

**Tier 1 Pilot Grant Application: Laying the Foundation
 Autumn 2024 Cover Sheet**

Project Information

Please provide the following information.

Project Title	The mental health effects of secure ways to report physical and sexual harassment in the workplace
Budget Request from Initiative	\$24,870
Budget Match (if applicable)	
Total Project Budget	

Applicant Information

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Abstract

There is evidence of strikingly high incidence of sexual and physical harassment at workplaces in low-income countries. But many victims keep abuse secret as they fear retaliation from abusers if they report the abuse, especially to an employer who could act on the abuse (but is particularly likely to retaliate). Keeping secrets is associated with worse mental health, and the mental health of workers in the Bangladeshi garment factories we study is particularly poor.

This study will (i) conduct a follow-up phone survey focused on worker mental health approximately one week after a large scale experiment in Bangladeshi garment factories that offers treated workers the opportunity to report harassment through hard garbling (HG) techniques that ensures plausible deniability, and (ii) use the random assignment to HG to assess the causal impact of the ability to report harassment in a secure way on workers' mental health.

We build on previous work involving PI Heath in the same setting that finds that HG greatly increases workers' reports of physical and sexual harassment, yielding suggestive evidence of mental health benefits from the ability to report harassment through HG. We anticipate more precise results in a larger sample. The results will yield evidence that scaling up HG reporting mechanisms will generate mental health benefits in a population with poor existing mental health. They will thus be an important input into implementing a HG project at scale, which is of interest to NGO's, including the Amader Kotha Helpline (with whom PI Ali has previously collaborated).

Tier 1 Project Research Plan

Problem description. There is evidence of strikingly high incidence of sexual harassment at the workplace both in industrialized and developing countries, with women being much more likely to experience it than men (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 2016). In the U.S., the 25-85% of working women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (ibid). Workplaces in developing countries such as the Bangladeshi garment industry also feature high rates of physical violence as well (Naved et al, 2018; Gibbs et al, 2019; Akhter, Rutherford, and Chu; 2019).

While these numbers are already high, the true rates are likely even higher, because victims fear retaliation from abusers if they report the abuse, especially within-workplace reports of abuse to an upper-level manager who could act on the abuse (but may be noticed by the abuser). Thus, many victims keep abuse secret. But there is also evidence that keeping secrets is associated with worse mental health (Cole et al, 1996; Larson & Chastain, 1990; Larson, Chastain, Hoyt, and Ayzenberg, 2015; Lehmler, 2009; Slepian, Kirby, and Kalokerinos, 2020), and correspondingly, that confiding secrets is associated with better mental health (Slepian and Moulton-Tetlock, 2019). Mental health in Bangladeshi garment factories is accordingly on average poor; in ongoing data collection by PI Heath, 29% of garment workers reported feelings of depression at least one day in the past week and 40% reported feeling hopeless at least one day.

Project aims. We will (i) conduct a follow-up phone survey focused on worker mental health approximately one week after a large scale experiment in Bangladeshi garment factories that offers treated workers the opportunity to report harassment through hard garbling (HG) techniques that ensures plausible deniability, and (ii) use the random assignment to HG to assess the causal impact of the ability to report harassment in a secure way on workers' mental health.

Plan, design, and methods. To assess whether survey techniques that guarantee workers plausible deniability increase reporting of harassment in the workplace, PI Heath conducted (in collaboration with Laura Boudreau, Sylvain Chassang, and Ada Gonzalez Torres) an experiment in coordination with a large Bangladeshi apparel manufacturer (Boudreau et al, 2023). Within a phone-based survey of 2,245 workers, we implemented hard garbling (HG) techniques that automatically randomly record a share of reported "no's" as "yeses", thus ensuring plausible deniability to workers who report harassment. HG increased reporting of sexual harassment by 271% and physical harassment by 290%, from reporting rates of 1.8% and 1.5%, respectively, under the status quo of direct elicitation.

We will conduct a follow-up phone survey focused on worker mental health approximately one week after an upcoming replication study of Boudreau et al (2023), which will test the effect of HG on reporting of harassment in a larger sample of workers (n=4500) in a broader sample of factories. Because of the random assignment of workers to HG (vs direct elicitation), we can estimate treatment effects that assess whether the association between reporting and mental health in previous research is causal by using random assignment to HG as an instrumental variable to predict the disclosure of abuse.

