



Sexualized Harassment in Belarusian Civil Society Abroad



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Introduction

Why has the problem of harassment become relevant right now?

In the spring of 2024, Nasta Bazar initiated the march 'In Liza's Memory' and the hashtag #ХопіцьГвалціць¹ after the rape case that led to the death of a Belarusian woman. This hashtag evolved into a Belarusian equivalent of #MeToo, where women began sharing their experiences of physical and sexualized violence. This was followed by accounts of harassment in various sectors of Belarusian society, including those abroad.

In our view, discussions on the topic of harassment have gained relevance due to the transformation of social and gender roles in Belarusian society following widespread emigration. The Belarusian community abroad has found itself in a new reality where the pressure of traditional social norms has weakened, and the global agenda on human rights and gender equality has become more relevant. This shift is largely due to the fact that most relocated Belarusians are now in European countries where human rights are upheld to a greater extent than in Belarus prior to 2020. Emigration has created a space for rethinking personal boundaries, power dynamics, and cultural stereotypes, enabling many to recognize the issue of harassment for the first time.

We note that it is in emigration where women's voices have begun to emerge, willing to discuss violence and manipulation by sharing their personal stories.² However, some of them encounter resistance within the community, which is linked to two main factors:

1. Patriarchal attitudes: In Belarusian culture, there is a historically ingrained notion that publicly discussing violence or harassment means "airing dirty laundry" and damages reputations. This issue existed before the wave of mass emigration and persists today.
2. Common goals of the revolutionary community: The Belarusian diaspora is often united by the common goal of resisting the regime and the hope of returning home, which requires activists to work together regardless of their personal behavior. This fosters a kind of "culture of silence" in which issues of harassment are pushed to the background in favor of maintaining unity in struggle.³

¹ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/62829.html>

² Nasha Niva's statement on the situation of domestic violence: <https://nashaniva.com/ru/338127>

YouTube show "Maximalno" on domestic violence: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyRA6czwxOg>

³ Euroradio Show: "In the program 'Idea' with Nasta Bazar, we discuss why a New Belarus cannot be built without embracing gender equality, how to rid Belarusian society of patriarchy, and the role of history in shaping this patriarchy": <https://euroradio.fm/ru/bazar-yazyk-pochitanie-proshlogo-izmeneniya-radi-buduschego-takoy-vizhu-nashu-ideyu>

How Does Emigration and a Common Goal Affect the Problem?

In emigration, Belarusian civil society has faced a new environment where social hierarchies are often erased, but cultural attitudes of offensive behavior persist. There are several key aspects here:

- The impact of migration stress. Social and economic instability in emigration creates vulnerability, especially for women, which increases their dependence on others and makes it more difficult for them to withdraw from unwanted interactions.
- Lack of clear protection mechanisms. Belarusian communities in emigration are often self-organized and lack institutional structures that can investigate cases of harassment or protect victims. This leads to a situation where the problem remains invisible and does not receive a proper response.

Why Is It Always Worth Talking About?

Discussing harassment is not a threat to the change that everybody is waiting for, but part of it. The struggle for freedom and human rights includes not only political independence, but also the creation of a society free of violence, which includes the protection of women. If this problem is hushed up, it will only reinforce the systems of oppression that Belarusian society seeks to overcome.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the importance of the principles of non-violence and the observance and protection of the rights of all population groups for the promotion and strengthening of democracy as a form of government.

Harassment within the Belarusian civil society in exile is not merely a collection of isolated incidents, but rather a reflection of systemic problems rooted in a culture of patriarchal values and the normalization of violence. Only through the open acknowledgment of this issue and the implementation of protective mechanisms can we create conditions in which the fight for freedom is not overshadowed by the neglect of human rights and the dignity of women.

Methodology

Data was collected through a Google Forms survey with closed and open-ended questions, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey was administered over a two-week period during which 39 responses were collected, and 8 in-depth interviews were conducted. The survey was anonymous, thus encouraging honest responses. In-depth interviews were conducted as online calls on a secure platform, via Signal, Telegram, Google Meet, Zoom, and were also done on the basis of anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, 4 interviews were held with female experts on harassment and protection of women's rights. The survey was carried out in Belarusian and Russian languages in order to cover as many people from different spheres as possible. The data were collected, processed and analyzed using statistical and substantive analysis methods.

This report has been prepared by the Legal Initiative in cooperation with Nasta Bazar.⁴

According to the International Labor Organization Convention No. 190:

- (a) The term "violence and harassment" in the world of work refers to a range of unacceptable behaviors and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm, and includes gender-based violence and harassment.
- (b) The term "gender-based violence and harassment" means violence and harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender, or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately and includes sexual harassment.⁵

The term 'harassment' applies to persons working irrespective of their contractual status, persons in training, interns, volunteers, jobseekers and even workers whose employment has been terminated. It is relevant for all sectors of the economy (formal and informal) and all working conditions, including distance work, professional training, as well as communication through information technology, employer-provided accommodation and commuting to and from work.⁶

⁴ Nasta Bazar is a Belarusian feminist and activist who has implemented a number of significant social projects. She was engaged in helping Belarusian men and women forced to flee to Ukraine in 2020-2021, as well as supporting people fleeing from a full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022. Nastyia initiated and participated in the launch of the Support UA Women campaign, aimed at raising funds for women who suffered from sexualized violence during the war. In addition, as mentioned above, she was the organizer of the Liza Memorial March.

⁵ ILO Convention No. 190:
https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190

⁶ Articles 2-3 of the ILO Convention No. 190.

It is worth noting that disagreements about job performance or other work-related issues are not typically considered harassment, but rather in the context of performance management.⁷

At the same time, it is important to note the terminology outlined in the Prevention of Harassment, Sexualized Harassment, Discrimination and Abuse of Authority Policy by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as UN Women, as it is broader in scope.⁸

In this report, we define sexual harassment as any unwelcome sexual behavior that could reasonably be perceived or expected to be offensive and/or humiliating to another person. Such behavior interferes with work or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment, and is intended to cause or may lead to physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm.

