



Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the World of Work

(Updated February 2022)

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) is violence and harassment directed at people because of their sex or gender, or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately, and includes sexual harassment.¹ GBVH encompasses violence and harassment against women, girls, men and boys; people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI); and other individuals who do not conform to dominant perceptions of gender. GBVH includes sexual harassment, domestic violence and sexual violence. GBVH is rooted in discriminatory gender norms, institutions and laws, and buttressed by a lack of accountability for perpetrators. GBVH occurs in all societies as a means of control, subjugation and exploitation that reflects and reinforces gender inequality.

GBVH is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world, impacting tens of millions of workers each year across all jobs and industries, in the formal and informal economy. GBVH at work perpetuates gender inequality in employment, society and culture. While GBVH at work is disproportionately directed at women, workers of every gender identity are harmed by this pervasive form of oppression. Workers from marginalized communities are more likely to be targeted, due to discrimination based on other socially constructed identities, such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, nationality and migration status, which intersect with and reinforce oppression based on gender.

The Prevalence of GBVH in the World of Work

One of the challenges in advocating to end GBVH in the world of work is that there is little comprehensive data about its prevalence. The majority of research on GBVH globally focuses on domestic violence and/or sexual violence in the community. This sometimes includes GBVH that is linked to work, but the specific dynamics of GBVH in the context of work are rarely acknowledged. The limited data regarding GBVH in the workplace focuses on sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is one of the most prevalent forms of GBVH in the world of work, but focusing on it exclusively fails to capture the wider spectrum of GBVH including abusive conduct directed at women, men and gender non-conforming individuals rooted in socially constructed expectations and stereotypes. It risks shifting the focus onto sexual desire rather than power and control.

¹ This is the definition from ILO Convention 190 to eliminate violence and harassment including gender-based violence and harassment, which may be found here: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190.



Women and GBVH in the World of Work

- As of 2021, the World Health Organization estimated that 35 percent of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.
- Participatory research conducted in 2018-2019 by women union garment workers in Cambodia, with support from the Solidarity Center, found 87 percent of women garment workers interviewed had experienced verbal harassment or unwanted touching at work, although only 48 percent of women workers interviewed self-identified as targets of GBVH. Forty-six percent of those interviewed reported that a supervisor or manager forced them to become their mistress or “second wife,” with the understanding that it would improve their working conditions.
- Participatory research conducted in 2018-2019 by women union garment workers in Indonesia with support from the Solidarity Center found that 71 percent of women garment workers interviewed reported experiencing GBVH at work, including verbal, physical, psychological and sexual violence.
- In Ecuador's export-oriented flower industry, over 55 percent of all flower workers reported suffering some form of sexual harassment in 2005, with 70 percent of workers ages 20 to 24 experiencing sexual harassment .
- In Swaziland, where women comprise 90 percent of the workers in the garment sector, a 2014 survey of more than 400 garment workers noted that more than 70 percent of respondents reported witnessing verbal and physical abuse in their workplace by supervisors.
- In a 2019 study in Morocco, 24 percent of women workers reported being sexually assaulted at work, and 13 percent said they were victims of digital gendered violence. Fully 93 percent of respondents who reported experiencing any form of sexual violence did not report it.
- In a nationwide survey conducted in 2017 on violence against women in Georgia, 20 percent of women reported experiencing sexual harassment, with 10 percent reporting they had experienced it in the workplace.
- In a 2002 study of commercial agriculture workers in Kenya, 90 percent reported experiencing or observing sexual abuse at their workplace.
- A 2008-2009 survey by the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development of full-time domestic workers found that 14 percent of respondents



had experienced sexual abuse at the hand of their employers, 16 percent said they were forced into sexual touching and 18% reported rape on the job.

- In a 2019 Bangladesh [survey](#) of 200 garment workers, 80 percent reported that they had experienced sexual violence and harassment in the world of work.
- In Uganda, a [survey](#) carried out in over 2,910 organizations indicated that 90 percent of women had been sexually harassed at work by their male superiors.
- In a 2013 [article](#) compiling statistics regarding GBVH at work in industries that make up “the backbone of the Sri Lankan economy,” 83 percent of women workers in the tea estate sector said they had experienced gender-based violence at work, and 62 percent of women in the industrial sector reported unwanted and unwelcome sexual advances at the workplace.
- A [study](#) conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in 2011 found that 23 percent of women workers reported experiencing some form of gender-based violence at work in the previous year.

LGBTQI Workers and GBVH

- [Research](#) conducted by the Trades Union Congress in the United Kingdom in 2019 found that nearly 7 in 10 LGBT people have been sexually harassed at work. Twenty-one percent of female LGBT workers reported that had experienced sexual assault, and 12 percent of LGBT women said they had been severely sexually assaulted or raped at work.
- The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [found](#) in 2011 that LGBTI workers experience a high level of bullying and harassment in the workplace because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Sixty-nine countries in the world criminalize same-sex relationships, and five have the death penalty as punishment. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), even where legal protections are in place, many LGBTI workers face considerable discrimination at work. Often employers freely discriminate if they believe a person is LGBTI or deny them benefits such as parental leave, pensions and health care programs.

GBVH During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread social and economic instability, [increasing the risk of GBVH against women](#) and other marginalized workers in the world of work. It has exacerbated preexisting and ongoing oppression, including the growth of precarious work, gender-based discrimination and the use of violence and harassment



to prevent marginalized workers from organizing to address poverty and exclusion from laws and social protections.

- A 2020 [survey](#) in South Africa found that GBVH committed against domestic workers increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employers exposed themselves, displayed pornography, demanded sexual favors, raped and sexually assaulted domestic workers at higher rates than before the pandemic.
- A 2020 [survey](#) of workers across the private sector in Bangladesh found that most reported experiencing sexual harassment during the pandemic.
- Women comprise more than [70 percent](#) of the health care sector globally and have been exposed to higher rates of GBVH at work during the pandemic, including [being propositioned for sexual favors](#) in exchange for access to adequate personal protective equipment.

Impact of GBVH in the World of Work

- GBVH [causes](#) long term psychological, economic and physical harm to individuals—those targeted as well as witnesses. It undermines economic security and inhibits full and equal participation in the economy and in society.
- GBVH is structural and used to maintain power hierarchies in the workplace and society through working environments and economic systems based on fear, intimidation and oppression, which negatively impacts everyone in the world of work, communities and society at large.
- GBVH in the world of work [discourages](#) women from entering fields where they anticipate they will experience it and causes women to leave fields when they do experience it, perpetuating occupational segregation and the pay gap.
- Women are [disproportionately](#) employed in precarious jobs, lacking contracts or other formal recognition of their employment status, and are excluded from the limited legal protections covering some forms of GBVH at work and from social protections such as health care and income support if they lose their jobs. This makes them especially vulnerable to GBVH.