



Gender-Based Violence at Work

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world—yet not enough is done to prevent it, especially at the workplace.

Widespread violence and the threat of violence against women at the workplace can cause serious physical and psychological damage and also take an economic toll. South Africa, for example, lost up to an estimated [1.3 percent of the country's GDP in 2014](#) due to gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence at work causes direct economic and physical harm to women, undermining their productivity, livelihoods, employment prospects, physical and emotional health, and sense of security. It corrodes women's agency and voice, hindering women's efforts to shape the conditions of their lives and work. The risk of gender-based violence at work is increased when workers are economically vulnerable.

GBV in the world of work takes multiple forms, including:

- Physical abuse, including assault, battery, attempted murder and murder
- Sexual violence, including rape and sexual assault
- Verbal abuse and threats of violence
- Bullying
- Psychological abuse and intimidation
- Sexual harassment, including quid pro quo
- Threats of violence
- Economic and financial abuse
- Stalking
- Human trafficking
- Forced prostitution

GBV Can Happen at any Workplace: Gender-based violence occurs in offices, hospitals, restaurants and farm fields. Workers in the informal sector tend to be more vulnerable due to a [lack of formal regulations](#).

Health Care: Nurses are [three times more likely](#) on average to experience violence in the workplace than other occupational groups, according to a 2002 study in five countries, and since the majority of the health workforce is female, workplace violence in the sector has a strong gender dimension.

Restaurants and Entertainment: Service workers in restaurants, karaoke bars and beer gardens frequently experience violence at work. In the [Cambodian beer industry](#), for example, “studies have shown alarmingly high rates of harassment in the workplace, including unwanted sexual touching (83 percent) and coerced sex (38 percent). Harassment is so common ... it is viewed as an occupational hazard rather than an abuse of human rights.”

Agriculture: Rural women often work in isolation, and so are especially vulnerable to workplace violence. A [study among 400 workers in tea growing and processing in Kenya](#) revealed that more than 90 percent had experienced or observed sexual abuse at their workplace. Ninety-five percent of women who had suffered workplace sexual abuse—half of whom were single mothers with children—were afraid to report the problem [for fear of losing their job](#).

Little Legal Protection Covering GBV at Work

There are no binding international standards covering gender-based violence at work, and many corporate accountability instruments that mention GBV are voluntary (i.e., the [United Nations Global Compact](#)). Further, few national or local laws address the full scope of GBV at work.

Workers and Their Unions Are Best Positioned to Stop Workplace GBV

Unions and worker organizations are finding ways to protect workers from gender-based violence where there are no legal protections or where legal protections are not enforced.

- Unions have negotiated collective bargaining clauses with employers that address sexual harassment, including grievance and disciplinary procedures.
- In Florida, women members of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) were central in developing the protections that were included in the Fair Food Program, which [stipulates that](#) farms must comply with fundamental labor standards, including preventing violence and sexual harassment at work. Corporations agree to buy only from farms that comply, and auditors annually evaluate the farms. Some 90 percent of Florida tomato growers have signed on to the program and gender-based violence has been nearly eliminated.