Examples of harassment may include:

- Inappropriate compliments about someone's appearance;
- Jokes, teasing, or comments with sexual undertones that cause discomfort or embarrassment to the victim;
- Proposals to engage in sex or undress – for money or otherwise, even when made in a supposedly joking manner;
- Unsolicited physical contact: touching the neck (e.g., massage), waist,

⁷ Secretary-General's bulletin Prohibition of discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n08/238/36/pdf/n0823836.pdf>

⁸ **Harassment** is any improper conduct that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offense or humiliation to another person, when such conduct interferes with work or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. Harassment may take the form of words, gestures or actions which tend to annoy, alarm, abuse, demean, intimidate, belittle, humiliate or embarrass another. Harassment may be directed at one or more persons based on a shared characteristic or trait as set out in the discrimination definition above. Harassment normally implies a series of incidents.

Sexual Harassment is any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that results in physical, psychological or sexual harm, that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. Sexual harassment may occur in the workplace or in connection with work. While typically involving a pattern of conduct, sexual harassment may take the form of a single incident. In assessing the reasonableness of expectations or perceptions, the perspective of the person who is the target of the conduct will be considered. Sexual harassment is the manifestation of a culture of discrimination and privilege based on unequal gender relations and other power dynamics. Sexual harassment may involve any conduct of a verbal, non-verbal or physical nature, including written and electronic communications. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the same or different genders, and individuals of any gender can be either the affected individuals or the alleged perpetrators. Sexual harassment may occur outside the workplace and outside working hours, including during official travel or social functions related to work. Sexual harassment may be perpetrated by any colleague, including a supervisor, a peer or a subordinate. A perpetrator's status as a supervisor or a senior official may be treated as an aggravating circumstance. –

<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/About%20Us/Accountability/UN-Women-Harassment-sexual-harassment-discrimination-and-abuse-of-authority-policy-en.pdf>

slapping on the buttocks, which may be disguised as accidental touches, and other similar actions;

- Threats – not always carried out – to cause harm to the victim (including threats of withholding bonuses, contract termination, or spreading personal information) if she refuses sexual advances.

Examples of non-verbal harassment include:

- Posting offensive materials, including posters, photographs, cartoons, graffiti, items, or messages on bulletin boards, desks, or in shared areas with sexual undertones.
- Repeatedly giving unwanted gifts or invitations.
- Constant staring.
- Deliberately placing or sending inappropriate images/photos that could offend others and cause harm (e.g., nudity, deepfakes⁹).
- Using email, messaging apps, or social media to send sexualized images to other employee(s).

In this report, we define the **scope of harassment** in situations involving labor and related relationships, regardless of whether employment is formal or not, including employment contracts, contractor agreements, cooperation on equal terms, as well as volunteering. Additionally, it covers areas where there is an inherent hierarchy and vulnerability in the workplace (e.g., gynecology, psychology/psychotherapy, receiving charitable assistance, etc.).

The **perpetrators of harassment** can include not only direct supervisors, but also subordinates, colleagues, mentors/mentees, volunteers, individuals providing assistance, services, and others.

⁹Deepfakes use a form of artificial intelligence called deep learning to make images of fake events, hence the name deepfake. The AI firm Deeptech found 15,000 deepfake videos online in September 2019. A staggering 96% were pornographic and 99% of those mapped faces from female celebrities on to porn stars. As new techniques allow unskilled people to make deepfakes with a handful of photos, fake videos are likely to spread beyond the celebrity world to fuel revenge porn. As Danielle Citron, a professor of law at Boston University, puts it: "Deepfake technology is being weaponized against women." Beyond the porn there's plenty of spoof, satire and mischief.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jan/13/what-are-deepfakes-and-how-can-you-spot-them>

Analysis of online form responses

The language of the respondents

28% of the respondents completed the survey in Russian and 72% in Belarusian languages.

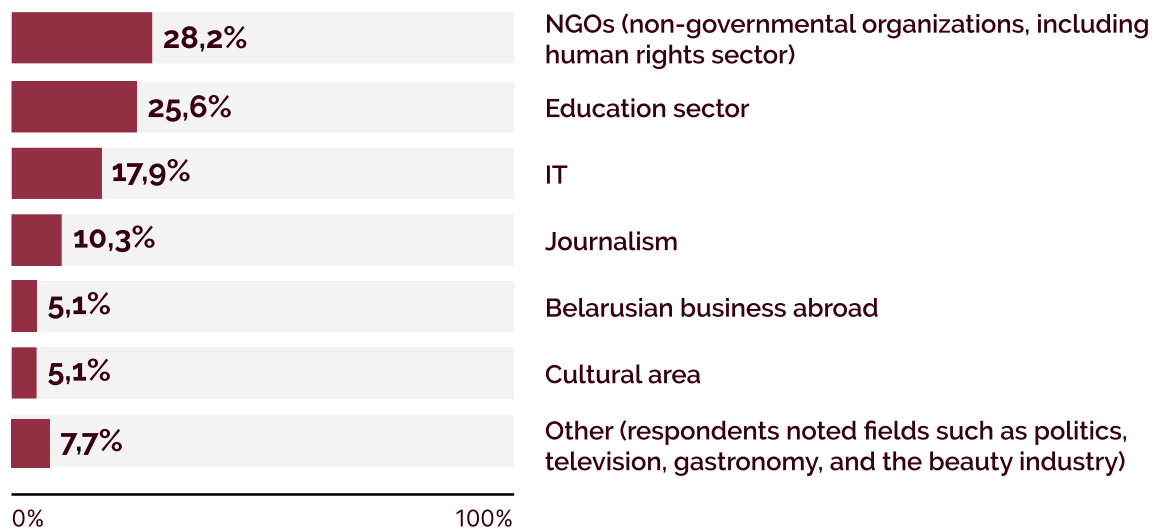
Age of the respondents

More than half of the respondents aged 25-34 (53.6%), followed by those aged 18-24 (29.2%), with 7.3% of respondents in the 35-44 and 45-55 age groups, and 2.4% aged 56 and older.

Geography of Respondents

At the time of data collection, 61.5% of respondents were residing in Poland, 15.4% in Lithuania, 10.3% in Georgia, 5.1% in Germany, 2.6% in the United States, and the Netherlands.

Field of Activity



25.6% of respondents indicated the education sector, 28.2% – NGOs (non-governmental organizations, including human rights sector), 17.9% – IT, 10.3% – journalism, 5.1% – Belarusian business abroad, 5.1% – culture, and 7.7% – other (respondents noted fields such as politics, television, gastronomy, and the beauty industry).

