

# Violence at work is not part of the job

A guide to end and prevent violence against women at work





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# Violence at work is not part of the job

## A guide to end and prevent violence against women at work

Gender-based violence continues to be one of the most harrowing forms of human rights abuse where labour is concerned. Violence at work impacts severely on the victims. Violence at work threatens the dignity, security, health and well-being of everyone. Between 40 and 50% of women experience some form of sexual harassment in the workplace, whether physical and/or sexual. It affects not only workers and employers, but also their families, communities, economies and society as a whole. No one is immune, but women and girls are usually the target.

According to a study performed by CNV International in four countries across four continents on violence on the work floor, it appears victims of violence are reluctant to report it. This is often due to the fear of retribution.



“There are very few countries which have labour law provisions to prevent, address and redress gender-based violence in the workplace. An ILO Convention is absolutely necessary to close this gap and reinforce the protection against violence for women and girls.”

**Sharan Burrow**, ITUC General Secretary

“There are very few countries which have labour-law provisions to prevent or even address violence at work. Although there is some legislation in some countries, its enforcement tends to be weak. The challenge is to improve implementation of the existing legislation. A cultural change is also necessary,” stresses CNV vice-president Arend Van Wijngaarden. “Women often dare not take the formal route. On the one hand because they, sadly, have become accustomed to violence and intimidation, whilst at the same time they fear the eventual consequences a report can have. Problems are too often silenced by fear of getting sacked or just because ‘it is not done’ to speak out on these issues.”

“ Between 40 and 50% of women experience some form of sexual harassment in the workplace whether physical and/or sexual.

## Stakeholder Network

On 7 October 2016, World Day for Decent Work, CNV Internationaal organised a broad stakeholder meeting and a working session on Gender-Based Violence on the work floor. Representatives of trade unions, the Dutch government, the private sector, knowledge institutes and civil society organisations discussed the most effective ways to eliminate Gender-Based Violence on the work floor. During the round table discussions we learned from different perspectives where the problems lie and – perhaps even more significantly – what we can do to help end violence on the work floor. Furthermore, participants discussed the process towards the upcoming ILO standard on ending violence against men and women. CNV Internationaal launched a stakeholder network at this event with the aim of promoting continued exchange on the subject whilst creating broad support for an ILO standard on the elimination of violence on the work floor. The present guide resumes key elements for all stakeholders involved and includes a broach approach and steps to take to end and prevent violence against women at the workplace.

## What are we talking about?

Violence at work can be any act which results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering. This includes threats of such an act. It can either occur at the place of work or on the way to and from work and can take on multiple forms such as:

- Physical abuse including assault, battery, attempted murder and murder
- Sexual violence including rape and sexual assault
- Sexual harassment
- Verbal and sexist abuse
- Bullying
- Coercion
- Psychological abuse, intimidation and threats of violence
- Economic and financial abuse
- Stalking



“Taking the bus home after dark because of a rush job, or because an order at the garment factory had to be finished, is extremely dangerous. Women are often raped on the way home.”

**Evangelina Argueta**, CGT trade union coordinator export processing zones, Honduras



## What are the consequences?

Violence at work affects women in many different ways. A woman might lose her job for challenging a violent colleague. She might lose her job due to being absent from work because of fear of violence at work. She might be less able to concentrate, or work productively, and her pay, position and job security may be threatened as a result. A woman might ‘put up’ with violent behaviour out of desperation to keep her job. In the worst cases, violence at work can contribute to the death of a worker, or to a worker’s unborn child.



### **Sorayda Liliana Gonzalez (48)**

sells shoes for children on the streets of Guatemala-City. She also works for trade union CGTG. Her personal experiences have motivated her tremendously to dedicate herself to women facing violence at work in her country.

Violence against women is a big problem in Guatemala. There even is a special word to describe it: ‘femicidio’. The lawlessness and impunity in the country impedes the fight against violence. Investigation and prosecution of crimes often does not happen, and the cases that make it to court progress very slowly. In addition, victims of sexual violence on the work floor often lack the knowledge and resources to launch a court case. They can receive assistance from the legal officer of the CGTG in filing complaints.

