

# Responding to gender-based violence in the world of work in South Africa

*Perspectives from the Labour Research Service (LRS)*



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## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IS A WORLD OF WORK ISSUE

Women report feeling unsafe at work,<sup>1</sup> and when travelling to and from work, across all sectors in South Africa. Women are more vulnerable to violence and harassment in insecure and precarious employment because they lack legal protection and bargaining power. Incidents of violence and harassment are often unreported for fear of further victimisation and dismissal.

The term gender-based violence (GBV) covers many different forms of violence, ranging from bullying and psychological abuse to rape and sexual assault. The common thread between these different forms of violence is how they are used to maintain the social power of men over women in society. By recognising that GBV is a world of work issue, we take into account the experiences of violence and harassment that a woman may experience both in her workplace and in other places, such as on public transport to and from work. As working hours increase, insecurity and risk of being assaulted or violated increase because more women leave their homes after dark and return late at night.

Domestic violence in South Africa is alarming<sup>2</sup> and can seriously affect a woman's ability to work. In the past, this would have been seen as a personal issue, unrelated to her role at work. The International Labour Organization's (ILO's) Violence and Harassment Convention 190<sup>3</sup> has challenged this notion, arguing that domestic violence affects employment, productivity, and health and safety in the world of work. This means that domestic violence follows a woman into work, whether it's the psychological impact of

the violence or the actual physical threat of a partner stalking her at work. South Africa has ratified Convention 190 and adopted a code of good practice to deal with harassment and violence in the workplace.

Gender-based violence significantly affects women's physical and mental health and undermines their overall wellbeing and confidence in the workplace. The ILO Convention reinforces the view that sexual harassment and violence are important occupational safety and health issues.

## A WORLD OF WORK FREE OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE – LRS VISION

As a labour support organisation, the Labour Research Service (LRS) recognises that GBV is multifaceted and embedded in personal, situational, and socio-cultural contexts. Strategies to change individual behaviour and attitudes in the world of work must reinforce shifts in workplace practices and policies.

The South African workplace can be a microsystem of the wider society in which violence is pervasive, but it has the potential to be a space free of GBV. For this to happen, there must be conscious intervention by all role players. Trade unions are key actors in the world of work. We assist unions to develop effective strategies to prevent and address GBV in the world of work.

## INITIATIVES TO REDUCE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Over the past five years, we have supported unions in the domestic work, public health and education, garment, retail, and transport sectors to experiment with different approaches to preventing and ending GBV in their sectors.

<sup>1</sup> According to the 2022/2023 quarter one crime statistics, 855 women were killed in South Africa. As the modern workplace extends beyond company offices to employees' homes, the risk that employees become victims of gender-based violence (GBV) has increased. <https://www.polity.org.za/article/employers-role-in-eradicating-gender-based-violence-legally-required-or-simply-virtuous-2022-10-12>

<sup>2</sup> Statistics South Africa released a report, Crimes Against Women in South Africa, indicating that one in five women (21%) had experienced physical violence by a partner. [https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/1\\_Stock/Events\\_Institutional/2020/womens\\_charter\\_2020/docs/30-07-2020/A\\_Statistical\\_Overview\\_R\\_Maluleke.pdf](https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/1_Stock/Events_Institutional/2020/womens_charter_2020/docs/30-07-2020/A_Statistical_Overview_R_Maluleke.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019. (No. 190) [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/F?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C190](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/F?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190)



## **Gender-based violence affects women's physical and mental health and undermines their wellbeing and confidence in the workplace**

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### ***Domestic worker's experience of gender-based violence***

Domestic work, which is dominated by women, is mostly undervalued. Workers report frequent verbal abuse, mistreatment, and sexual harassment. Live-in domestic workers, isolated from their own families and support systems, are particularly vulnerable to violence.

Bringing people together to name their everyday experiences of GBV is an important starting point for developing prevention strategies. We supported the Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union of South Africa to engage in a participatory research process, which aimed to understand members' experiences in the context of 'employers' homes' as a workplace. The research revealed systemic abuse of rights. Yet, many workers are reluctant to speak out for fear of being disbelieved or losing their jobs. We also found a situation in which a female employer elevates her status as a woman by undermining and degrading the status of the domestic worker. One domestic worker said: *"This crushed my self-esteem"*. Women experiencing sexual abuse by male family members chose not to speak up because they feared being disbelieved or losing their jobs.