We think it is indeed plausible that the opportunity to report harassment through HG improves mental health. Boudreau et al (2023) measured mental health and well-being in a follow-up phone survey and found that reports of harassment induced by random assignment to the HG arm (in a two-stage least squares framework) cause a 0.23 standard deviation increase in mental health (P = 0.291) and a 0.86 standard deviation increase in job satisfaction (P = 0.170). We anticipate more precise results in a sample that is almost twice as large.

Tier 1 Project Evaluation Plan

This project seeks to answer the following policy-relevant question: What are impacts on mental health of the opportunity to report workplace harassment in a way that ensures plausible deniability? Our measures of success are (i) a clean dataset resulting from a follow-up study measuring the mental health of workers who participate in the replication of Boudreau et al (2023) and (ii) instrumental variable estimates that report the causal impact of the ability to report harassment in a secure way on workers’ mental health.

The results in (ii) will yield evidence that scaling up HG reporting mechanisms will generate mental health benefits in a population with poor existing mental health. They will thus be an important input into implementing a HG project at scale, which is of interest to NGO’s such as the Amader Kotha Helpline (with whom PI Ali has worked on a related project on reporting of sensitive information in the workplace). The Helpline receives an average of 2,800 calls per month from a total of over 700 textile and apparel factories. Despite its successes, the Helpline has faced challenges to empower women to report workplace misconduct, especially sensitive topics like sexual harassment. If we find evidence that HG indeed increases mental health in a broad set of workers and without direct endorsement from the factory and the Helpline adopts it, workers in all Helpline-served factories would benefit. Further, this research has great potential for replicability in other contexts, especially workplace settings in which physical and sexual harassment are common. In fact, the Helpline is expanding its services to other developing countries in low-skilled manufacturing sectors; it recently began operating in Pakistan.

Project Timeline

Time	Activity
Ongoing	Recruitment of respondents for the replication of Boudreau et al (2023)
Nov-Dec 2024	Replication study of Boudreau et al (2023). Each respondent will be called back approximately 1 week after their initial survey and asked about mental health.
Jan-Feb 2024	Analysis of the effects of HG on workers’ mental health
March 2025	Applications to NIMH and NIH PDB R21 to scale-up HG in a nationwide sample of workers
August 2025	Application to NSF economics program to scale-up HG in a nationwide sample of workers

Biographies

ARM Mehrab Ali has more than 15 years of experience in planning, managing, designing, and supervising large-scale development research projects and has managed over 65 large-scale research projects, both in terms of sample size and timeframe. He also has extensive experience in developing innovative tools to facilitate different modes of data collection. He has also developed numerous technical tools and solutions on ODK, SurveyCTO, Python, Stata, R, and other data science platforms. He holds an MS in International Economics from the North South University.

Rachel Heath is a Professor of Economics at the University of Washington. She studies labor markets in developing countries, with a focus on working conditions in export manufacturing. She has 15 years of experience collecting data in the garment industry in Bangladesh. She is an affiliate of the Bureau for Research and Economic Analysis of Development (BREAD) and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL). She was a post-doc at the World Bank and holds a PhD in Economics from Yale University.

Tier 1 Project Budget

	Requested from Initiative	Funding Match
Salaries		
Faculty		\$25,208
Staff		
Student		
Benefits Based on Payroll Load Rate in Effect		\$6,277
Supplies and Materials Supplies, Equipment Under \$2,000, etc.		
Equipment Equipment Over \$2,000		
Tuition		
Other	\$24,870	
Total Direct Costs (PHI-requested funding cannot exceed \$25K)		

Budget Justification

We conduct this project in a cost-effective way by building off the replication of Boudreau et al (2023), which has \$55,000 of funding from Columbia University, Princeton University, and the Weiss foundation. We also use co-funding from the economics department to fund one month of summer salary for co-PI Heath to work on the project. Thus, the requested budget is for the follow-up phone survey (n=4500).

We include in particular:

- \$12650: Enumerator time (team of 14 enumerators paid 2400 taka or \$15.06 USD at the current exchange rate each for 43 days).
- \$7112: Supervisory personnel time. (Research associate for 2 months at 300,000 taka/2510.14 USD per month; Research fellow for 0.5 months at 500,000 taka/4183.57 USD per month)
- \$5670: Compensation for respondents (150 taka/1.26 USD X 4500 participants).

This budget was developed using information provided by the ARCED foundation, of which PI Ali is executive director, and with whom we would collaborate to hire local workers and conduct the survey. We worked with ARCED in the original Boudreau et al (2023) project and the upcoming replication, so their team has experience working with garment workers, collecting sensitive data, and implementing the HG mechanism.

References

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