

Briefing 3.1 – Introduction to gender-based violence in the world of work

1. Introduction

This briefing introduces definitions of gender-based violence and highlights the importance of addressing these issues within a ‘world of work’ context, connecting workplaces to public spaces, transport and housing, as well as women’s unpaid roles in the family. In the next briefing, Briefing 3.2, gender-based violence is looked at specifically in relation to global supply chains.

Summary of key points: gender-based violence in the world of work

- Gender-based violence in the workplace is often invisible, but is a growing problem as more women enter the workforce. The most common form is sexual harassment.
- Both women and men can be victims of sexual harassment and violence – however, it is disproportionately experienced by women.
- The ‘world of work’ includes workplaces, transport and public places, and also takes account of women’s burden of care work.
- Globally one in three women experiences some form of gender-based violence.

2. Defining gender-based violence

This Resource Kit focuses principally on women’s experiences of gender-based violence in the world of work, as women are the vast majority of workers at the bottom of the global supply chain and it is women who overwhelmingly experience violence and sexual harassment. Gender-based violence is reinforced by gender inequalities between women and men, where women hold lower-levels of power than men. However, it is important to note that men and boys are also the victims of gender-based violence. Unequal gender roles have negative effects on men too, as they reinforce men’s power over women and perpetuate unequal societies.

In addition, ideas of masculinities are also socially reproduced and can result in gender-based oppression towards men.

Gender-based violence encompasses violence against women and girls as well as violence against men and boys, people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI), and other individuals who do not conform to dominant gender roles (ILO 2012). It has also become widely used to address violence against women as a phenomenon that is related to the gender of both victim and perpetrator.

In particular, gender-based violence is increasingly used to define acts of violence rooted in some form of ‘patriarchal ideology’ with the purpose of maintaining social power for (heterosexual) men. (Council of Europe, 2007)

Violence against women – in the home, in the workplace and in public spaces – perpetuates inequalities between women and men. It is an issue of significant global attention and is a key issue affecting women’s empowerment as identified under the UN Sustainable Development Goals. (UN, 2015)

The UN defines violence against women as:

“Violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.” (United Nations, 1993)

For a discussion of the different definitions of gender-based violence see the ILO’s Annotated Bibliography. (Cruz and Klinger, 2011)

- ➔ **Information Sheet 1 provides further information and definitions about gender-based violence as well as the main international instruments from the UN and the ILO that have relevance to gender-based violence.**

3. Gender-based violence in the world of work

3.1 Defining the world of work

The *world of work* is a concept developed by the ILO to encompass all aspects of women's and men's working lives, both paid and unpaid work. Gender-based violence in the world of work can occur in the workplace itself, in the home, in public places, in employer provided housing and in commuting to and from work. The concept of the world of work also encompasses informal work, such as selling products in the street or artisanal production or piecework in the home.

3.2 What is gender-based violence in the world of work?

Gender-based violence in the world of work includes:

- Bullying, physical and verbal abuse from work colleagues, supervisors or managers.
- Sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances.
- Sexual abuse and violence, including 'coercive' or transactional sex, rape and sexual assault.
- Abuse and harassment around pregnancy.
- Psychological abuse and intimidation.
- Threats and acts of physical and sexual violence.
- Abusive working conditions such as poor health and safety (including building and equipment safety).
- Inadequate or inappropriate sanitary facilities and rules about their use.
- Involuntary excessive long working hours and unpredictable or late demands to work overtime.

“Gender-based violence in the workplace is a serious violation of human rights and an attack on dignity and physical and psychological integrity. Across the world, 35 per cent of women fall victim to direct violence at the workplace, and of these between 40 per cent and 50 per cent are subjected to unwanted sexual advances, physical contact or other forms of sexual harassment.” (European Economic and Social Committee, 2015, para 2.4.1)

3.3 Sexual harassment

The most common form of gender-based violence in the world of work is sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is unwelcome and offensive conduct of a sexual nature that may make workers feel humiliated, intimidated or uncomfortable. It is a violation of workers' rights. Sexual harassment creates a climate of fear and physical and mental ill health; workers may have to take sick leave or at worst are forced to leave their jobs.