“ The risk of exposure to violence is often greater in jobs and sectors where work is informal or precarious, where wages are low, where workers are stopped from joining or forming trade unions and where management accountability is low.

Workplaces are an important environment in which to address violence. Violence at work is one of the chief and widespread obstacles to women’s economic empowerment, autonomy and independence – and to the realisation of gender equality.

## What are risk factors?

Violence can occur at any work floor. However, the risk of exposure to violence is often greater in jobs and sectors where work is informal or precarious, where wages are low, where workers are stopped from joining or forming trade unions and where management accountability is low.

Segregation into jobs or occupations which are mainly female or mainly male also increases the risk of exposure to gender-based violence, whether from colleagues or from members of the public. Women are overrepresented in jobs in domestic work, hospitality, health and social care, the garment and textile industry, tea and flower plantations and at the bottom of global multinational companies’ supply chains.

Women in male-dominated sectors such as construction and transport are also more exposed to violence. As well as violence at work, domestic violence can also spill over into the workplace, for example through prolonged/or frequent absenteeism, poor concentration and productivity or even by being stalked at the workplace by a violent partner.

“Women working at the plantations in Central Kalimantan often receive compulsory injections to postpone menstruation.”

**Emma Liliefna,**  
SBSI trade union, Indonesia





“Being pregnant as  
a garment worker  
in Cambodia almost  
automatically means  
you will lose your job.”

**Ath Thorn,**  
CLC trade union, Cambodia



## Why should a company act and put in place a policy to eliminate and prevent violence?

1. To help improve health and safety at work whilst developing relations between employers and workers;
2. To reduce women's vulnerability and exposure to GBV, whilst increasing their economic independence and productivity at work;
3. Improving safety at work reduces employers' economic losses associated with gender-based violence (e.g. through absenteeism, loss of productivity, court/tribunal cases, compensation orders);
4. It contributes to realising decent work objectives;
5. It reduces the risk of bad publicity and reputational damage due to incidents of violence at work.

## How can companies act to prevent or stop violence at work?

How can companies create a workplace culture where violence is not tolerated?

What steps can be taken?

1. Crafting well-designed human resource policies that contain clear processes for preventing violence and addressing the consequences of GBV in the world of work;
2. Giving clear guidance to management and workers concerning their responsibilities to prevent, address and redress violence at work;
3. Establishing clear procedures for reporting grievances and complaints;
4. Providing guidance on investigating and handling complaints of violence at work;
5. Ensuring consultation with the trade unions in the development of the above procedures;
6. Ensuring freedom of association, to enable workers to seek external help if necessary;
7. Establishing an 'in confidence' person;
8. Informing everyone in the company regarding the above steps;
9. Monitoring the above steps;
10. Including clauses on the elimination and prevention of violence in the workplace in the collective bargaining agreement with the aim of involving workers, mentioning the above steps.

## What is the trade unions' role?

Trade union organisations can act on different levels to address violence at work:

1. Embedding activities and regulations that can lead to the creation of a safe environment both inside and outside the factory;
2. Embedding into collective bargaining specific issues such as maternity benefits, childcare facilities, clean toilet facilities and hygienic conditions, as well as safe transportation;
3. Improving gender equality and eliminating gender biases, especially through educational activities;
4. Reporting sexual harassment in the workplace, as this is often underreported. Trade unions can conduct surveys on gender-based violence;
5. Opening a helpline with (female) staff trained in violence at work issues;
6. Helping victims to file complaints through their legal departments;
7. Integrating initiatives that combat gender-based violence into broader labour strategies;
8. Promoting the application of a model policy and code of conduct on sexual harassment within the supply chain supplying garments to European brands;
9. Raising awareness of managers and workers regarding violence in the workplace and putting in place a grievance mechanism for victims in the workplace.

markets, schools and village squares, to discuss the issues and to provide information. We also hold talks on the radio. The trade union has set up a special helpline and centre to advise and mediate on behalf of women that became victims of violence. These services are used extensively. We would like to expand these activities so we that we can help women quickly, as well as to be able to reach out to women in other locations across the country."

