



MADE FOR THIS MOMENT

How ILO Convention 190
Addresses Gender-Based Violence
and Harassment in the
World of Work During the
COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond



Published in November 2020 by the Solidarity Center

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Executive Summary

INTERNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZATION (ILO) CONVENTION 190 (“ILO Convention 190”) is the first global, binding treaty that recognizes the fundamental right to a world of work free from violence and harassment. That right is under renewed threat from the inequality, poverty and social instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which leaves workers, particularly women, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized workers, at increased risk of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the world of work.

Women workers and allies from different sectors and countries campaigned for more than a decade to secure the adoption of ILO Convention 190, supplemented by Recommendation 206, and fought to ensure it reflected their lived experiences. As a result of their organizing and advocacy, ILO Convention 190 takes an intersectional feminist approach¹ that targets the root causes of GBVH, including multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination, power relationships and precarious working arrangements. Workers around the world are now advocating for ratification by governments and implementation by employers and unions. Their work has never been more critical, as the pandemic has exposed how these root causes undermine worker safety, equality and democracy.

ILO Convention 190 recognizes how work is structured today, by protecting workers normally excluded from labor protections, including workers in non-standard work arrangements, in export processing zones and in the informal economy. Workers in precarious jobs have been disproportionately impacted by unemployment during the pandemic, and most do not qualify for unemployment benefits or emergency relief measures, making them particularly susceptible to pressure for sexual favors and other degrading treatment in order to get or keep a job.

ILO Convention 190 outlines how governments and employers can address risk factors in specific sectors and occupations. This would protect frontline workers during the pandemic, like nurses and other healthcare workers who face increased physical and psychological abuse, and domestic workers, who experience unwanted sexual advances, physical assault and rape at the hands of their employers.

ILO Convention 190 protects the entire ‘world of work,’ not just the physical worksite. This reflects the changing ways that work is performed, by protecting against all GBVH linked to work, including private homes when work is conducted there, work-related communications, and the commute to and from work. This is particularly relevant during the pandemic, as workers report increased harassment online and increased sexual violence in public spaces.

ILO Convention 190 recognizes the transformative power of worker organizing. The importance of unions has become especially clear during the pandemic, as workers struggle to demand safety and respect on the job. GBVH is used as a tool of oppression to silence worker voice. ILO Convention 190 recognizes that the people best placed to design effective measures to address GBVH at work are the workers most impacted by it, and preventing GBVH requires addressing its insidious presence within workplaces and societies by remaking power structures, which can only be done through collective organizing and collective power.

ILO Convention 190, supplemented by Recommendation 206, provides an effective, comprehensive framework for how to design policies and laws that prevent and address GBVH in the world of work. It does so by clearly defining GBVH, mandating a comprehensive scope of protection that applies to all forms of abuse and the most vulnerable workers, outlining the responsibilities that governments, employers, and workers share, and emphasizing the importance of worker organizing.

The report identifies concrete steps to address and prevent GBVH in the world of work:

- ▶ Governments, employers and unions can work together to ratify and implement the critical protections in ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206, to address the increase in GBVH due the pandemic, and ensure safe, respectful workplaces for all.
- ▶ Governments can ratify and implement ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206, work with unions and employers to develop comprehensive, inclusive amendments to national legislation and mandate data collection on the scope and incidence of GBVH in the world of work to inform appropriate legislative and policy responses.
- ▶ Employers can publicly support ratification of ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206, and negotiate with workers and unions to implement employer obligations under ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206 throughout their supply chain.
- ▶ Unions can continue to build diverse national coalitions to advocate for ratification and implementation of ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206, negotiate protections with employers in collective bargaining agreements and incorporate the ILO Convention 190 framework into internal union policies.



