

act:onaid

ActionAid Briefing paper: Sexual harassment and violence against garment workers in Bangladesh

Introduction

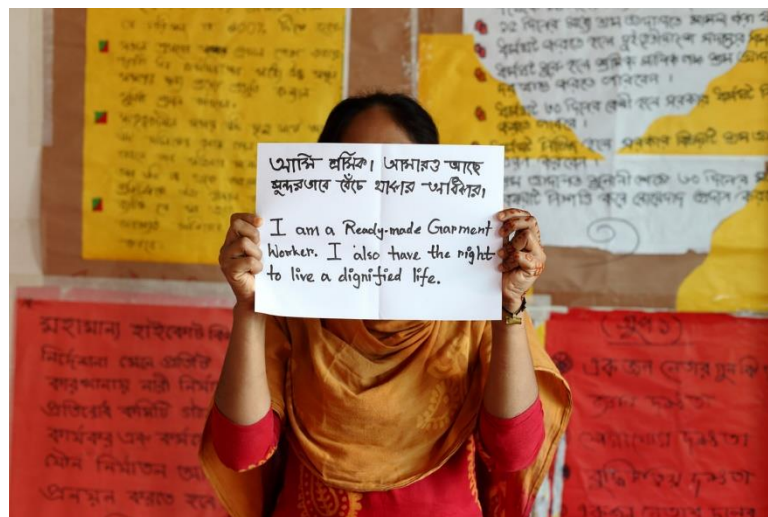
Research conducted by ActionAid has found that 80% of garment workers in Bangladesh have either seen or directly experienced sexual violence or harassment in the workplace.

This shocking figure demonstrates the need for greater protection of women and girls throughout the garment industry, which is one of Bangladesh's key industrial sectors.

Governments, employers and trade unions have recently negotiated the first ever international law to end violence and harassment in the world of work at the International Labour Conference (ILC) in Geneva. The law was adopted on 21 June 2019 and is a historic moment and a big step forward for women's rights in the workplace. Details of how individual countries of the ILO voted can be found at the end of this document in Appendix 1.

ActionAid is now calling on International Labour Organisation (ILO) member states to urgently ratify the treaty so that the law can be enacted and provide protection for women and other marginalised workers.

The experiences of women garment workers in Bangladesh demonstrate why this global legislation to end violence and harassment at work is so desperately needed. This briefing paper includes facts, figures and case studies which all show the devastating impact that sexual assault and harassment in the workplace has on women and communities.



1. Nurjan (pseudonym) holding up a message to the people who buy the clothes she makes. Image credit: Fabeha Monir/ActionAid

The research – part one

There were two parts to our research. Firstly, we commissioned the Centre for Development Communications to survey 200 garment workers in Bangladesh about their experiences of sexual violence and harassment at work. The workers who took part attend Workers' Cafés, supported by ActionAid Bangladesh in Dhaka where they receive information and support about their rights.

Experiencing and witnessing abuse

Our aggregate data showed that 80% of respondents reported experiencing or witnessing abuse at work. This includes all respondents who confirmed they had been subjected to at least one of the following: having been sexually harassed; molested or assaulted while working; having been subjected to extreme verbal abuse at work; and having seen a factory manager or supervisor abuse and harass other women.

“A lot of times women are forced to get involved with their line managers because of the power gap. It is common among line managers to use their position for taking undesirable and immoral advantages.” Survey respondent

% of women who had experienced or witnessed sexual assault, molestation or harassment in the workplace