## Best practice: a broad approach to ending gender based violence

Noel Chadare, secretary general from trade union organisation COSI in Benin – has organised a campaign that targets men and women with regard to gender based violence. "Violence against women is a major issue in my country. Often, parents keep their teenage daughters away

from school for fear of unwanted pregnancies. For the girls, this almost automatically results in a life of poverty. The consequences for society as a whole are severe. Without education it is difficult to find work." Chadare believes a change in attitude is necessary. "That is why our trade union visits

**Noel Chadare,**  
COSI trade  
union leader,  
Benin





## What can be done on an international level?

There is currently no internationally agreed law that deals with the many different forms of gender-based violence in the workplace. An ILO standard on ending violence at work would be a significant step to improve women's working conditions worldwide and to save the millions of dollars spent every year on health care, lower productivity and sick leave as a direct result of violence against women. Workplaces are an important environment in which to address violence. Violence at work is one of the chief and widespread obstacles to women's economic empowerment, autonomy and independence – and to the realisation of gender equality.

The International Labour Organisation ILO is the U.N.'s only tripartite agency. It brings together governments, employers and workers' representatives of 187 member states to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent working conditions for all men and women.



An ILO standard would send a strong message that violence is NOT part of the job. It would help to give workers a voice to stand up against gender-based violence, and negotiate collective agreements that directly address GBV. It would help workers and employers agree on policies to prevent and confront GBV in the workplace, as well as empowering women workers to take action. The subject is on the agenda of the 2018 International Labour Conference as a standard setting item.

## What could an ILO standard on violence at work cover?

- A broad definition of gender-based violence at work which would include the diverse forms of violence endured by workers in their workplace;
- Provisions to prevent gender-based violence at work;
- Measures to protect and support workers affected by gender-based violence;
- A determination of the groups most affected by violence: Women, LGBT persons, indigenous and migrant workers, workers living with HIV/AIDS and disabilities;
- People trapped by forced labour and child labour;
- Protection of all workers irrespective of race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion/affiliation, national or social origin, property, marital status, sexual orientation, HIV/AIDS status, migrant/refugee status, age, disability or place of work;
- Recognition of the impact of domestic violence on the workplace;
- Invoking a broad definition of the 'workplace';
- Provision of various employment and social security rights for complainants, including the right to reduce or reorganise working hours;
- The implementation of a specific provision for the appropriate and sensitive treatment of complainants of violence by persons who suffer from multiple forms of discrimination, prohibiting employers from discriminating against them/penalising them for the consequences of the abuse.

## Why support an ILO standard to end and prevent gender based violence at work ?

### What would be the benefits




## Sources, further resources and tools

- CNV Internationaal investigation on violence against women in the workplace  
<https://www.cnvinternationaal.nl/en/decent-work/violence-against-women-at-the-workplace>  
Partly also available in French and Spanish:  
CNV Internationaal la violence envers les femmes au travail au Bénin  
CNV Internationaal violencia contra la mujer en el lugar de trabajo en Honduras
- ITUC Leaflet Stop gender-based violence at work (also available in French, Spanish and Arabic)  
<http://www.ituc-csi.org/gender-based-violence>
- ILO background paper expert meeting 3-6 October  
<http://bit.ly/2gIYtOT>
- Gender-based violence in global supply chains Resource Kit,  
International Training Centre ILO and Fair Wear Foundation  
<https://gbv.itcilo.org/>

If you would like to be part of the stakeholder network and keep-up-to-speed with developments send a message to: [internationaal@cnv.nl](mailto:internationaal@cnv.nl)





CNV Internationaal's mission is to contribute to Decent Work in developing countries through strengthening the position of workers in both the formal and informal economy. Our work is centered on three themes: 1) Strengthening social dialogue, 2) Improving labour rights in supply chains and 3) Increasing youth employability. One of the major subjects within the labour rights theme is the issue of ending violence against women at the workforce.

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