Understanding Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the World of Work and Why it Has Increased During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the world of work is an abuse of power, one of the most prevalent and yet hidden human rights violations, and a primary barrier to achieving gender equality.² It affects tens of millions of workers, of all gender identities and across all sectors and occupations. It causes physical, psychological, social and economic harm, and undermines economic security and full and equal participation in employment and society.³ It has enormous, but often overlooked, costs for businesses and communities, and undermines economic growth.⁴

GBVH is violence and harassment directed at a person because of their actual or perceived gender or sex, and violence and harassment that affects persons of one gender or sex disproportionately, including but not limited to sexual harassment.⁵ Women are disproportionately targeted, but anyone can be a target, particularly members of the LGBTQ+ community, and others who do not conform to dominant social expectations about gender. Other forms of identity-based discrimination intersect to place certain workers at heightened risk of GBVH.

GBVH in the world of work includes rape, sexual assault, unwanted sexual advances and other forms of sexual harassment. It can also take the form of physical or psychological abuse based on a person's actual or perceived gender identity, including bullying, mobbing, offensive gender stereotyping and degrading comments, for example, a supervisor calling women workers inferior or making homophobic or transphobic statements. These forms of harassment are not sexualized, but they are rooted in gender-based discrimination.

Abuse often occurs at a worksite, but it also takes place in other spaces that are linked to work, such as over email, at work-related events or on the work commute. Perpetrators of GBVH are often supervisors abusing

their power over subordinates, but they can also be co-workers abusing other co-workers, or people with whom workers come into contact, like customers, clients, public officials and community members.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread social and economic instability,⁶ increasing the risk of GBVH against women and other marginalized workers in the world of work.⁷ 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.

The pandemic increases the risk of stigmatization, discrimination and violence against marginalized groups in society, particularly as these marginalized groups often become scapegoats for the spread of the virus, and supervisors, co-workers and members of the public carry these prejudices into the world of work.⁸ This includes women, LGBTQ+ individuals,⁹ migrant workers, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities¹⁰ and people who do not conform to dominant expectations about gender.¹¹

Women are over-represented in many “essential” occupations where workers have been forced to continue working during the spread of COVID-19. For example, women comprise more than 70 percent of the health care sector globally,¹² where they have been exposed to higher rates of GBVH at work, including incidents of being propositioned for sexual favors in exchange for access to adequate personal protective equipment.¹³ Workers in service-oriented jobs experienced disproportionately high rates of GBVH on the job prior to the pandemic,¹⁴ including from patients, clients and other third parties. The pandemic has heightened social stress and other risk factors, leading to increased GBVH in the world of work. For instance, health workers in China have reported being harassed and physically attacked on the job, while health workers in Honduras, Mexico and Singapore have been attacked and even murdered in public spaces and on their commutes.¹⁵

LAGOS MARKET PORTER HARASSED DAILY AT WORK, ON COMMUTE

My name is Amoke Eze Musa.* I work as an *ala baru* (a market porter) in Lagos, Nigeria, helping to transport loads to and from vehicles and for customers. My home is about 50 kilometers (30 miles) from the market but my husband got laid off, and I could not watch my children starve.

In the market, I experience sexual harassment from male shop owners. Some approach me and encourage me to meet them in a hotel, saying they will help me find a better job. There are days I just do not want to go to work but I must feed my family. I do not report these men because I do not want to lose their patronage. I negotiate my daily wage with them, which is often meager.

I have experienced a lot of sexual harassment while trying to get home on the public bus. Strange men touch my breast or buttocks. I feel dirty by the time I get off. I wish I did not have to take the bus home, but I cannot walk as the distance is too far.

During the peak of COVID-19 in Lagos all perishable foods markets were allowed to remain open and we were allowed to work, but I was afraid to ride the bus at night due to the high incidents of rape and sexual violence on the streets. I felt it was safer to start a small vegetable business within my neighborhood rather than risk being raped or abused on the road. My family suffered a lot. With the lifting of lockdown restrictions now I am back to my work, but I still have to think about how to remain safe. These incidents are almost a normal part of my daily commute.¹⁶

*Name changed to protect confidentiality.