According to the ILO there are two kinds of sexual harassment in the workplace: **quid pro quo** sexual harassment (demand for something in return for sexual favours) and **hostile environment** sexual harassment.

This can take many different forms:

- Physical harassment: unwelcome touching, fondling, hugging or kissing.
- Verbal harassment: sexually suggestive, offensive, comments or jokes; inappropriate invitations to go out on dates; intrusive, offensive questions about private life; intrusive, offensive comments about a woman's physical appearance.
- Non-verbal harassment: inappropriate, intimidating staring or leering; receiving or being shown offensive, sexually explicit pictures, photos or gifts; indecent exposure; being made to watch or look at pornographic material against one's wishes.
- Cyber harassment: receiving unwanted, offensive, sexually explicit emails or SMS messages; inappropriate, offensive advances on social networking web-sites or in internet chat rooms.

“Sexual harassment is overwhelmingly a problem of women workers. It has nothing to do with normal interaction between the sexes: it denotes scorn of another person, and is used to establish or prove power over others. Sexual harassment produces feelings of revulsion, violation, disgust, anger and powerlessness. Good managers know that it is in the long-term interest of the enterprise to ensure that their employees are treated with respect. While effective legal remedies are necessary, it is also important to ensure that the problem ceases, or better still, never starts. Thus, preventive measures are especially important.”

Source: ILO Combating sexual harassment at work. Conditions of work digest 1/92.

“What is considered sexual harassment in many countries is actually violence, often sexual violence.” (Phil Fishman, Senior Technical Advisor to Better Work Jordan)

3.4 Domestic violence – a workplace issue

The World Health Organization estimates that one out of three women suffers from violence, and this is the leading cause of death among women aged 16-44 years. Domestic violence affects women in all societies of the world, regardless of age or social status, but it has its most harmful effects on ethnic minorities, migrants and the poor, on account of existing social inequalities. Men can also be victims.

Women’s working lives are inextricably linked to their domestic and care roles. A woman who experiences domestic violence from an intimate partner may be stalked by the perpetrator at her workplace, impacting on her safety and that of her co-workers. Her work performance may be affected and she may miss days at work.

The Australian *Safe at Home, Safe at Work* project provided a methodology for surveys that have been carried out in Australia, Canada, the Philippines, Turkey and the United Kingdom. The surveys point to the importance of measures to respond to domestic violence in the workplace, because it impacts on victims’ health and wellbeing, attendance at work, productivity and security. In particular, women who suffer domestic violence may be harassed by their husband or partner at work, raising safety issues for themselves and their colleagues. In Australia and Canada, among other countries, trade unions have negotiated agreements to give victims of domestic violence entitlements to leave. (Wagner et al., 2012; Baird et al., 2014)

3.5 Gender-based violence and women’s occupational safety and health

Workplace sexual harassment and violence have a significant impact on women’s physical and mental health, undermining their well-being and confidence and resulting in a working environment based on fear. In the worst cases rape and sexual violence in the workplace, in dormitories attached to the workplace and in travel to and from the workplace, also pose risks for women in contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Gender-based violence has costs to employers, whether it takes place in the workplace, in public places or in the home. According to the United Nations it can “... impact the workplace through decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, health and safety risks, and increased healthcare costs for the employer.” (Cruz & Klinger, 2011, p. 13).

UN Global plan to end gender-based violence

At the UN Commission on the Status of Women 2013, 130 governments agreed to promote gender equality and ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services. This global plan recognized that women’s right to control their sexuality is essential to preventing violence against women and that sexual education can help reduce the harmful gender stereotypes that lead to violence. Among the priorities is the establishment of multi-sectoral services for survivors of violence, including for health, psychological support and counselling, as well as the need to protect the right to sexual and reproductive health. For further information see: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/57sess.htm>
<http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw>

Increasingly sexual harassment and violence are considered as important occupational safety and health issues. Sexual harassment can include restrictions on the use of the toilet during working hours. There are anecdotal reports of women garment factory workers in Mexico and car assembly workers in Honduras wearing diapers because of severe restrictions on toilet breaks. In addition, temperatures inside factories often exceed 30° C but because toilet breaks are restricted, workers refrain from drinking water. The risk of infection and further medical complications are particularly evident for pregnant and menstruating women.

