

No more words – it's time for action

On the occasion of International Women's Day 2014, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) is calling time on gender-based violence in the world of work. Violence against women at work, whether at their actual place of work or on the way to and from work, can take on multiple forms, including:

- **Physical assault**
- **Verbal abuse and threats of violence**
- **Bullying**
- **Psychological abuse**
- **Sexual harassment**
- **Economic violence**

- Between 40 and 50 per cent of women in the European Union experience unwanted sexual advances, physical contact or other forms of sexual harassment at work.
- Across Asia, studies in Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines and South Korea show that 30 to 40 per cent of women suffer workplace sexual harassment.
- According to Australia's Human Rights Commission 25 per cent of women have been sexually harassed in the workplace.
- And in Uganda, where a new sexist law has banned women from wearing mini-skirt and other forms of 'indecent' dress that might 'provoke' men, a survey carried out in over 2,910 organisations indicates that 90 per cent of women are sexually harassed at work by their male seniors.

However it manifests itself, violence can destroy a woman's ability to earn a livelihood and prevent her from fully enjoying her economic, social, political and cultural rights. At worst, it can result in death.

That's why the ITUC is urging the tripartite constituents of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to support calls for an ILO Convention on violence against women and men in the world of work at the forthcoming ILO Governing Body meeting from 13 – 27 March, 2014.

Anyone can be a victim of violence at work, but gender-based violence (GBV) typifies unequal economic and social power relations between women and men. Addressing this issue – and the violence it produces – is fundamental to achieving gender equality, social justice and true peace and democracy.

The global economic, social and employment crises, which have followed the collapse of the world's financial markets, are exacerbating the incidence of GBV. A "levelling down" in terms and conditions of employment has seen more and more men being affected by precarious working arrangements with a high degree of informality, more job insecurity, poor health and safety, and a lack of social dialogue and social protection. But this has long-been

the reality of the majority of women who, globally, remain concentrated in lower paid and lower status jobs with little decision-making power.

Women form a significant percentage of workers in occupations at higher risk of violence such as teachers, social and healthcare workers, and shop and bank clerks. Women are particularly exposed to risks as migrant workers and domestic workers, as dependent family workers and within the informal economy.

In terms of employment relations, women are over-represented among workers holding informal, atypical and precarious jobs, thus often lack both individual and collective bargaining power.

Trafficking in human beings provides one of the starkest examples of GBV, ensnaring millions of women and girls in modern-day slavery. Women and girls represent 55 per cent of the estimated 20.9 million victims of forced labour worldwide, and 98 per cent of the estimated 4.5 million forced into sexual exploitation.

And Mexico's maquiladoras (special export processing zones) sadly provide just one example of what can happen when GBV becomes a part of workplace culture. Young women working in the maquiladoras are often subjected to sexual harassment at work and the threat of extreme violence on the dangerous journey home from work. The ITUC has received reports of everything from women being punched in the stomach by factory bosses to "test" whether they are pregnant to women being raped, attacked and all too often murdered when leaving work late at night after a long shift.

The stories are tragic. And trade unions, employers and governments need to act with the urgency that the situation requires.

This year, the tripartite Governing Body of the International Labour Organisation, meeting from 13 to 27 March, will have the opportunity to decide whether or not to include a standard-setting item on violence against women and men in the world of work on the agenda of the 2016 International Labour Conference.

The ITUC is calling on affiliates to contact their governments to urge them to support the proposal for such an instrument. An ILO Convention addressing GBV would close a crucial gap, as only a few countries provide such protection. And there is no international, legally binding standard dealing specifically with the issue of gender-based violence in the world of work. An ILO Convention would commit governments to engage with the trade unions and employers to reform laws and put in place enforcement mechanisms to prevent gender-based violence at work. This would form a significant contribution to the realisation of women's rights.

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For further information see the ITUC website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/unions-call-for-ilo-standard-on>