Domestic workers, the majority of whom are women, experienced higher rates of GBVH at work during the pandemic.¹⁷ Domestic workers are often members of the most excluded ethnic communities and social groups in their societies, and are at heightened risk of exploitation and abuse, including GBVH at work, due to xenophobia, racism and sexism.¹⁸ They lack employment-based legal protections in most countries, work in isolation, often depend on employers for shelter and food as well as their wages, and many are migrants rendered more vulnerable by their lack of citizenship. A study conducted in South Africa during the pandemic found that domestic workers experienced increased GBVH in the world of work, particularly by the heads of households who hired them. Employers exposed themselves, displayed pornography, demanded sexual favors, raped and sexually assaulted domestic workers at higher rates.¹⁹ Workers recounted being fired when they refused demands for sex, with nowhere to go in the midst of the pandemic.²⁰ Surveys conducted by the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) of live-in domestic workers across the Middle East and the Americas found that psychological, physical and sexual violence increased during the pandemic.²¹ For example, a domestic worker in Mexico reported that her employer began touching her once he started working from home.²²



Increased economic insecurity, including increased unemployment, is a risk factor for GBVH at work because it makes workers more dependent on their jobs and less able to report abusive conduct. Women, particularly migrant women, have been disproportionately impacted by job loss,²³ including the decimation of the informal economy in many countries and layoffs in sectors in which women are the majority of the workforce, such as the apparel sector.²⁴ Garment factory employers in Central America took advantage of pandemic restrictions to illegally shed workers with underlying health issues seen as liabilities, particularly targeting pregnant women, women on maternity leave and older workers.²⁵

Women are disproportionately employed in precarious jobs, lacking contracts or other formal recognition of their employment status, and thereby 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.²⁶ This leaves women more vulnerable to GBVH. For example, there have been mass layoffs in the palm sector in Liberia due to the economic impacts of the pandemic, and women workers report that supervisors have been demanding sex in exchange for keeping their job.²⁷ In response to high-profile reports of sexual assault against garment workers during the pandemic, women garment workers in Bangladesh took to the streets to demand increased workplace protections including ratification of ILO Convention 190.²⁸

DHAKA GARMENT WORKER FIRED AFTER REFUSING SEXUAL ADVANCES

My name is Salma.* I worked as a sewing machine operator in Dhaka, Bangladesh, for more than nine years. I was terminated during the pandemic after experiencing gender-based harassment on the job. The problem started around a year ago, when my production supervisor started making sexual advances. I told him I was not interested, but he continued, even calling me after work and on weekends. I knew if I reported him, management would retaliate against me rather than stop him.

When my supervisor realized I would not accept his advances, he started criticizing my work. When the pandemic began in April, the factory started laying off more workers, and my workload increased. In June 2020, I was given a complex new task. My supervisor began criticizing my work. He forcefully pushed me and I fell on the floor. Then he took me to the production manager's office, where he accused me of being insubordinate and failing to meet my production target. The manager told me to resign. I knew if I resigned, I would not get any benefits so I refused. They forced me out of the factory without paying me my dues and other benefits.

I filed a complaint and then fled Dhaka. I am afraid factory management will harm me for complaining. The job market is terrible right now due to this pandemic and I cannot find work, I will have to look somewhere else because I cannot return to Dhaka. After nearly 10 years, the only thing I got for my work at the factory was indignity.²⁹