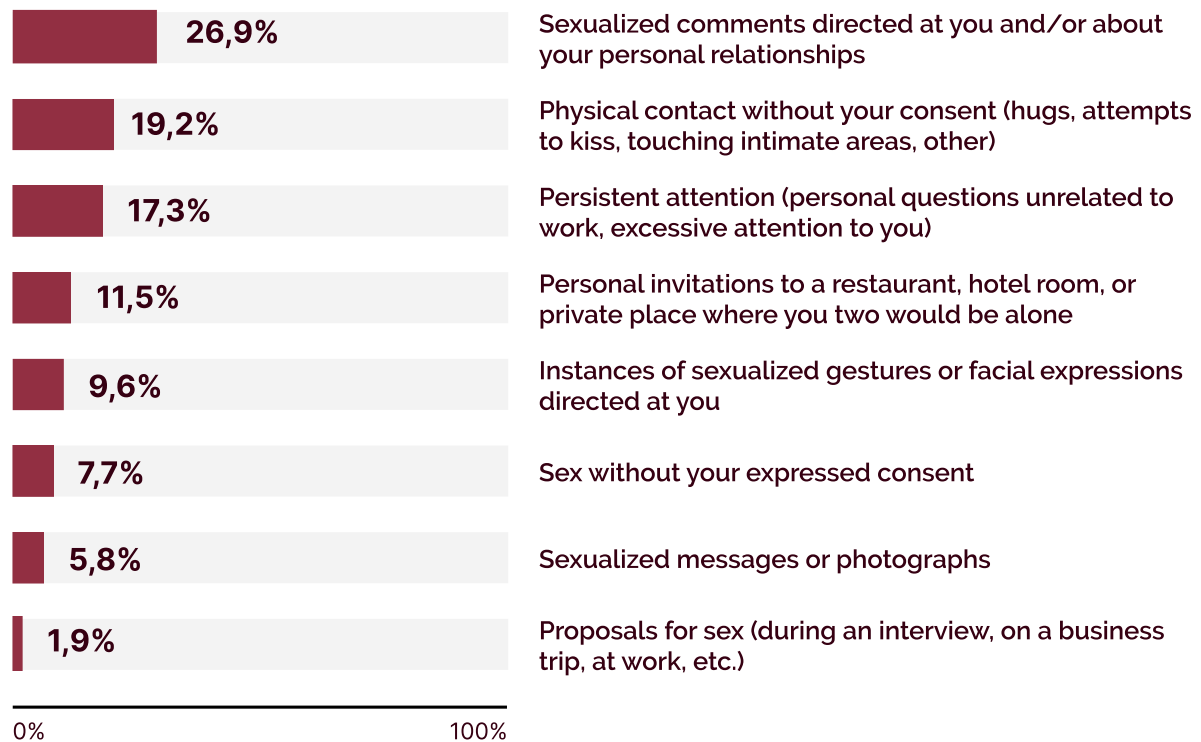
"Have you experienced harassment in your professional environment: discrimination, moral pressure (bullying), or actions of a sexualized nature?"

43.9% of respondents stated that they had not encountered such issues, while 56.1% reported having such experiences. However, when asked follow-up

questions, it was revealed that 79% of all respondents had experienced some form of harassment at least once in their lives. This suggests that women do not always recognize the actions directed at them as harassment.

"Have you experienced sexualized harassment?"

The responses were distributed as follows:



Thus, the most common forms of sexualized harassment were sexualized comments and physical contact without consent. This indicates that verbal and physical harassment are the most frequent and tangible forms of boundary violations in the workplace.

Persistent attention (17.3%) also plays a significant role, indicating systematic violations of professional boundaries through personal questions and excessive attention. This creates additional pressure on women and can lead to feelings of insecurity and discomfort.

It is noteworthy that propositions for sexual relations in exchange for career opportunities were not mentioned, which may either reflect a lack of readiness among respondents to disclose such incidents, or their absence in the specified fields.

It is important to highlight that such manifestations of sexualized behavior not only undermine professionalism and trust within the team but can also significantly affect the psycho-emotional well-being of women, negatively impacting their morale and career prospects.

Specific situations that respondents have encountered or are aware of:

Unacceptable behavior at work:

- A supervisor slapped a respondent on the buttocks when she asked him to check the work process. When she expressed her outrage, he claimed that nothing had happened.
- A respondent described her experience at a job she left due to the lack of formal employment. She stated that the employer exhibited inappropriate behavior while under the influence of alcohol at the workplace, which included humiliating colleagues and making unwelcome advances.

The situations described by the respondents highlight various aspects of harassment, including both sexualized violence and unwanted physical contact, as well as psychological pressure. It is important to note that in some cases, respondents face the issue of their experiences being underestimated by those around them, particularly in the workplace, where certain incidents (such as those occurring at work) may be perceived as normalized behavior, contributing to a sense of impunity for the harasser.

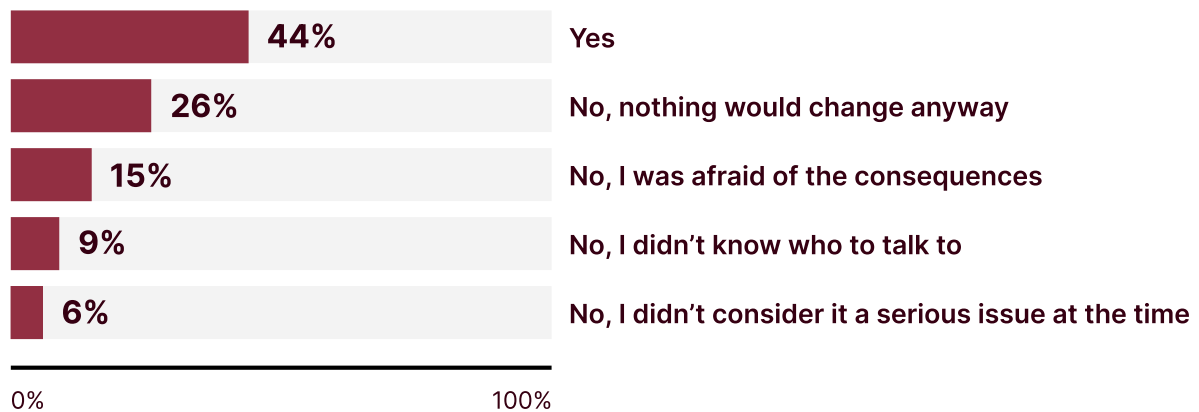
Significant attention is also given to situations in exile, emphasizing the importance of support and protection for women in foreign countries, where legal and social structures can differ significantly from those in their home countries. The mentioned examples of violence and pressure further highlight the need for protective mechanisms at all levels, from family relationships to professional interactions.

