



POPULAR ARTICLE

Challenges faced by women reviewers working in organic certification agencies

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Intricacies of the subject

Organic certification agencies play an important role in maintaining the credibility and integrity of organic products. Reviewers are responsible for examining inspection reports, supporting documents, non-compliances, corrective actions, traceability records, and other evidence before certification decisions are made. Women are increasingly working as reviewers, inspectors, technical officers, and managers in the organic certification sector. However, they may face several workplace challenges, including harassment, unequal treatment, pressure from senior personnel, long working hours, limited flexibility, and difficulties in maintaining independent technical judgment. This article highlights these challenges and proposes practical measures to improve the working environment for women reviewers. Key recommendations include transparent HR policies, fair project allocation, reasonable review timelines, equal work-from-home opportunities, compensation for weekend, administrative support, and protection from inappropriate management pressure. A fair workplace is essential not only for employee welfare but also for maintaining impartiality and credibility.

Introduction

Organic certification depends on a reliable system of inspection, review, and certification decision-making. Reviewers have an important responsibility because they evaluate whether the information collected during inspection provides sufficient evidence of compliance with applicable organic standards. A reviewer may examine inspection reports, farm or processing records, input information, traceability documents, mass balance, supplier certificates, laboratory reports, non-compliances, corrective actions, and other certification records. The reviewer must make an objective assessment based on standards, procedures, and documented evidence. Their participation strengthens the technical capacity and diversity of certification agencies. However, technical competence alone is not sufficient if the workplace does not provide equal opportunities, reasonable workloads, and independence. Women reviewers may experience challenges related to workplace harassment, management pressure, unequal treatment, excessive working hours, personal relationships within the organization, and limited flexibility. These issues should be addressed through transparent organizational systems rather than treated as individual problems.



Workplace harassment and HR policies

A safe and respectful workplace is essential for every employee. Women reviewers should be protected from sexual harassment, gender-based comments, bullying, intimidation, humiliation, discrimination, and inappropriate personal behaviour. An effective HR system should clearly define unacceptable behaviour and provide a confidential mechanism for reporting concerns. Employees should know whom they can approach and how complaints will be investigated. Importantly, HR rules should apply equally to everyone, including reviewers, auditors, quality managers, senior management, and other senior employees. No person should receive special treatment because of their position, influence, friendship, or relationship with management. Employees should also be protected against retaliation when they raise genuine workplace concerns. A reviewer should not fear losing projects, receiving unfair performance assessments, or facing other negative consequences simply because they reported inappropriate behaviour.

Pressure from quality managers and senior personnel

Reviewers are sometimes required to make difficult technical decisions. Pressure may arise when a quality manager, senior reviewer, auditor, or other manager disagrees with a reviewer's conclusion. This issue is not related to whether the manager is male or female. A female reviewer may experience inappropriate pressure from a female quality manager just as pressure can come from any other senior employee. For example, a reviewer may identify missing evidence or a non-compliance, while a senior person may encourage the reviewer to close the issue quickly. Such situations can affect the

independence of the reviewer. Certification agencies should establish a documented technical escalation process. Differences in technical opinion should be resolved through the applicable standard, certification procedure, and objective evidence. The reviewer should be able to explain and defend a technical decision without fear of personal consequences.

Pressure for positive certification decisions

The independence of certification decisions is fundamental to the credibility of an organic certification agency. Senior management may sometimes face commercial or operational pressure to complete a project quickly or retain an important client. However, such pressure should not compromise technical requirements.

A reviewer should not be pressured to take a positive certification decision merely because:

- The operator is commercially important;
- There is pressure to meet a deadline;
- Management wants to maintain a business relationship;
- A senior person has a personal relationship with the operator; or
- The reviewer is concerned about the consequences of disagreeing with management.

Certification decisions should be based on objective evidence and applicable requirements. Where evidence is insufficient, the reviewer should be able to request clarification, identify non-compliance, or recommend further action. Senior management should support technically justified decisions, even when those decisions are not commercially convenient.



Personal relationships, friendship and equal treatment

Personal relationships are common in workplaces. An auditor and reviewer may have studied together at school or college, worked together previously, or may be personal friends. Such relationships are not automatically a problem. The concern arises when personal relationships influence professional decisions. For example, friendship with a senior auditor, quality manager, or Managing Director should not result in preferential treatment regarding project allocation, workload, work-from-home permissions, leave, training, promotion, or performance evaluation. Similarly, employees should not receive additional pressure because another employee has a closer relationship with senior management. Certification agencies should have clear conflict-of-interest rules and should manage situations where personal relationships could influence, or appear to influence, professional decisions.

The principle should be simple: professional decisions should be based on competence, performance, evidence, and organizational procedures—not friendship or personal influence.