**Name changed to protect confidentiality*

Changes to working locations and arrangements have created new and invasive ways for perpetrators to commit GBVH in the world of work. In Nigeria, an office cleaner was raped by her supervisor, who used COVID-19 as a pretext to have her clean his office at an irregular time when other people were not present.³⁰ In the United Kingdom, workers report perpetrators showing up at their home or getting their personal phone numbers to continue abuse.³¹ As many businesses have shifted to remote work, workers can be at heightened risk of exposure to degrading treatment online, as there is increased opportunity for contact and less oversight.³² For example, many workplaces in India reported a surge in online harassment.³³ Workers in the UK were told to put on more makeup or “dress sexier” during video conferences.³⁴ Researchers in Australia and an advocate in Italy both concluded that online harassment was harder to address, as there was less oversight, including reduced opportunities for others in the workplace to witness and intervene in misconduct, and less access to formal and informal support structures.³⁵

Border closures have negatively impacted migrant women workers in particular, with many becoming trapped with perpetrators using COVID-19 as a “means of coercive control.”³⁶ Heightened policing and restrictions on business operations have been used to target marginalized workers, particularly in the informal sector.³⁷ For example, indigenous women in Chile have reported being detained and prevented from entering markets that nonindigenous street vendors were allowed to use.³⁸ A survey conducted by WEIGO of informal workers across Africa, Asia and the Americas found that “[p]olice harassment of informal workers was common across all regions resulting in the confiscation of goods, fines or physical violence and abuse.”³⁹

HONDURAN COMMUNICATIONS WORKER FIRED AFTER PUSHING BACK AGAINST HARASSMENT

My name is Daniela.* I started working for a communications company in Honduras one year ago, as a voiceover artist. I began receiving unwanted attention from the owner of the company before I was even done with training. He would call me into his office to ask me personal questions and comment on my body. I tried to shrug it off and do my job.

Things escalated once the pandemic started. The owner stopped coming into the office, but instead of escaping his attention, I ended up getting phone calls from him that sometimes went on for hours. I confided in some colleagues, who warned me to be careful.

He assigned me a new project, and instructed me that I had to do my narration with a sensual tone. He told me I had to work on my vocal skills, and told me he was going to coach me. He started giving me erotic texts to read for him over the phone and asking whether I liked them, was aroused by them, or imagined myself in the stories, stating that he did. After a few days, I told him this was unprofessional and he had to stop. He got angry and hung up. Just a few hours later, human resources called me and told that the owner had ordered them to fire me, even though this was not the normal procedure for terminations in the office.

I thought about trying to complain, but everything took place over the phone, I have no evidence, and I am 22 at the very beginning of my career. This man has been in the field for more than 30 years and is very influential, he could make trouble for me.

**Name changed to protect confidentiality*



How ILO Convention 190 Prevents and Addresses the Increase in Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the World of Work

In June 2019, the ILO adopted Convention 190 supplemented by Recommendation 206, the first global, binding treaty on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work, including GBVH.⁴⁰ This represents a huge victory for the global labor movement, which launched a campaign to end GBVH in the world of work and successfully advocated for the ILO to begin a standard-setting discussion in 2014. The campaign preceded the #MeToo movement that relaunched in 2017 and gained more traction and visibility as demands to address GBVH at work received increased media attention and public scrutiny.

The ILO is the only United Nations entity that is tripartite—that is, government officials and representatives of workers and employers engage in negotiating international labor standards. Women and LGBTQ+ workers from diverse sectors and countries made up the overwhelming majority of the workers' group who negotiated the language in ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206. They shared their personal experiences with GBVH in the world of work, demonstrating that it is an epidemic requiring structural and comprehensive responses from governments, employers and workers' organizations. Their organizing and advocacy is why ILO Convention 190 takes an intersectional feminist approach to preventing and addressing GBVH.