"Who was the perpetrator of the harassment?"

65% of respondents were able to identify the harasser. Of this group, 69% indicated the harasser as a supervisor, while 31% -- work colleagues.

"Did you tell anyone about the incidents of harassment?"

The responses were distributed as follows:

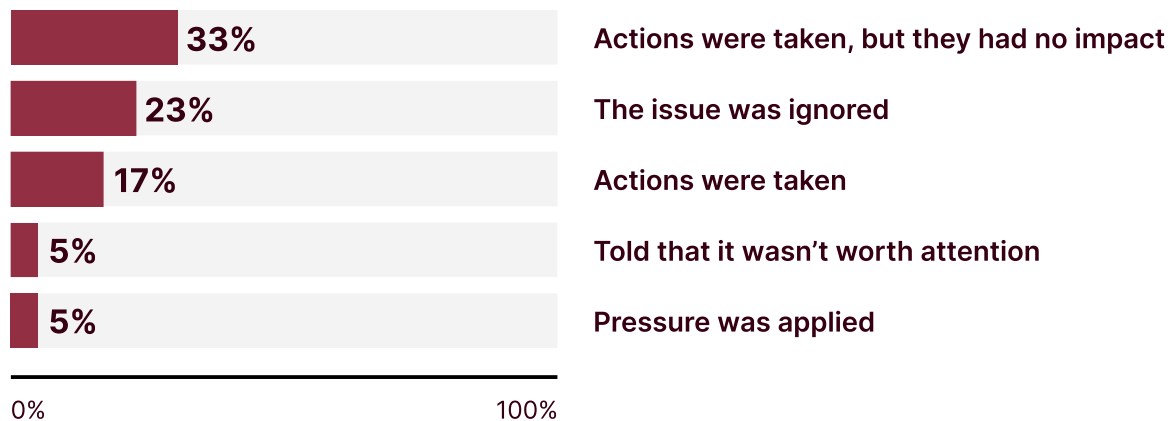


These data show that just under half of the victims (44%) found the courage or opportunity to share their experiences. The remaining responses indicate a significant level of distrust in the response system, *normalization of harassment by society*, fear of consequences, and a lack of awareness about existing support mechanisms.

Additionally, 17% of respondents who experienced harassment shared their experiences with close relatives or friends.

"What was the response from management when you reported the harassment?"

The responses were distributed as follows:



These results indicate that, in most cases, the response from management was either ineffective or nonexistent. Only 17% of respondents noted that action was taken. However, in 33% of cases, despite actions being taken, the situation remained unchanged. This highlights the need for a more serious approach to such complaints, increased responsibility from management, and the creation of more effective response mechanisms.

"Are you aware of harassment situations among your acquaintances?"

This question was asked to assess the scale of the problem and understand its prevalence.

The respondents shared the following examples:

Sexualized violence and pressure at work

- Five respondents mentioned threats of dismissal, invitations to meet outside of the workplace (e.g., to visit someone's home or go to the movies), as well as negative changes in attitude toward them after refusing such proposals, which in some cases led to dismissal a few months later.

Unwanted attention

- One respondent provided an example where a man persistently invited her friend to a private dinner despite her refusals.

Sexualized violence and stalking

- Two respondents noted instances of sexualized violence and stalking in the field of Belarusian activism.

Sexualized comments

- Many respondents were aware of situations where educators made inappropriate comments about the appearance or clothing of female students.

Alcohol and manipulation

- One respondent shared an incident she knew of, where a colleague repeatedly got female coworkers drunk with the intention of later engaging in sexualized contact with them.

Violation of personal boundaries

- One respondent reported an incident where a professor kissed her friend during class without her consent.

The examples highlight three key issues:

First: Abuse of power and violation of hierarchy. Many of the cases involve harassers leveraging their professional position to exert pressure on victims.

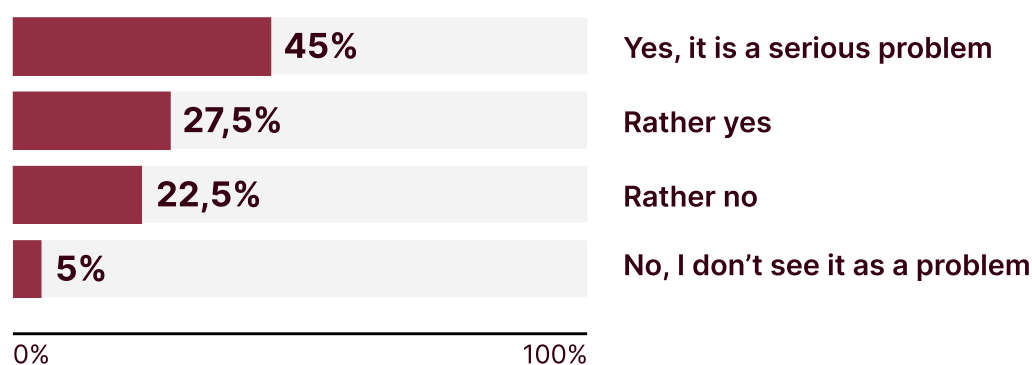
Second: Manipulation through the victim's vulnerability. This includes tactics such as using alcohol or threatening with dismissal.

Third: Lack of protective mechanisms. Many of these situations could have been avoided if effective tools for prevention and accountability had been in place.

These examples emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive solutions, including the adoption of clear ethical standards in educational and professional institutions, fostering a culture of appropriate behavior, and promoting awareness of personal accountability for such actions.

Perception of Harassment in the Belarusian Emigrant Community "Do you think harassment is a widespread issue in the Belarusian community in exile?"

Response distribution:



The majority of respondents (72.5%), including those who chose "Yes, it is a serious problem" and "Rather yes," believe that harassment is a widespread issue in the Belarusian community in exile. This indicates a high level of awareness about the problem and its consequences.

