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Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced yesterday that the Clinton Administration will award the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) a new grant to fight the abuse of women in sweatshops. ILRF will use this grant to launch an important new public awareness campaign against workplace sexual harassment worldwide.

Women working in sweatshops worldwide face daily threats and intimidation from exploitative bosses and factory managers. "This is a problem that afflicts the world's most vulnerable women," said project director Natacha Thys. "Young women in countries like Haiti, Cambodia and El Salvador are particularly vulnerable because they are desperately poor. They are forced to leave their villages and seek employment in factories, in homes as domestic workers, and on plantations to support their families. They can't afford to lose their jobs. Their employers know this, and they are often made victims of harassment, threats and sexual exploitation."

ILRF has found that the effects of sexual harassment can include depression, anxiety, insomnia and increased use of alcohol or drugs. Despite these far-reaching effects, sexual harassment is not an illegal practice in many countries. Currently there are no international labor conventions to protect women from workplace sexual harassment.

ILRF will work with local women's rights and labor rights organizations in Africa, Latin America and Asia to build a global campaign for effective national and international protections for women workers. The new funding from the US State Department will enable ILRF and its partners to conduct worker surveys and interviews in target countries in Africa and the Caribbean to determine the extent of the problem. Subsequently, ILRF and its local partners will develop an educational video to help alert women workers in these countries about the problem of sexual harassment. Next, project partners will develop national and international legal strategies to promote better protections for women workers.

"We want to make ending sexual harassment as important a priority as ending child labor, forced labor, or any other basic labor rights violation," said Thys.

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