ILO Convention 190 recognizes the societal and structural nature of GBVH in the world of work and emphasizes the need for governments and employers to address its root causes, including discrimination, power relationships, and social and cultural norms that normalize and legitimate GBVH in the world of work.⁴¹ These essential protections have renewed urgency during the pandemic.⁴² Among the critical protections ILO Convention 190 provides:

- ▶ A broad definition of gender-based violence and harassment that addresses both individual and structural abuses and encompasses, but goes beyond, sexual harassment
- ▶ Expansive coverage to ensure protections for workers who are typically excluded from labor and employment law and measures that target risks in specific occupations and sectors, to ensure the most vulnerable workers are protected

- ▶ Coverage that extends beyond the physical workplace into the broader world of work
- ▶ Protection against violence and harassment from third parties
- ▶ A requirement that governments implement gender-responsive structural change with a focus on prevention by creating an enabling environment for worker organizing

ILO Convention 190 Prevents and Addresses All Forms of Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the World of Work

ILO Convention 190 contains two definitions: one for violence and harassment and a separate one for GBVH. It defines violence and harassment in the world of work as: “a range of unacceptable behaviors and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm and includes gender-based violence and harassment.”⁴³ It goes on to define GBVH as “violence and harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately and includes sexual harassment.”⁴⁴

This broad definition of GBVH at work is comprehensive and prohibits the range of abuses based on gender and sex that many workers experience regularly. Only approximately two-thirds of the countries in the world have laws prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace,⁴⁵ and many of these only recognize sexual harassment as a crime,⁴⁶ requiring the target of the violence or harassment to report the perpetrator to the police, significantly limiting the likelihood that it will be addressed. Women workers who advocated for ILO Convention 190 shared many examples of other forms of GBVH that are oppressive and debilitating, such as infantilizing treatment like cheek pinching, or repeatedly being told they and all women are incompetent, stupid or worthless.⁴⁷

ILO Convention 190’s broad definition recognizes workers’ lived experiences and ensures that the full spectrum of abusive conduct is covered. ILO Convention 190 recognizes that all workers, not just women, can experience violence and harassment in the world of work based on their gender or sexual identity, and requires states to recognize and address a continuum of violence and harassment through gender-responsive prevention and intervention policies.

Article 10 of ILO Convention 190 calls on governments and employers to “recognize the effects of domestic violence and, so far as is reasonably practicable, mitigate its impact in the world of work,” by providing work-based protections that allow survivors to remain employed while seeking safety. This includes paid leave to address the domestic violence, such as moving, obtaining a restraining order or legal custody of children, flexible work arrangements and temporary protection against dismissal.⁴⁸ These are particularly critical in this moment, as domestic violence has surged around the world during the pandemic,⁴⁹ but the workplace has always been a particularly important site of intervention against domestic violence, both because it is common for perpetrators to sabotage their victim’s work performance, and because economic independence is a critical factor in many survivors’ decision to leave.

ILO Convention 190 addresses how various forms of GBVH at work are interrelated and linked to an underlying power hierarchy of gender-based oppression and structural discrimination. It underscores the importance of prevention and the need to shift workplace power dynamics and expectations. The persistent experience of multiple forms of GBVH across a person’s work life both compounds individual suffering and reflects the need for governments, employers and unions to address the systemic and interrelated nature of GBVH at work.

ILO Convention 190 Protects the Most Vulnerable Workers from Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Article 2 of ILO Convention 190 protects workers and “other persons in the world of work,” in addition to workers irrespective of their contractual status including those in training, interns, apprentices, terminated workers, volunteers, job-seekers and job applicants. It applies to all sectors, including the public sector and the informal economy.⁵⁰

This coverage of workers, not just employees as defined in national law, ensures that workers traditionally excluded from labor protections, such as domestic workers, street vendors and supply chain workers in export processing zones, are protected from GBVH. Women, young people, migrants, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized identities are disproportionately in precarious work arrangements, including part-time work, nonstandard contracts and informal work.⁵¹ Precarious forms of employment are growing in many countries, as employers increasingly rely on complex supply chains rather than directly hiring full-time, formal workers. Typically, such full-time, formal jobs are the only work arrangements in which employers have any responsibility to prevent discrimination, violence or harassment under law.