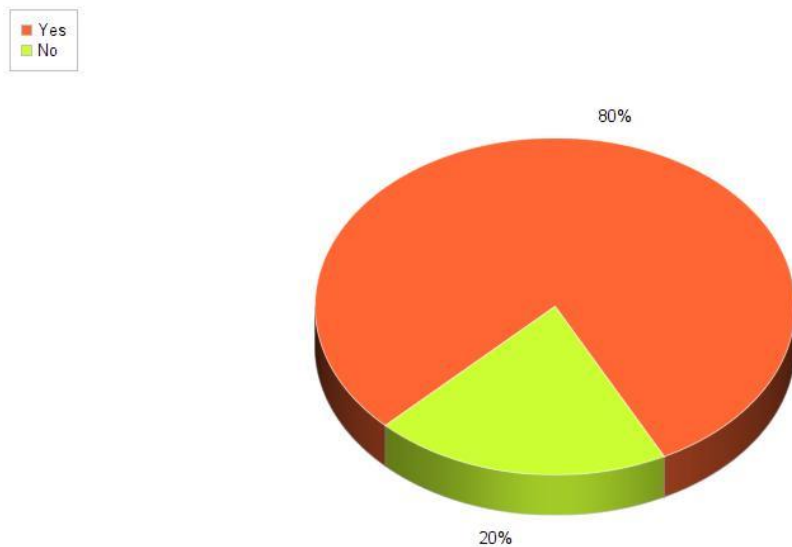


Figure 2: Chart showing % of women who had experienced and/or witnessed abuse

The data also shows that 12% of women said they had been sexually harassed molested or assaulted at work. A shocking 10% of women said they were currently being subjected to sexual harassment, molestation and assault at work. In reality, these figures are likely to be higher because survivors of abuse are sometimes reluctant to discuss this, whether because of anxiety, shame, or fear of reprisals.

“I did not share my experience of sexual violence with café workers when I faced it.” Survey respondent

Awareness and prevention of abuse

The vast majority (81.5%) of respondents said they were aware of abuse and harassment in and around work. A quarter (24.5%) claimed that most or all women in their factory had experienced some form of sexual harassment or abuse while working. However, 54% declined to answer the question, demonstrating the reluctance and fear around speaking out about sexual violence.

We also asked about the presence and impact of sexual abuse prevention committees. We found that for 84.2% of respondents who had experienced abuse, they were either unaware of a committee or there was none.

Safety in general

The survey also gathered data on the general safety of workers and the conditions in garment factories.

We found the vast majority of workers surveyed – 90% - described experiencing negative health impacts from their work. These included exhaustion (78%), severe back pain (57%), injuries to hands and feet (46%), depression and mental health instability (43%), eyesight issues (36%), and health issues linked to menstrual hygiene (23%).

% of respondents who had experienced negative health impacts from work

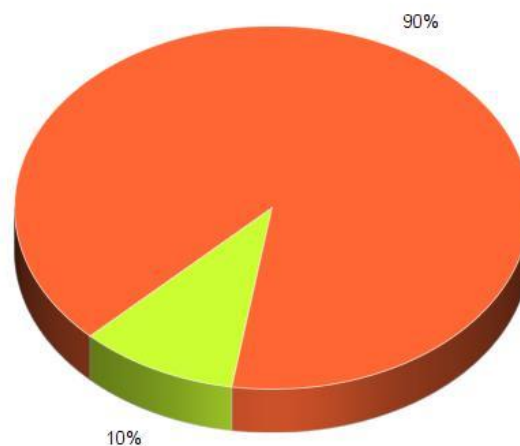


Figure 3: percentage of respondents who reported negative health impacts from their work

Every single respondent, without exception, reported some level of safety concern in and around the workplace. Often there is little or no support for women who are injured in the workplace.