NGOs such as Women's Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), Homeworkers World Wide and HomeNet have pointed to the increase of suppliers that sub-contract to women home workers, as a means to cut costs by replacing core, full-time workers. In addition, in many garment factories women workers are supervised and managed by men. This results in power imbalances often where women are sometimes forced against their will to work in dangerous conditions and use dangerous substances.

On the morning of 24 April 2013, thousands of factory workers went to work in the eight-story Rana Plaza commercial building just outside of Dhaka. A few hours later the building collapsed, killing 1,137 people and injuring a further 2,500 workers. Most of those who died that morning were women.

Women make up 80 per cent of the 4.2 million strong workforce in the garment export industry and for many, these jobs are the first opportunity for economic independence and a job outside the home. According to UN Women, the Rana Plaza tragedy underlined the double-edged sword this employment has proved to be: "The industry has created tragically unsafe, exploitative and dangerous workplaces where women workers face poor pay, inequality, harassment and violence. Today, while they are four out of five workers on the production lines of Bangladesh's 5,000 textile factories, only 1 in 20 supervisors is a woman." (UN Women, 2015, p. 59)

Rana Plaza survivor, Jesmin Akter, was forced to go to work by her supervisor, despite being scared for her life by the large crack in the eight-storey garment factory building. If she didn't go to work in the unsafe factory she was told she would lose her pay. Later the same day the building collapsed.

Source: IndustriALL: <http://www.industrialall-union.org/i-was-forced-to-go-up-rana-plaza-victim>

Women's lack of power often makes it difficult to negotiate safe sex and refuse unwanted sex. When women and girls lack power in the workplace, or if their accommodation is tied to their employment, they face greater risks of sexual harassment and violence, including rape. Young women are particularly vulnerable to coerced sex and are increasingly infected with HIV/AIDS. Over half of new HIV infections worldwide occur among young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years. More than 60 per cent of HIV-positive youth in this age bracket are female. The vulnerability of women and girls to HIV remains particularly high in sub-Saharan Africa which accounts for 80 per cent of all women living with HIV in the world. (WHO & UN, 2010).

The impact of gender-based violence on women's sexual and reproductive health

Violence affects family planning and safe sex practices: It limits a woman's power to have safe sexual practices that protect them from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Violence is not only a risk factor for HIV but also a consequence of status disclosure. Informed choices are jeopardized because women are unlikely to disclose their status due to fear of violence. Young women and those who are forced to have sexual intercourse are more vulnerable to HIV infection.

Violence adversely affects maternal health: Women who experience violence are far more likely to delay seeking prenatal care, delay seeking postnatal care, gain insufficient weight, and bleed during pregnancy. They are also far more likely to acquire vaginal, cervical and kidney infections.

Violence adversely affects pregnancy outcomes: Violence increases the risk of miscarriages, abortions, premature labour and foetal distress. Violence also is associated with a four-fold increase in low birth weight. Low birth weight is a leading cause of infant mortality.

Violence directly impacts physical health: It is common for female victims who have experienced gender-based violence to report trouble walking and or carrying out daily activities due to excessive pain, memory loss, and nausea.

Violence affects mental stability: It makes a woman up to four times more likely to have suicidal thoughts and six times more likely to attempt suicide on more than one occasion. 37 per cent of deaths of women aged 15-44 are due to suicide and this percentage continues to increase – GBV or sexual abuse is a particular cause of suicide among young women who suffer irreversible reputational damage.

Gender-based violence restricts choices and decision-making of those who experience it: This curtails women's rights across their life cycle to access critical sexual and reproductive health information and services. It is a risk factor for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, and unwanted pregnancy, in addition to causing direct physical and mental health consequences.

Integrated responses to violence against women in existing programmes for the prevention of HIV and AIDS, and for the promotion of adolescent health, is recommended by international agencies.

Source: International Centre for Migration, Health and Development. Available at: <https://icmhd.wordpress.com/2013/08/26/ending-gender-based-violence-in-bangladesh/>