### ***A pilot social action initiative to reduce violence in a health institution in Gauteng***

An ILO working paper, 'Gender-based violence in the world of work' (Kruz and Clinger, 2011), reports that although healthcare workers are eight times more likely to have experienced the threat of violence than workers in manufacturing, almost 70% of incidents among nurses go unreported.

The LRS partnered with the Health & Other Services Personnel Trade Union of South Africa in a social action initiative at the Meadowlands Clinic in Soweto. This was in response to the high levels of violence against its members in health facilities. The union was concerned about the safety and security of its members, and their ability to provide high-quality services in stressful and, at times, traumatic conditions. Worker leaders spoke of feeling 'terrorised' by angry community members who blamed them for the lack of care. Using a multi-stakeholder approach, the initiative experimented with individual and collective actions to reduce violence, and to change perceptions about the value of care work and the value of healthcare workers. The union deepened its understanding of the causes of violence and that there is no 'quick fix' or single strategy. Interventions would need to be at many levels, including policy and advocacy.

The Meadowlands initiative was an example of concerned individuals and groups experimenting with actions that would give value to the 'life-giving' work of healthcare workers. This strategy is significant in that it was used to reduce violence in the clinic, by drawing a direct link between devaluing the reproductive work of health workers and the increasing levels of violence against the predominantly female workforce in the health system.

### ***Responding to gender-based violence in and around the school as a workplace***

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) undermines the quality of education and creates unsafe and discriminatory workplaces for staff. Everyone in schools can be a perpetrator or a victim of SRGBV.

The LRS has worked with African affiliates of the global teachers' union, Education International, to test strategies for the prevention and elimination of SRGBV. The 'Education Unions Take Action to End SRGBV' initiative put teachers, education personnel, and teachers' unions at the forefront of efforts to end SRGBV. Unions experimented with different approaches, starting with a process of empowering their members by coming together and sharing their stories of SRGBV. This broke the silence around the issue. At a formal and structural level, unions elected members to lead efforts to end SRGBV.

Embedding the commitment to ending SRGBV in union policy frameworks was a key priority, which gave the issue lasting legitimacy in the organisations. This helped to sustain action to end SRGBV.

### ***A participatory action research programme to identify strategies for addressing gender-based violence in the garment manufacturing sector and the supply chain***

Sexual harassment is a common occurrence in the women-dominated garment manufacturing sector, internationally, according to a 2019<sup>4</sup> ILO report on sexual harassment in the industry. In the South African context, women in the garment industry speak of a 'culture of GBV' where women are intimidated, demeaned, and harassed in the workplace, and where domestic violence is prevalent in the home.

The retail sector, part of the clothing value chain, is dominated by women and characterised by insecure and precarious employment. Retail workers work long hours and shifts due to increasing precariousness. As a result of later working hours, many women are vulnerable and do not feel safe on public transport. There are reports of increased customer abuse and sexual assault.

In partnership with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and its affiliates, the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union and the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union, the LRS, together with the National Labour and Economic Development Institute, facilitated a participatory action research process to identify strategies to prevent and address GBV and harassment in the workplace. The research aimed to give voice to women and other marginalised workers, as experts on their own experiences of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) at work, and as owners of decision-making processes to prevent and address GBVH. Many of the worker researchers and the workers they interviewed had experienced GBV, and the research had the potential to trigger traumatising thoughts and feelings. The unions created safe spaces for support and counselling throughout the research process.

### ***Creating workplaces free of homophobic and transphobic violence***

The ILO C190 and the Code of Good Practice on Preventing and Eliminating Harassment at Work have opened up important spaces for the LRS to advance the rights of LGBTQ+ people to a safe and inclusive world of work. Convention 190 emphasises the importance of addressing violence against marginalised groups. Prejudice and discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community put them at increased risk of threats and violence. The LRS works in partnership with trade unions to raise awareness in unions and workplaces, and to include policy and bargaining demands and strategies that can introduce measures to support and protect LGBTQ+ workers in the workplace. The United National Transport Union, a union with a majority of male members organising in the transport sector, has taken the lead in working to create a safe environment for LGBTQ+ workers.

## **CONCLUSION**

We see examples of our constituencies critically reflecting on their practices in all our work. For example, unions recognise that a struggle for collective agreements reflecting 'gender demands' must include a struggle for changes in individual consciousness and behaviour, resource allocation and, importantly, organisational culture. This is a slow process of recognising and mobilising around not only the obvious demands, such as pay, but also giving value to what are seen as the 'soft' issues of dignity, safety, and security. 🌱

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<sup>4</sup> Text of the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) is available at [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C190](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190).