Workers in precarious jobs lack labor protections, fair wages and clear accountability structures, increasing the risk of GBVH at work. Gender-based stereotypes and norms and a lack of gender-responsive labor policies both maintain and legitimate the disproportionate concentration of women and other marginalized groups in insecure forms of employment. The threat of GBVH at work is also used to keep women and other marginalized groups out of formal employment in traditionally male-dominated sectors.

ILO Convention 190 requires a broad scope of coverage, to ensure the most vulnerable workers are protected. Article 6 requires governments to adopt laws, regulations and policies “ensuring the right to equality and nondiscrimination in employment and occupation” for women workers and other workers who belong to “one or more vulnerable groups or groups in situations of vulnerability” disproportionately affected by GBVH in the world of work. This emphasis on how various forms of discrimination and oppression, including discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, migration status, religion and disability, intersects with discrimination based on gender and gender identity, is essential. The inclusive vision of ILO Convention 190 is particularly critical as governments look to confront multiple crises, including recovery measures following the economic chaos caused by the pandemic and violent racism and misogyny that are the legacies of colonialism and imperialism.

Moreover, governments are required to identify sectors, occupations and work arrangements with higher rates of GBVH, and consult with unions and employers to develop specific protection measures.⁵² This language recognizes that the way work is structured can leave workers at heightened risk of violence and harassment on the job. Implementing industry-specific measures is critical for essential workers who have continued to work throughout the pandemic at great risk to their personal safety.

For example, ILO Convention 190 would require that governments and employers develop measures to address the specific risks to health care and retail workers from interacting with patients and customers, often at irregular hours and in isolated settings. Governments and employers would need to address the specific risks faced by domestic workers, many of whom were trapped in their employers’ homes during lockdown, in countries where they are not citizens, facing GBVH from employers on whom they are completely dependent for wages, shelter, food and often legal status in the country.

ILO Convention 190 would protect informal workers like Amoke Eze Musa, the porter who felt she could not report market vendors who sexually propositioned her because she negotiates with them directly to set her daily wage. The structural power dynamic she faces is ripe for abuse. If her country ratified ILO Convention 190, the government would have to engage with informal workers directly to create better processes and protections for porters.

ILO Convention 190 Prevents and Addresses Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the Entire ‘World of Work’

Article 3 of ILO Convention 190 applies to GBVH not just in the workplace, but in the broader world of work, meaning violence and harassment occurring “in the course of, linked with or arising out of work” including public and private spaces where they are a place of work, in locations where a worker is paid, takes a rest break or a meal, and uses sanitary, washing and changing facilities; during work-related trips, travel, training, events or social activities; through work-related communication, including those enabled by information and communication technologies; in employer-provided accommodation; and when commuting for work.⁵³

Implementing this language would protect workers from GBVH wherever they work during the pandemic, which has become even more critical as more people are working from home or temporary locations, often in isolation, communicating more over technology, and commuting at irregular hours. Workers who are harassed online or stalked at their home by supervisors or co-workers would have access to protections and remedies under the labor law. Employers, who currently often have the option of ignoring work-related misconduct that happens offsite, would be required to take steps to prevent and address these forms of GBVH linked to work. Implementing this language would protect workers like Daniela, who are subjected to harassment over work-related communications.

It would protect the many workers like Amoke Eze Musa who experience pervasive GBVH on the work commute. Avoiding such abuse forces women to make decisions that negatively impact their professional life. For Amoke Eze Musa, that meant choosing less lucrative and even more precarious work rather than risk being raped on her way home. Ratifying ILO Convention 190 would mean that the government would have to take action to ensure everyone can safely utilize public transportation, including consulting market workers to understand the risks they face, and transport workers. The fear of harassment, sexual assault and rape on the commute prevents many women from seeking certain types of employment; addressing it would increase gender equality and equal access to opportunity.