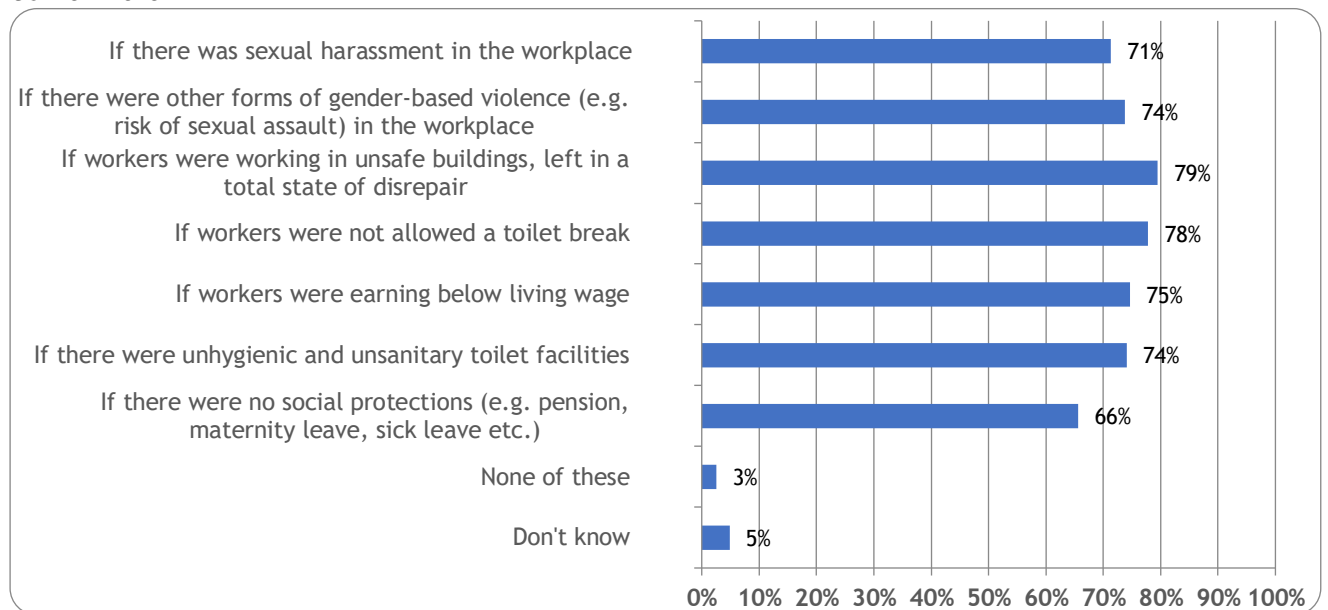
“Once I broke my leg at work, but my line manager did not approve my sick leave application. I did not receive any medical allowance from my factory, neither did I have any medical insurance.” Survey respondent

The research - part two

Secondly, we commissioned YouGov to conduct online surveys with nearly 7,000 people in the UK, Ireland, Netherlands, Sweden, USA and Australia on their attitudes to ethical clothing and workers' conditions. We wanted to understand the relationship between consumer choices and their awareness of workers' pay and conditions. We also wanted to understand people's attitudes to what constituted an intolerable working environment and whether their purchasing choices reflected those attitudes.

We found that many of our respondents would be unwilling to work in a factory that had similar conditions to those that garment workers in Bangladesh regularly face.

Figure 4: Which, if any, of the following conditions would make you unwilling to work somewhere?



All the conditions listed above are regularly experienced by garment workers in Bangladesh. In part, this is because there is no binding international treaty to protect and guarantee the rights of women and other marginalised workers. This is why our campaign at the International Labour Conference was so important and why ratification of the convention is such an urgent matter.



Nurjan (pseudonym) in a reflective moment. Image credit: Fabiha Monir/ActionAid

Our survey with YouGov showed that ethics were a factor in influencing which brands consumers purchased, although many had other, over-riding concerns that took priority. For example, half of our survey respondents felt that cost was more important when considering what to buy, while 47% were more concerned with the quality of the clothes. Just 14% of respondents said that ethical considerations were the most important thing when making their choices.

We also found that a significant number of people said there were barriers between them and buying ethical clothing. For example, 61% of respondents said that it was hard to know which clothing brands are ethical and 25% said that cost was a barrier to them when considering ethical fashion.

Towards the end of the survey we asked respondents to read a selection of statements and decide whether they believed each one to be true. The responses show that we still have a long way to go to raise awareness of the issues faced by workers in the garment industry around the world. For example, less than half of respondents felt it was true to say that garment workers in Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia face regular harassment and other forms of gender-based violence at work. Likewise, only 48% of respondents felt it was true that 59 countries have no national legislation that protects employees from sexual violence or harassment at work. See the next page for the chart in full.