Workload and project allocation

Review work requires concentration and adequate time. The number of projects that can reasonably be assigned to a reviewer depends on the complexity of each project.

For example, if a normal project requires approximately three to four working days for proper review, project allocation should reflect this time requirement. A complex project involving several sites, products, standards, non-compliances, traceability records, and corrective actions may require additional time.

Workload planning should consider:

- Complexity of the operation
- Number of sites and products
- Volume of documentation
- Applicable certification standards
- Number of non-compliances
- Traceability and mass balance requirements
- Additional clarification required; and
- Experience of the reviewer.

Assigning excessive projects can create pressure to complete files quickly and may affect the quality of review. Reviewers should therefore be evaluated on both productivity and the quality and accuracy of their work.

Working late, weekends and holidays

Occasional urgent work may be necessary in certification activities, particularly during renewal periods or when important deadlines arise. However, regular late-night work should not become a normal expectation. Continuous long working hours can lead to fatigue, stress, reduced concentration, and increased risk of mistakes. For women reviewers, late working may also create difficulties relating to family responsibilities and personal safety.

Where employees are required to work on weekends or public holidays, the organization should have a clear policy for compensation. Depending on applicable law and company policy, compensation may include overtime payment, compensatory leave, or adjustment of working hours. The same rules should apply to all reviewers. One employee should not regularly receive compensation or flexibility while another employee performing comparable work receives none without an objective reason.



Work-from-home and flexible working

A significant part of review work involves documents and electronic records. Depending on confidentiality and information-security requirements, some review activities may therefore be suitable for work-from-home arrangements. Flexible working can improve productivity and work-life balance. However, access to work-from-home arrangements should be based on transparent criteria. A concern may arise if an employee is regularly permitted to work from home because of a close friendship with the Managing Director or another senior person, while other reviewers performing similar work are denied the same opportunity. The issue is not that an individual should not receive flexibility. The issue is that comparable employees should have a fair opportunity to request and receive flexibility based on objective criteria. A work-from-home policy should define eligibility, approval procedures, working hours, confidentiality, information security, communication requirements, and performance expectations.

Administrative and filing support

Reviewers need to maintain proper certification records and audit trails. Filing inspection reports, supporting documents, correspondence, and corrective-action records is therefore an important part of certification work. However, excessive administrative work can reduce the time available for technical review. Certification agencies should provide appropriate digital systems, standard filing procedures, checklists, and administrative support where necessary. Filing and administrative support should also be distributed fairly. It should not be provided only to selected reviewers because of personal relationships or informal preferences. Providing adequate administrative support allows reviewers to concentrate on their

primary responsibility: maintaining the technical quality and integrity of the certification process.

Recommendations

- Organic certification agencies can improve the working environment through the following measures:
- Implement clear HR policies covering harassment, bullying, discrimination, complaints, and retaliation.
- Protect reviewer independence by ensuring that technical decisions are based on standards and evidence.
- Establish technical escalation procedures for disagreements between reviewers and senior personnel.
- Allocate projects realistically, considering complexity and the actual time required. A project requiring three to four working days should be planned accordingly.
- Monitor working hours and avoid making excessive overtime a routine practice.
- Provide fair compensation or compensatory leave for approved weekend and holiday work.
- Introduce transparent work-from-home policies that provide equal opportunities to employees performing comparable work.
- Manage conflicts of interest where friendship, previous relationships, or personal connections could affect professional decisions.
- Provide filing and administrative support so reviewers can focus on technical assessment.
- Ensure equal treatment in workload, flexibility, training, promotion, compensation, and performance evaluation.
- Protect employees who raise genuine concerns from retaliation or unfair treatment.



Conclusion

Women reviewers are an important part of the organic certification system. Their responsibilities require technical knowledge, attention to detail, independence, and professional judgment. To perform these responsibilities effectively, they need a workplace based on respect, fairness, transparency, and equal opportunity. Issues such as harassment, inappropriate management pressure, excessive workload, long working hours, weekend work, unequal access to work-from-home arrangements, lack of administrative support, and preferential treatment based on personal relationships can negatively affect employee morale and may also create risks to certification impartiality. A certification agency should therefore establish clear HR rules and apply them consistently to all employees. Project allocation should be realistic, with sufficient time for proper

review. Where a project normally requires three to four working days, workload planning should reflect this requirement. Weekend and holiday work should be appropriately recognized and compensated according to applicable rules. Similarly, work-from-home flexibility should be available through transparent criteria rather than personal relationships. Friendship with a senior auditor, quality manager, or Managing Director should neither provide an unfair advantage nor create a disadvantage for another employee. Ultimately, the objective should not be to provide special treatment to women reviewers, but to ensure fair treatment, equal opportunity, professional respect, and a safe working environment for all reviewers. Such an environment will improve employee satisfaction while also protecting the independence, impartiality, and credibility of organic certification.

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