ILO Convention 190 Prevents Gender-Based Violence from Third Parties in the World of Work

Articles 4 and 9 of ILO Convention 190 require that governments and employers “take into account violence and harassment involving third parties,”⁵⁴ including “clients, customers, service providers, users, patients, members of the public”⁵⁵ and, in the case of informal workers, “state actors,” including police and security officials.⁵⁶

Most labor laws regarding GBVH, particularly those addressing employer liability for failing to prevent GBVH, are limited to co-workers, often only a supervisor or someone with clear, formal power over their target. However, it is well documented that workers in service industries face disproportionately high rates of GBVH at least in part due to their exposure to third parties, particularly if their role is client- or customer-oriented.

Implementing ILO Convention 190 would mean that governments and employers would have to work with health care workers, retail workers, domestic workers and other frontline workers to develop specific policies and protocols to prevent GBVH committed by patients, customers, clients and other third parties.

For informal workers, who often exist in precarious legal as well as economic circumstances, ILO Convention 190 specifically recognizes that government officials play an important role, often as perpetrators of GBVH. For example, street vendors report being forced to have sex with police officers to avoid fines or retain a desirable selling location. With lockdown measures imposing curfews and restrictions on economic activities, authorities have new tools to escalate abuse.

Ratification and implementation of ILO Convention 190 would require governments and employers to consult directly with workers and unions to craft inclusive laws and policies to prevent and address GBVH at work committed by third parties.

ILO Convention 190 Addresses Collective Power to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence and Harassment through Worker Organizing

ILO Convention 190 recognizes the critical need to address “unequal gender-based power relations”⁵⁷ including by “promoting and realizing the fundamental right of all workers to freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining.”⁵⁸

Preventing GBVH requires shifting more agency and control over working conditions to women and other marginalized workers who are especially at risk during the pandemic. Critically, ILO Convention 190 recognizes that democratic, representative unions are a particularly effective mechanism to prevent GBVH.

Workers themselves are in the best position to understand when and how GBVH occurs in a workplace, particularly if they have a space to collectively share their experiences and define solutions. Unions can be powerful advocates for justice in individual cases and provide structure and a space to come together to demand change and push back collectively against oppression and abuse. One recent study of women in banana packing found that 58 percent of women in nonunion plants experienced GBVH at work, compared with only 8 percent at unionized plants.

The importance of unions has become especially clear during the pandemic, as workers struggle to demand safety and respect on the job. Unions have improved health and safety practices for both workers and the community during the COVID-19 pandemic, with one study in the United States concluding the mortality rate of patients in nursing homes with unionized staff was 30 percent lower compared with nonunion nursing homes, and staff were more likely to have access to adequate personal protective equipment.⁵⁹

GBVH is rooted in discriminatory stereotypes about how women and men should behave, who is allowed access to power and resources, who should be present and taken into account in decision-making around access to resources and the social organization of work, and what types of labor are recognized, valued and remunerated. Challenging the insidious presence of GBVH in workplaces and in society requires remaking power structures and redefining how leadership looks and operates, which can only be done through collective organizing and collective power. The impact of the pandemic has laid bare the cost of persistent inequality underscoring the importance of a strong democratic union movement.



Recommendations

Ratifying ILO Convention 190 will give governments, employers, and unions tools to address the increase in GBVH during the pandemic and beyond. Workers and unions around the world are working in diverse coalitions to campaign for ratification of ILO Convention 190 by governments and implementation of its language by employers and within labor movement structures. The International Trade Union Confederation is coordinating at the international level, to demand ratification of ILO Convention 190 and end to GBVH as part of a new social contract.⁶⁰

Unions recognize that GBVH is used to reinforce and legitimate gender inequality and intersecting forms of oppression, including homophobia, racism, xenophobia and ableism, all of which have escalated due to the impact of the pandemic. ILO Convention 190 presents a framework for confronting these intersecting forms of oppression, and rebuilding economies based on inclusivity, equality, safety, dignity and respect on the job.