However, some respondents (22.5%) leaned toward the view that harassment is not a widespread issue, while 5% did not consider it significant at all. Potential reasons for this may include:

- Differences in personal experiences and living conditions.
- Lack of awareness or unwillingness to acknowledge the issue.

Analysis of in-depth interviews

Respondents emphasize that working in fields with a strong social mission—such as media, NGOs, and social work—comes with an expectation of a safe environment and shared values. As a result, encountering harassment in these spaces makes it even more difficult to recognize and report the issue. For instance, one participant commented:

"We fought for the revolution, so people fear disappointment and choose to defend what is happening."

This statement highlights the conflict between expectations and reality: even in environments aimed at progressive change, there is a prevailing fear of acknowledging problems, which amplifies the trauma of such experiences. Furthermore, harassment is often perceived as commonplace or "not serious."

In contrast, expectations from the political sphere are the opposite: bias against women is more openly expressed. For example, participants shared statements such as:

"As soon as a woman gets a position, it means she had a relationship with one of the top men."

These remarks illustrate stereotypes that devalue women's professional achievements.

Gender Imbalances

- Women perform routine tasks, while men occupy leadership positions. An example from an interview:

"We have an overwhelming number of women doing the grunt work, while the leadership roles are predominantly held by men."

This reflects systemic gender segregation in the workplace, where women are confined to invisible, less prestigious roles. This limits their opportunities for advancement and leaves them in vulnerable positions.

- The likelihood of harassment is higher in teams with male leadership. One respondent shared:

"I know of at least two female employees who were coerced into relationships at work. While she's his 'mistress' she gets bonuses, and then the swings begin - threats, devaluation, and pay cuts."

This example illustrates how the absence of clear boundaries and accountability within leadership creates an environment ripe for abuse. Dependency on such "bonuses" exacerbates the trauma and feelings of helplessness for those involved.

Main Forms of Harassment

The most common forms of harassment, as reported by respondents, include:

1. Compliments with sexual connotation.

"Oh, you look great!" He [the boss] would periodically make sexualized jokes. She was trying on a dress, and he said, "How about showing it off to me too?"

This quote illustrates everyday harassment that becomes normalized in the workplace. Even seemingly complimentary remarks directed at women can create discomfort and violate personal boundaries.

2. Physical contact

"I was 19 years old when an older man approached me and started massaging my shoulders. There were many people around. My reaction was to freeze, and I saw that no one said this was wrong. Only when he tried to do the same thing to another girl, and she refused, did I realize I could say 'no.'"

This case highlights both the normalization of inappropriate behavior and the need for collective support to ensure such actions are deemed unacceptable. The silence of others exacerbates feelings of helplessness, especially for young women.

Power and Vulnerability

Women are often afraid to talk about harassment because of the concentration of power in the hands of one person. The monopoly of power in the workplace reinforces fear and suppresses resistance. Women feel that any complaint could jeopardize their career or the existence of the project.

Thus, one female respondent stated:

"Decision-making is tied to a single person. That's why women hardly ever speak up - you just won't find a job in this field afterwards."

"Often they lure us with bonuses, and then the harsh abusive behavior begins: 'Where would you go?'"

Such structure reinforces a sense of defenselessness. One respondent shared:

"I realize that if I start talking, they will stop working with me, and the world is divided into 'for' and 'against' camps. It's voluntary isolation."

This analysis reflects how the traumatic nature of harassment is exacerbated by the isolation of the victims, which deprives them of support and causes them to remain silent.

Emigration as an Aggravating Factor

In the context of emigration, women experience heightened vulnerability. Many report a growing sense of impunity among those who commit harassment.

"In emigration, many perpetrators of harassment feel like nothing will happen to them."

"The financial aspect is crucial. I couldn't find a job, so I continued to tolerate this."

This highlights the weakness of institutional mechanisms, particularly in the context of emigration. The lack of legal protection and unclear lines of accountability create a sense of hopelessness among women.¹⁰ Vulnerability is further amplified, leading to a chain of fears: expressing dissatisfaction—job loss—difficulty finding work in a particular field. This is compounded by financial instability, increasing the risk of exploitation for women in precarious situations.

Social Response and Powerlessness

Respondents highlighted the absence of societal support and the difficulties in shifting social norms.

"I read women's forums. Women often blame others: 'Why are you putting up with it?' You realize there's no support, just 'garbage dumped on your head.'"

This statement illustrates how public reaction can shift the focus from the perpetrator of violence to the victim. A similar situation is observed in the context of domestic violence, where accusations are often directed at the victim: "It's your own fault!", "Why do you tolerate this?". Such remarks from others reinforce the sense of guilt and discourage open communication about the problem, making it even more invisible and women even more vulnerable.¹¹

¹⁰ Violence has serious short- and long-term physical, economic and psychological consequences for women and girls, impeding their full and equal participation in society:

<https://eca.unwomen.org/ru/stories/explainer/2023/11/chasto-zadavaemye-voprosy-vidy-nasiliya-v-otnoshenii-zhenschin-i-devochek>

¹¹ We are talking about Victim-blaming: 'Victim-blaming' exists to a certain degree with all forms of violence. In order not to question the safety of the world around us when we hear of a violent incident, we may examine the behaviour of the victim and assure ourselves that if we avoid such risks and behaviour (e.g. being out late alone, venturing into certain areas, leaving our door unlocked, dressing in a 'provocative' way) we will avoid violence. This natural act of psychological self-defence, however, focuses our attention on the perceived responsibility of the victim, and may neglect to fully question the conduct of the perpetrator. By shifting the blame to the victim in gender-based violence, the focus is on the victim, often a woman, and her behaviour, rather than on the structural causes and inequalities underlying the violence perpetrated against her. – <https://www.unescwa.org/sd-glossary/victim-blaming>

Another example:

"The girl who introduced me to this man once said: "He got me very drunk. I fell asleep and woke up in different clothes. He said I had puked, and he changed me. But now after the respondent shared her story of harassment I am not sure that nothing happened."

This situation supports the thesis that there is a need for a shift in public rhetoric, a shift in focus from victim-blaming, mistrust, gaslighting, to the unacceptability of harassment in general, as well as the perpetrator of harassment. Otherwise, women are left alone with doubts about whether their feelings were justified and with a sense of helplessness.

