Women in Conservation Program, we hope to get a good understanding of the sexual harassment situation in Vietnam, and we will work closely with other NGOs, institutions and government bodies to reduce sexual harassment in our working environment, through supporting NGOs/institutions to create their own anti-sexual harassment policy, provide training and workshop to prevent sexual harassment at workplace. We will keep you posted of the following activities.

RPD2_FR: It is very leading and treats sexual harassment as if it is only a workplace problem.

Our response: This survey is aim to explore sexual harassment at workplace. Please read the information carefully.

RPD4_FR: The question regarding "what gender are you sexually attracted to" is unnecessary, intrusive, and has undertones of victim blaming. Also, the question of how you responded to sexual harassment does not even include an option for directly confronting the harasser, only giving an option of direct confrontation through seeking revenge (?!), which make all of the responses passive and almost indicates that passive responses are the only acceptable ones, which is really problematic.

Our response: i) Gender and physical attractiveness plays a role in sexual harassment. For example, if more male respondents are interested in male than in women within the conservation sectors, one would expect to see more sexual harassment towards men than women. Please see "Schematic Responses to Sexual Harassment Complainants: The Influence of Gender and Physical Attractiveness" 10.1007/s11199-006-9165-1 for details. ii) We asked how people respond to sexual harassment AFTER the event happen, not DURING, to avoid provoke negative feeling that can affect the respondents, as well as to avoid judgmental feelings toward respondents (i.e if respondents answered they did not do anything, they might feel that they are being judged by the researcher).

RPD22_FR: The questions were a bit biased to receiving sexual harassment. Wonder if it be good to ask if one also think they may be a harasser. I for example once squeezed my junior male colleagues arm muscles without asking and made a comment he looked so buff. I realised only after that this could be perceived as sexual harassment and I apologised to him. I think, may be not in VN, sexual harassment can go both ways. Anyway, it's usually men in powerful positions abusing this power...

Our response: Thanks to your comment, we considered having questions to explore if respondents could be harassers, however for the current purpose of this research, as well as considering the length of the survey (ideally <30 minutes), we have removed those questions. In the future though, we will definitely involve this aspect.



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