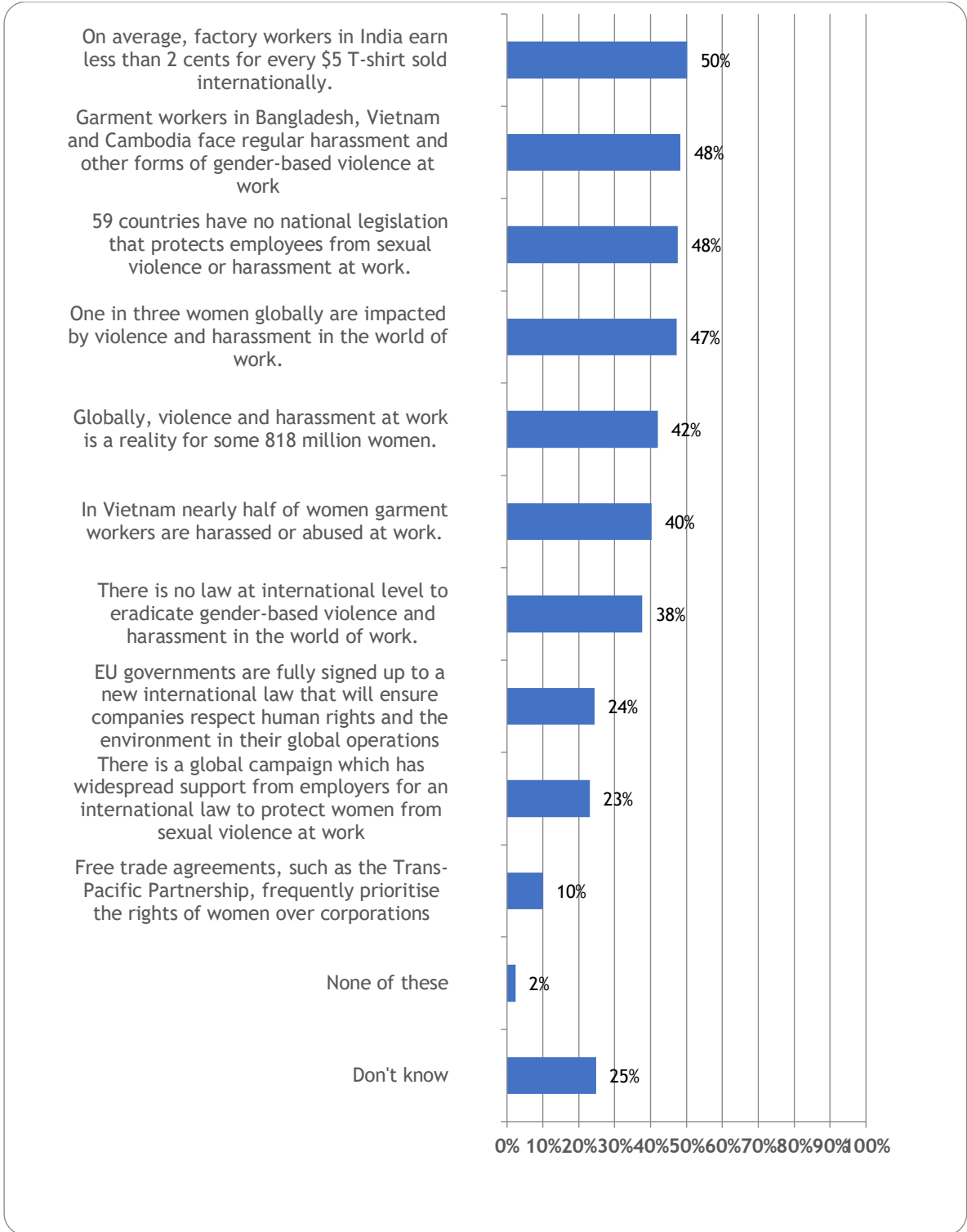


Figure 4: Which, if any, of the following do you think are true?

Garment workers share their stories

The following are two case studies that highlight the experiences of garment workers. Their powerful stories show why the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention and Recommendation is so vital in protecting women in the workplace.

Life for garment workers in Bangladesh can be frightening, brutal and painful. Sadly Salma's and Rahima's experiences, while awful, are far from uncommon.



*Salma (not her real name) is a garment worker in Bangladesh.
Image credit: Fabeha Monir/ActionAid*

Salma: I want to tell them that the dress you are wearing to look beautiful is made of our sweat and tears.

Fifteen years of working in the garment industry has left Salma suffering from severe back pain, which she can't afford treatment or time off for, and dreaming of a better life for her children.

Although just 38, she says back pain is "a common problem among most elderly workers".

