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Select Gender-Based Violence Literature Reviews: Violence Against Women and Informal Employment

BACKGROUND

This United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported literature review, one of a series of eleven literature reviews contributing to Agency efforts to better understand gender-based violence (GBV) and its impact on the empowerment of girls and women, addresses the research question presented below.



Photo: Pakistan Home Workers

*Are women working in the informal sector more exposed to or face greater violence?
What drives this situation and how can it be addressed?*

FINDINGS

Realizing women’s rights at the workplace requires women’s access to employment with adequate pay, safe working conditions and social protection. In large parts of the world, employment does not meet these criteria. Informal work is the norm in developing economies, in rural and urban areas. According to the International Labour Organization, in 2018 61% of workers worldwide work informally; in developing and emerging economies the rate is 70%. Many are domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors, or waste pickers.

Informal work risk factors. The ILO’s expanded definition of “informal work” is a heterogeneous category seeking to include a range of self-employed persons as well as a range of wage workers who are employed without legal and social protection. The most vulnerable informal work category is non-paid family work, which may include work in family businesses or on farms. Authorities not only disregard the abuse of informal workers, they are sometimes the perpetrators. Local authorities may also be indirectly responsible for violence by not providing adequate infrastructure (poor lighting and unsafe transport stations) and protection.

Various conditions create vulnerabilities for informal sector women, including (ILO 2016):

- Working uncovered or unprotected by labor law and social protection;
- Unsocial working hours (i.e., evening and night work);
- Working in relative isolation or in remote locations;
- Working in intimate spaces and private homes;
- Working in conflict zones; and
- High rates of unemployment.

What is gender-based violence?

GBV is a flagrant violation of human rights and excludes women from economic and political opportunity. GBV occurs in every region of the world and is a major obstacle for achieving not only gender equality, but also sustainable development, economic growth, as well as peace and justice. Within gender-based forms of violence, it is important to understand and confront violence and harassment in the world of work as it is a threat to the dignity, health and wellbeing of those who experience it and their families. On the other hand, GBV also undermines working environments, affects productivity, damages enterprise reputation and ultimately hinders a country’s economic growth.

As a type of GBV, violence against women (VAW) in the workplace appears cyclical and related to exposure to other forms of aggression. Some studies argue that victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) tend to be engaged in informal legal and illegal activities (Pyles 2006), possibly because women who experience abuse are traumatized, less able to work in the formal sector and are generally more desperate to find ways to earn money.

Women in the informal sector. Women tend to be employed in the most vulnerable categories of work, the least secure and lowest-paying occupations, while men dominate in the more protected and remunerative jobs. Women face multidimensional obstacles which prevent access to decent work. They often bear the load of unpaid childcare and domestic work, leaving them with little choice but to take on low-quality jobs that allow them to attend to domestic responsibilities. Second, a range of discriminatory social and cultural norms may affect women's access to opportunities for education and skills development, freedom of movement, and financial access. In general, the range of opportunities available to women is limited by pervasive gender stereotypes and social norms, as well as discriminatory practices, within both households and labor markets. Finally, female domestic workers and street vendors face particular difficulties, including, respectively, harassment and psychological, physical and sexual abuse and contractual abuses leading to mental health issues and insecure working conditions characterized by psychological, physical, or sexual as well as state-led violence and corruption.

Towards ending violence and harassment. As of 2018, out of 80 countries reviewed by the ILO, 65 had work-related sexual harassment regulations and 60 had work-related physical and psychological violence and harassment regulations. Also, international human rights treaties have set global standards for countries and contribute to gender equality advocacy efforts holding governments accountable. Although it is hard to assess the impact of these advances on the prevalence of violence against women in the workplace, particularly in the informal sector, as data is very scarce, these laws and international conventions represent an important advance signaling that violence in the workplace is unacceptable.

FINDINGS

- **The legal system and enforcement of laws.** In order to reduce and prevent the violence women face in the informal economy, a multitude of stakeholders including enterprises, governments, non-governmental organizations, and worker committees should consider action in legal, public, and private spaces. Laws and regulations are required, but employers and workers also need training and advocacy awareness to ensure laws are effectively implemented.
- **Social awareness campaigns and interventions.** Social-awareness campaigns and interventions to empower women may also help prevent violence against vulnerable working women. Strategies could address the many complex factors that make women vulnerable to violence in informal-sector work spaces, including prevailing gender norms and power imbalances. Development actors might encourage policies and approaches to economically empower women, such as education promotion, skills development and training, and financial inclusion.
- **Improved public services.** Actions to improve public services can also reduce women's vulnerability to workplace violence. For example, public childcare can reduce pressure on women who in many cases are forced to take on low-quality informal jobs, such as street vending, that allow them to take their children with them or have flexible hours. In addition, investments in urban infrastructure can create safer environments for women workers.
- **Collective action.** Collective action and informal worker representation are critical for addressing work conditions. Informal workers engaging in collective action are challenged, however, in efforts to obtain legal recognition of their work and for their organizations. In addition, informal workers tend to work in small numbers in scattered locations and can rarely afford monthly organization/union membership fees, so these organizations may struggle to generate administrative expenses required to operate. Efforts might help unions link with other kinds of organizations, networks and associations that could provide skills trainings for women, as well as assistance with acquiring access to financial and material resources.

Please use this link to access the full report in the USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC):
https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WQ8X.pdf

REFERENCE

ILO. 2016. Final Report: Meeting of Experts on Violence against Women and Men in the World of Work. Geneva: International Labour Office.