Many unions have also incorporated ILO Convention 190 ratification into advocacy around implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 to promote more government accountability in economic and social development, including decent work (Goal 8) and gender equality (Goal 5).⁶¹ Goal 5 includes targets on ending “all forms of discrimination” and eliminating “all forms of violence” against all women and girls. Goal 5 also advocates adopting and strengthening policies that promote gender equality,⁶² which the ILO has explicitly linked to the fight to end GBVH at work.⁶³ Unions recognize that economic equality cannot be achieved as long as GBVH remains an effective tool of oppression.

Governments, employers and unions can work together to ratify and implement ILO Convention 190 and use its framework to ensure safe, respectful workplaces. As a part of these efforts:

GOVERNMENTS SHOULD:

- ▶ Ratify and implement ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206
- ▶ With workers and employers, develop and implement comprehensive amendments to national legislation, including laws on labor and employment, occupational safety and health, non-discrimination, criminal law and other areas as relevant, to:
 - Prohibit all forms of GBVH as defined by ILO Convention 190
 - Protect all workers as defined by ILO Convention 190
 - Cover the entire world of work as defined by ILO Convention 190
 - Protect against violence from third parties
 - Require employer accountability for failure to prevent GBVH in the world of work
 - Ensure all workers can exercise their right to freely form and join unions and associations and engage in collective bargaining
- ▶ Mandate collection of data on the scope and incidence of GBVH in the world of work to inform appropriate legislative and policy responses

EMPLOYERS SHOULD:

- ▶ Publicly support and advocate for ratification and implementation of ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206 by national governments
- ▶ Consult with workers and unions to implement employer obligations under ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206, including:
 - Engaging in a comprehensive risk assessment that examines working conditions, exposure to third parties, power relationships, discrimination and underlying social and cultural norms that support violence and harassment
 - Adopting a workplace policy that defines and prohibits all forms of GBVH as defined in ILO Convention 190 and lays out procedures for responding to specific incidents
 - Conducting trainings for all staff, including managers, on GBVH in the world of work and employer policies in place to prevent it
- ▶ Engage in collective bargaining with workers on policies and procedures to address GBVH, including voluntarily recognizing unions and associations formed by workers who do not currently enjoy the right to collective bargaining under national law
- ▶ Recognize that the responsibility to identify and prevent GBVH extends throughout the entire supply chain, and adopt policies and practices that ensure accountability for subcontractors, suppliers and other downstream entities

UNIONS SHOULD:

- ▶ Continue to build diverse national and international coalitions to advocate for ratification and implementation of ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206
- ▶ Negotiate collective bargaining agreements with employers that implement employer obligations under ILO Convention 190 and Recommendation 206
- ▶ Incorporate the ILO Convention 190 framework into internal union policies



ILO Convention 190, supplemented by Recommendation 206, provides an effective, comprehensive framework to design policies and laws that prevent and address GBVH in the world of work. It does so by clearly defining GBVH, mandating a comprehensive scope of protection that applies to all forms of abuse and to the most vulnerable workers, outlining the responsibilities that governments, employers and workers share, and emphasizing the need for workers to have more power and agency over their working conditions. Governments, employers and unions can work together to ratify and implement the critical protections in ILO Convention 190, to address the increase in GBVH due to the pandemic, and ensure safe, respectful workplaces for all.

Endnotes

- 1 Intersectionality is a concept introduced by U.S. scholar Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how multiple forms of structural discrimination and marginalization intersect, compound and reinforce one another. Intersectional feminism recognizes that institutional gender-based discrimination is inextricably linked with structural racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism and other forms of discrimination, which create specific identity-based stereotypes, exclusion and vulnerability. See, e.g. UN Women, Intersectional Feminism: What It Means and Why It Matters Right Now, July 1, 2020 https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook (accessed on November 13, 2020); Kimberlé Crenshaw, Keynote Address, Women of the World Festival, March 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DW4HLgYPIA> (accessed on November 13, 2020).
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