"My plan is to buy land close to the city and build my own house there. I don't want to live in the slum anymore," says Salma, who lives in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka with her husband and two sons.

"I want my children to study and do something better. I do not want them to work in garments factories like me."

Although she says conditions for workers are getting better, she says verbal abuse remains rife and women still feel unable to report incidents of sexual violence and harassment.

"Perhaps 30% of women are facing some kind of violence. No one usually talks about it. Most of them do not even understand that they are being abused," she says.

"If a woman is pregnant in most cases she is bound to resign. Line managers bully women for getting pregnant.

“If we are not performing well or make a mistake, then they will start making offensive comments about our appearance.”

Salma has experienced terrifying incidents of sexual violence, including an attempted rape. But she says she could not discuss these with her family, or they would not let her return to work. She says workers are usually asked to leave the factory if they raise issues of harassment with the management.

In a previous role, her manager repeatedly asked her to stay back after work, but she refused. One morning when she was earlier than other works, he violently attacked her, dragging her up two flights of stairs.

“I thought I would have been raped. I never went back to that place again,” she says.

She says she didn’t know her rights before attending a Workers Café, an initiative supported by ActionAid Bangladesh to support garment workers. Since she has learnt about labour laws, maternity leave benefits, the right to work in a safe environment with access to clean drinking water.

Salma says that now she would report any incidents of violence and harassment. “I will protest now if anything happens. I will let the management know. If I do not get any justice from them, I will file a police complaint,” she says.

She questions whether the people who buy the clothes she makes, know how little garment workers are paid and the conditions they face. “I do not even know if they are aware of our pathetic living conditions,” she says. “I want to tell them that the dress you are wearing to look beautiful is made of our sweat and tears.”



Rahima at a sewing machine. Image credit: Fabeha Monir/ActionAid

Rahima: “I want to help younger women, so they never have to go through what I have”

Rahima, 35, says she feels fearful and tense while working as a machine operator in a garment factory in Bangladesh. She says her supervisor behaves badly towards her, especially during shipment time when the workload heavily increases.

She describes one particularly terrifying experience when she was asked to stay late by a quality control worker. When she refused to go upstairs with him, he became aggressive.

“He became tremendously violent and threw a piece of plastic at me. It started bleeding over my head. I was very afraid by then. He didn’t stop and then forcefully tried to drag me upstairs,” she says.

“I realised if I couldn’t save myself something terrible would happen to me. I kicked and punched him and started screaming loudly. Finally, my husband and the guard arrived to protect me.”

Rahima says she feels nervous whenever she thinks about this incident. Her husband went with her to the factory the next day to talk to the manager. But her attacker was never reprimanded, and it was dismissed as an accident.

“They did nothing,” says Rahima, who left the job soon after the attack. “I stayed at home for three years, I didn’t want to go back to any garment factory.”

She had to return to work, and she says attending a Workers’ Café helped her get her confidence back.

“If I had known more about my rights at the time, I could have brought justice for myself. Now I want to help other young women, so they never have to go through what I have faced,” she says.

Rahima says that violence and harassment are “happening everywhere”.

“Girls do not like to speak about it openly as they fear losing their jobs. It’s not only their job, they are concerned about their reputation, about their families. Many of the young girls are unmarried and they face harassment often,” she says.

Rahima adds: “If we can get a law [to end violence and harassment at work] and give girls justice, only then can the situation change.”

One of the ways ActionAid provides support is by helping to establish cafes for garment workers. These safe spaces offer women the opportunity to learn more about their rights while sharing their stories. Nasima’s story explains more about how this works.



Nasima in the Women's Café. Image credit: Fabeha Monir/ActionAid

Nasima: “The workers come to share the stories that they cannot share with anyone else.”

Nasima Akhter, manages Kalyanpur Café, Safety and Rights Society in Dhaka, which supports garment workers, mainly women, to understand labour law and their rights.

The cafés, supported by ActionAid Bangladesh, provide advice, training and support on a range of issues, such as being paid the minimum wage, unfair dismissal and sexual violence and harassment.

Nasima says women who attend the café feel more confident to challenge poor treatment at work: “They are now more aware, sensitive and vocal about different issues. They recognise injustices and stand up for themselves and others. The workers now are pushing the factory management to be compliant with the laws and regulations.”