Reasons for women's silence

Main reasons:

- Harassment was perceived as the norm in Belarus and remains so in communities in exile.

"In Belarus, butt slapping and grabbing subordinates was the norm."

Historical tolerance of harassment shapes a culture of silence, where violation of personal boundaries becomes commonplace.

- Fear of reputational consequences.
"The way the system works is that the person who does nasty things keeps his job. He still looks omnipotent, he's trusted. You're afraid you won't be able to find a job because of your reputation."

This comment emphasizes the dependence on charismatic leaders that reinforces the fear of social and professional sanctions for victims of harassment.

Recommendations for Change from Respondents

1. Raising Awareness and Strengthening Personal Boundaries

- Organizing training for women aimed at developing skills to actively assert and recognize their boundaries is crucial.

For example, specialized workshops could be conducted to help women understand that their self-worth is not tied to their professional achievements ("You are not your job"). Many women do not realize when and how their

boundaries are being violated, while aggressors tend to systematically identify vulnerable individuals they can exploit.

Organizations frequently appeal to women by promoting noble values and ideas or offering opportunities to participate in meaningful projects. However, it is common for their work to be undervalued, compensated either with low wages or minimal material benefits and privileges, such as meals or a chance to belong to a particular community.

2. Implementing Structural Changes

- Reputation and Legal Accountability System

It is crucial to reform the institution of professional reputation to ensure it functions effectively. Individuals found to have committed harassment should lose their professional reputation, including access to grants. For example, the UN has a system that tracks individuals accused of harassment, maintaining a centralized database to prevent them from being employed in UN structures again.¹²

- Legal Assistance

Introducing free and independent legal aid for victims is essential. This would provide women with the protection of their rights and access to support in challenging situations.

3. Documentation and Recordkeeping of Violations

Establishing a database of harassment cases is necessary to provide documented evidence and preserve the facts for accountability and future prevention.

4. Educating Women

- Legal Literacy and Confidence

Women should be provided with educational opportunities to increase their awareness of their rights, methods of protection, and strategies to counter wrongful actions. Training should cover such skills as recognizing potentially vulnerable situations, establishing and asserting personal boundaries, as well as knowledge of available legal and social protection mechanisms. This preparation would help women not only mitigate the risk of exploitation but also build confidence in their ability to handle challenges and advocate for their interests.

"Women need to understand their rights, be confident in themselves, and not fear taking action when their boundaries are violated."

- Shifting the Paradigm

¹² <https://shknowledgehub.unwomen.org/en>

The current system, shaped by patriarchal norms, assumes men are primarily responsible for financially supporting their families, while the work of women is undervalued. Although women often shoulder a significant share of both domestic and professional responsibilities, their contributions frequently remain invisible.

"This is a paradigm where women, despite their responsibilities, continue to perform undervalued work."

5. Establishing a Protection System for Female Employees

- Creating an Independent Union

An independent union should ensure the protection of women's rights without conspiracy of silence or favoritism. This is especially important for:

- Ensured paid sick leave.
- Guaranteed vacation rights.
- Protection of employees from dismissal without notice.

Example:

"One employee was dismissed two weeks before the end of the month without notice, leaving her no time to find a new job or prepare for the situation."

6. Solidarity and Collective Action

- Uniting Women to Develop Joint Solutions Against Harassment.

"Don't stay silent—unite. Get together, find a solution."

Collective action and the solidarity of women can serve as powerful tools to shift public perceptions of the issue.

- Shifting Perspectives

Many men, even without direct intent to violate boundaries, may not realize that their behavior is inappropriate. Therefore, engaging in constructive dialogue with men is crucial to raising awareness about harassment.

"I believe that many men, who didn't mean any harm, would start understanding the problem if it were explained to them."

Analysis of Harassment: Causes, Connection to Social Structures, and Insights from Women's Rights Experts' Key Findings

This report incorporates insights from four independent experts specializing in women's rights and advocacy. Expert opinions in this area are essential for understanding the root causes of harassment and identifying potential solutions. As a result, key conclusions have been drawn and organized into thematic sections

Harassment is neither an isolated nor a random occurrence. Instead, it is a systemic issue embedded within a broader framework of violence and discrimination¹³. These phenomena are deeply ingrained in social and cultural mechanisms, perpetuating and normalizing such behaviors. The structural causes of harassment are closely linked to economic and social inequality, stereotypes about the roles of men and women, as well as the normalization of violence.¹⁴

Why Is It Important to Talk About Harassment?

One of the key steps in combating harassment is open dialogue about the issue. When harassment becomes a subject of public discussion, women begin to recognize their own experiences in others' stories, realizing that what happened to them was not "flirting" but rather a form of exploitation, humiliation, and violence. This awareness emerges through the sharing of diverse voices and experiences.

It is crucial for as many people as possible to speak about harassment -- victims, lawyers, psychologists, parents of victims, children, government representatives, and journalists. Only when the issue is addressed from multiple perspectives can women understand that harassment is neither normal nor accidental, but rather a manifestation of systemic and structural problems.¹⁵ For example, seemingly "harmless" behaviors like "jokes" and persistent "compliments" or leaning in to sniff perfume behind someone's ear may appear innocent until society begins to discuss how these acts constitute harassment. Silence and a lack of awareness create an environment where victims believe they are the only ones experiencing such issues:

¹³ No woman is safe from sexual assault - even if she holds a high position in society. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 82 percent of women MPs surveyed had experienced some form of psychological violence and 20 percent had experienced sexual harassment. Given the scale of the problem, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has issued recommendations on how to counter sexism and harassment.

<https://news.un.org/ru/story/2019/11/1368071>

The Inter-Parliamentary Union is a worldwide organization of national parliaments. <https://www.ipu.org/>

¹⁴ <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/preventing-and-addressing-violence-and-harassment-world-work-through>

¹⁵ <https://www.ywcanwil.org/why-is-it-important-to-talk-about-domestic-violence/>

"If this happened, there must be something wrong with me." Talking about this is essential to dispel the myth of uniqueness of such situations and to demonstrate that this problem is both widespread and systemic.

The Roots of the Problem

All forms of violence are interconnected,¹⁶ and in contexts where violence against vulnerable social groups is normalized, it becomes ingrained in everyday practices of interaction. These practices include obstetric violence, coercive pedagogical methods (e.g., "standing in the corner"), and physical and emotional abuse. Additionally, centralized forms of violence, particularly in the workplace, are widespread yet often unrecognized as such. For example, when a supervisor behaves inappropriately toward subordinates, such as by raising their voice, they often do not perceive this as an act of violence. Similarly, subordinates tend not to interpret such behavior within this framework.

Harassment is closely tied to discrimination and gender inequality.¹⁷ One manifestation of this is unequal pay. Women often earn less than men for the same positions,¹⁸ reinforcing the perception of their "inferiority" in society. In corporate culture, this dynamic can lead to situations where women are not taken seriously, and their professionalism is overlooked.¹⁹

Gender inequality in the economic sphere creates conditions that foster harassment. It is important to understand that economic dependence and workplace discrimination exacerbate women's vulnerability to harassment.

Hostile work environment. Harassment is often part of creating a toxic workplace culture where women, particularly younger employees, may feel forced to endure humiliation in order to "earn their place in the team."

Discrimination itself lays the groundwork for harassment by reinforcing hierarchical relationships and making women perceive inappropriate behavior as something inevitable.

¹⁶ This 2019 study shows in graphs how all types of violence are interconnected: <https://socio.bas-net.by/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rezultaty-issledovaniya-o-rasprostranennosti-nasiliya-v-otnoshenii-zhenshin.pdf>

¹⁷ https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/sexism-at-work-handbook/part-1-understand/what-sexual-harassment?language_content_entity=en

¹⁸ <https://eca.unwomen.org/ru/news/stories/2020/9/explainer-everything-you-need-to-know-about-equal-pay>

¹⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michelleking/2021/10/26/the-authority-gap-why-women-are-still-taken-less-seriously-than-men/>

It is worth noting that there is a factor of conspiracy of silence in the violence:

"You can be an observer, and it is impossible to extract this from the Belarusian context at all - you turn on TV, YouTube and witness that. You, most likely, were a victim of violence in different forms and, most likely, you yourself were in the role of an abuser (shouting, stomping feet, etc.). And it's a tangle of relationships that you can't get out of."

The Belarusian community has developed within a system where hierarchy, power, and control are important. Without critical reflection on these aspects, they continue to operate and become normalized. These patterns have been present since the post-Soviet era, including the years following Belarus's independence in 1991 and under the rule of Lukashenka. Particular attention should be paid to the period of Lukashenko's rule from 1994 to the present, when political rhetoric systematically legitimized violence and belittled women.²⁰ The role of women was often defined as subservient, with an emphasis on their reproductive functions.²¹ As a result, many people fail to recognize the impact of these attitudes, often perceiving them as natural forms of interaction.

It is crucial to understand that harassment is not merely the behavior of isolated individuals but rather the product of societal attitudes and hierarchies that place women in vulnerable positions.

Low wages and reduced economic independence leave women less protected from harassment, particularly in the workplace. The threat of blackmail, job loss, or damage to one's reputation becomes more tangible for those unable to resist the system. As noted earlier, some of the women interviewed had worked longer in an organization where there had been incidents of harassment by the employer:

"The financial aspect is very important. I couldn't find a job, so I continued to tolerate this."

Work environments where leadership holds significant power over subordinates create conditions ripe for abuse. In creative fields such as theater or the film industry, harassment is often viewed as a "prerequisite" for career growth²²:

"In school or at work, it's seen as a condition for successful studies or a career."

Women in these situations often do not recognize harassment as violence until they face betrayal or serious consequences.

²⁰ <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/50826.html>

²¹ <https://belta.by/president/view/zhenschina-v-belarusi-dolzha-rozhat-ne-menee-troih-detej-lukashenko-131069-2010/>

²² The Weinstein Story: "I think everyone is shocked, but not surprised," said actress Rita Moreno at a Beverly Hills event honoring women in television. The 85-year-old actress encouraged women to share their stories. She herself recounted being persistently pursued by a film studio executive when she was just 19 years old.- <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-41628071>

Hierarchies and Dehumanization

Men who engage in harassment often believe their actions fall within the boundaries of acceptable behavior.²³ This mindset is rooted in deeply ingrained dehumanization and objectification of women. When women are seen not as individuals but as objects or means to fulfill personal goals, physical and moral boundaries become blurred.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in creative circles, where there is a pervasive belief that "artistic people" are entitled to anything. Women in these environments are often reduced to being mere "muses," expected to inspire. However, when a woman "stops behaving correctly," her opinions and individuality are dismissed as irrelevant.²⁴ Such men frequently use alcohol or drugs as excuses: "I don't remember anything," or "It was an accident." These are mere attempts to evade accountability for their actions.

Social Stereotypes and the Role of Women: A Foundation for Harassment

Harassment is closely tied to entrenched stereotypes about women's roles in society. From a young age, women are often taught to be "obedient" and "convenient"²⁵. This fosters a false sense of self that hinders their ability to defend their boundaries:

"A girl does everything right, agrees with her parents on everything, and then she goes to school or work and continues to be obedient."

As a result, women find it harder to say "no" or to recognize when their rights are being violated. This creates a favorable environment for harassment, especially in situations where the perpetrator's actions are disguised as "attention" or "help."

²³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/business/men-at-work-wonder-sexual-harassment.html>

²⁴ <https://www.forbes.ru/forbes-woman/433389-vse-hudozhnicy-stoyat-menshe-chem-odin-pikasso-pochemu-zhenshchiny>

²⁵ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2022/06/un-women-reveals-concerning-regression-in-attitudes-towards-gender-roles-during-pandemic-in-new-study>

Culture of Violence and Normalization of Harassment

The culture of violence in society becomes normalized from childhood and permeates all aspects of life. The use of aggression and humiliation in upbringing fosters an acceptance of violence as a norm.²⁶ This reinforces existing systems where harassment is viewed as acceptable.

Why Are Women Silent About Harassment?

Several reasons contribute to women's silence, including:

1. Feelings of shame and self-blame

Women who experience harassment often feel ashamed and shift the responsibility for what happened onto themselves:

"I didn't fight hard enough, I didn't say 'no' clearly enough, maybe I somehow signaled with my behavior that this was acceptable."

This self-critical attitude is exacerbated by stereotypes that suggest the victim "provokes" the harasser.