She says she hears about incidents of sexual violence and harassment about once or twice a month.

“I would assume there are more such incidents, but women are not talking about it,” she says. “I have spoken with around 600 workers, mostly women. I would say I have heard stories of violence from around 150.

“Once a worker was bold enough to share an incident of rape with me. However, most workers are not comfortable to talk about such incidents.”

Nasima says that when women file complaints about sexual assault, they are often not taken seriously, and no action is taken against the abusers, who are usually in more senior management positions.

“Typically, their situation deteriorates after they complain. Most workers think the best option for them after an incident of sexual harassment is to quit,” she says.

Nasima believes that sexual harassment and violence are less common than in past because workers are more informed about their rights.

But women workers continue to face other forms discrimination and are often forced to resign if they get pregnant or ask for a salary increase.

Nasima says she supports workers facing dismissal, saying: “I usually suggest them to get united and go in a group and let the managers know about the discrepancies. Most of them are not very keen to do so because they feel they will not receive justice.”

Salaries and working conditions continue to be key challenges for garment workers in Bangladesh, Nasima says: “Even after working hard, they still have to struggle to provide for themselves and their families.

“Saving for the future and hoping to offer a good life to their children look like dreams that are too big for them to achieve.”

ActionAid Bangladesh supports 25 workers cafés, including 17 in Dhaka and eight in Chittagong, funded by the European Union and provided by local partners.

Nasima adds: “The workers come to cafes to share their stories that they cannot share with anyone else. The cafes serve as safe spaces for them.”

For more information on the research, the ILO campaign or the case studies, please contact ActionAid Media Manager Jenna Pudelek – jenna.pudelek@actionaid.org

When using any detail from this report, please credit ActionAid as the source. When using any detail from this report, please credit ActionAid as the source.

Appendix 1 – how ILO member countries voted

The table below contains the list of countries (Governments, Workers, Employers) who have abstained or voted against the Convention and Recommendation. If your country is not in any of the lists below, this means they have voted FOR both the Convention and the Recommendation.

Governments were entitled to 2 votes each, Employers 1, Workers 1.

E – Employers, G – Governments, T/W – Workers

Convention (439 voted for, 7 against, 30 abstained)	
Those who voted against are:	Those who abstained are:
Costa Rica (E)	Germany (E)
Dominican Republic (E)	Argentina (E)
El Salvador (E)	Austria (E)
Guatemala (E)	Bolivia (E)
Malaysia (E, T/W)	Brazil (E)
Singapore (E)	Chile (E)
	Colombia (E)
	Denmark (E)
	El Salvador (G, G)
	Honduras (E)
	Japan (E)
	Kyrgyzstan (G)
	Malaysia (G, G)
	Mexico (E)
	Panama (E)
	Paraguay (G,G, E)
	Peru (E)
	Russian Federation (G,G)
	Singapore (G, G)
	Sri Lanka (E)
	Sweden (E)
	Switzerland (E)
	Thailand (E)
	Uruguay (E)

Recommendation (For 397, against 12, abstained 44)

Those who voted against are:

Austria (E)
Bangladesh (E)
Denmark (E)
El Salvador (E)
Finland (E)
Honduras (E)
Malaysia (E)
Portugal (E)
Singapore (E)
Sudan (E)
Sweden (E)
Czech Republic (E)

Those who abstained are:

Argentina (E)
Australia (E)
Bolivia (E)
Brazil (G, G, E)
Chile (E)
Colombia (G, G, E)
Costa Rica (E)
Cote D'Ivoire (E)
Croatia (E)
Dominican Republic (E)
El Salvador (G, G)
Spain (E)
United States (G,G, E)
France (E)
Guatemala (G, E)
Indonesia (E)
Honduras (E)
Ireland (E)
Iceland (E)
Italy (E)
Japan (E)
Kyrgyzstan (G)
Luxemburg (E)
Mexico (E)
Myanmar (E)
Panama (E)
Paraguay (G, G, E)
Peru (E)
United Kingdom (E)
Russian Federation (G, G)
Sri Lanka (E)

	Thailand (E)
	Uruguay (E)