"I didn't fight hard enough, I didn't say 'no' clearly enough, maybe I somehow signaled with my behavior that this was acceptable. You exaggerate the role of your responsibility"

2. Fear of Judgment

The fear of being judged by society or close ones also prevents women from speaking out. One respondent mentioned her hesitation to tell her parents about the incident:

"My dad would kill him, and my mom would kill me."

Such attitudes deepen the isolation of victims and allow perpetrators to remain unpunished. The more abusers escape accountability, the higher the overall level of violence in society.

3. The Taboo Nature of the Topic

Harassment remains a taboo subject in society, particularly when it occurs in

²⁶ Normalization of violence by the example of repression: <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/37141.html>

professional settings. Discussing it is often perceived as shameful, leaving many feeling uncomfortable. Women often feel trapped in a no-win situation:

"If you refuse, you lose your place under the sun; if you agree, you lose your reputation and your self-respect."

4. Victim-Blaming

Society often shifts the responsibility for violence onto women with statements like, "You provoked it," "You behaved inappropriately," or "Why didn't you leave?" Even women themselves, when faced with violence, may begin to blame themselves. As one survivor admitted: *"When I'm criticized, my first thought is, 'I didn't explain myself well enough.'"* This attitude suppresses the willingness to speak out and seek support.

5. Lack of Structural Support

Victims often don't know where to turn for help. There are no accessible mechanisms to help them defend themselves. Moreover, even attempting to share their story can lead to retraumatization, as women are forced to repeatedly recount their experience, often facing judgment and disbelief.

6. Corporate Ties and Fear of Conflict

Many people hesitate to criticize a colleague who is a perpetrator in order to "avoid creating tension." Men in particular often prioritize maintaining friendly relationships, fearing the loss of group "loyalty." This dynamic reinforces a culture of silence.

How Inequality Amplifies Harassment

There is a clear connection between women's economic and social vulnerabilities and the increased risk of harassment. Financial dependence significantly heightens women's susceptibility to manipulation and threats in the workplace. In the context of emigration and the fear of losing their job, women find themselves in an even more precarious position. Additionally, the fear of social judgment and taboo on discussing harassment further silence victims and enable impunity.

These factors reinforce a system where harassment becomes normalized behavior, perpetuating a cycle of violence supported by a culture of complicity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Belarusian civil society in exile is currently undergoing a process of transformation. A significant portion of this community has been forced to emigrate to European Union countries, where states are held accountable for human rights violations. At the same time, this civil society has fled a country where violence is normalized,²⁷ as vividly demonstrated by the widespread torture documented during the 2020 protests (See investigations and reports by the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus).²⁸

According to the report, many women continue to experience harassment in professional and related settings. Harassment manifests in a wide range of forms, from psychological abuse, such as insults, to acts of sexualized violence.

Women who have been forced to emigrate and experienced harassment face numerous challenges. These include the lack of labor unions, insufficient proficiency in the local language, a lack of awareness of their rights, and limited knowledge of organizations where they can seek qualified assistance. Additionally, there is significant pressure to work toward a "shared goal". The notion of "keeping dirty laundry private" becomes even more relevant in this context, extending beyond its traditional association with domestic violence to encompass workplace relationships, volunteering, activism, and other areas.

In light of these challenges, the following measures are crucial:

1. Recognizing the structural nature of the problem

It is important to realize that harassment is not an issue of individual behavior, but a systemic phenomenon rooted in cultural norms. Societal attitudes must be reexamined, and the concept of "normal" must evolve. For example, behaviors previously considered "flirting" should now be recognized as forms of violence. Communication norms must be redefined at all levels, from families to corporate standards.

2. Establishing support mechanisms

Accessible and transparent systems of protection are essential for victims, including:

²⁷ Examples: the state's refusal to recognize the murder of Mikhail Pishcheuski as a hate crime: https://www.bbc.com/russian/international/2015/10/151027_belarus_gay_murder

The state's refusal to recognize the attack on a Belarusian filmmaker as a hate crime: <https://euroradio.fm/ru/v-minske-neizvestnyy-napal-na-lgbt-kompaniyu-odin-postradavshiy-v-bolnice>

Public rhetoric about the "place of women": <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/41542.html>

Refusal to adopt a bill on countering domestic violence: <https://belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-zhestko-raskritikoval-zakonoproekt-o-protivodejstvii-domashnemu-nasiliju-320484-2018/>

²⁸ <https://torturesbelarus2020.org/ru/>

- a. Ethics committees in businesses. Women should have a way to report harassment anonymously without fear of judgment from colleagues. These bodies must exclude individuals with histories of harassment and maintain gender balance to ensure a safe environment for reporting.
- b. Legal and psychological services. Support should be easily accessible, widely advertised, free, anonymous, and confidential.

3. Awareness-raising campaigns

Organizing and participating in awareness campaigns about the unacceptability of harassment as a form of violence against women is essential. For example, international campaigns like "16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence"²⁹

4. Drawing attention to the issue and explaining its nature.

It is important to educate the public on why touching someone without their consent, even when framed as a "compliment," constitutes violence. Media materials should emphasize the unacceptability of harassment and highlight that certain forms of harassment are crimes. Creating Precedents:

Punishments for harassment should be not only fair but also public. This sends a clear message to society that the issue is taken seriously, and that violence will not go unpunished. Publicized cases establish a culture of zero tolerance for violence.

5. Informing the Public

Society must provide victims with safe spaces to share their stories. Public discussions of the issue can help women realize they are not alone, that what happened is not their fault, and that this is not a "personal tragedy" but a widespread problem. For instance, "The March of Liza's Memory" served as a catalyst for collective acknowledgment of violence against women.

It is crucial to openly discuss harassment, create spaces for dialogue, and establish transparent protection mechanisms. Without these measures, violence will remain a normalized part of everyday life for many. Only a multifaceted approach combining diverse voices and structural solutions can support victims and reduce societal tolerance for violence.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that defending human rights inherently includes defending women's rights. Gender discrimination is a violation of human rights, and in patriarchal societies, harassment is a form of gender discrimination and, at times, gender-based violence. Therefore, the defense of human rights is inherently connected to the protection of women's rights.

²⁹ <https://eca.unwomen.org/ru/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/16-days-of-activism>

