

Gender-Based Violence in the Workplace: An overview from the occupied Palestinian territory

‘Any action, incident or behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, injured in the course of, or as a direct result of, his or her work’¹ constitutes workplace violence (ILO, 2003).

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics conducted a study in the occupied Palestinian territory on gender-based violence (GBV) in the workplace in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Institute of Women Studies at Birzeit University. The objective of the study was to highlight the issue at the national level and to influence future policy-making. Its aims were to:

- identify the main ways that women are affected by GBV in the workplace;
- assess the legal framework and procedures for dealing with GBV at work;
- heighten awareness of GBV at work within national institutions, in organizations representing workers and employers, and amongst the general public.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was carried on a sample of 981 women in the occupied Palestinian territory working in paid and unpaid positions in different employment sectors. Out of these women, 660 worked in the West Bank and 321 in the Gaza Strip. The study used the ‘Sexual Experiences Questionnaire’, which has been widely used to carry out national surveys of the workplace. This questionnaire assesses the frequency and severity of GBV in the workplace as well as the impact it has on

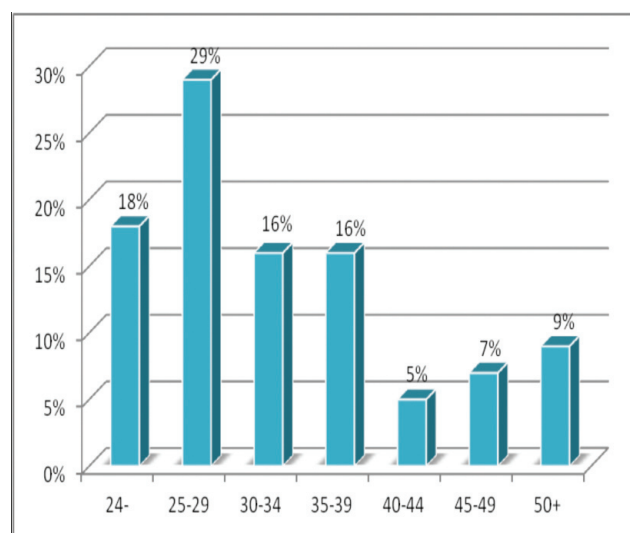
its victims and the strategies that have been employed to cope with it. It focuses on three main types of violence: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion.² A total of 853 surveys were completed, 574 from the West Bank and 279 from the Gaza Strip, which gives a response rate of 86 per cent

FINDINGS

Prevalence of GBV in the workplace

Out of the 853 women who responded to the survey, 78.2 per cent said they had not experienced any form of violence at work and 22.8 per cent said they had experienced some form of violence during the last 12 months. Young women aged between 25 and 29 were the most vulnerable age group, with 29 per cent reporting that they had experienced some form of violence at work. They were followed by women aged 24 and under, of which 18 per cent had experienced some form of violence in the workplace.

Figure 1: Victims of GBV in the workplace by age group

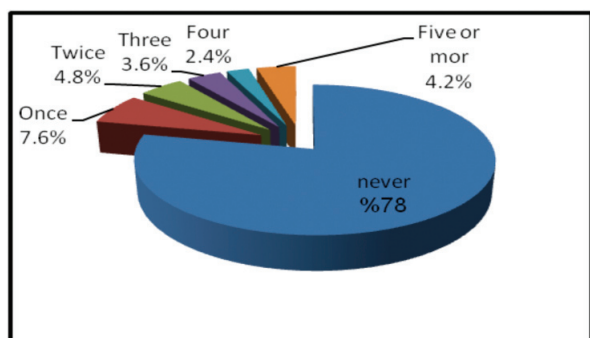


¹ ILO (2003) ‘Code of practice on workplace violence in service sectors and measures to combat this phenomenon’, (Geneva) (p. 4)

² Gender harassment aims to humiliate the victim but is not sexual in nature. It includes throwing insults or telling sexist jokes. Unwanted sexual attention is behaviour of a sexual nature that humiliates or intimidates another person. Sexual coercion is also sexual and involves someone bribing or sexually intimidating another person by, for example, offering to improve or downgrade their working conditions if they cooperate or fail to cooperate with them on a sexual level.

When asked how frequently they experienced GBV in the workplace, 4.2 per cent of the women said that they had experienced it on five or more occasions over the last 12 months, while 7.6 per cent reported having been harassed at least once during this period (see figure 2).

Figure 2: How many times women have been exposed to GBV over the last twelve months



These findings lead to two assumptions. First, some women do not report cases of GBV in the workplace because they are scared about the repercussions and fear that they will not be properly protected. Secondly, some women are not aware that they are the victims of GBV in the workplace.

Forms of GBV in the workplace

Violence in the workplace is any form of violent or threatening behaviour that takes place at work and includes murder, assault, rape, sexual harassment, threatening behaviour, bullying and verbal abuse. However, this study focuses specifically on sexual violence such as sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion.

Out of the 22.8 per cent of women (186 women) who said they had been exposed to GBV in the workplace, 4.5 per cent (38 women) said they had suffered unwanted sexual attention at least once, while 3.5 per cent (30 women) said they had been victims of sexual coercion.

The survey also revealed a regional variation in GBV at work (see table 1). It showed that there are less incidences of GBV at work in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank. This is because women in the Gaza Strip are more likely to work in the service sector, especially in education, where there is limited interaction between men and women.

Women in the Gaza Strip are also employed on family farms where they are less likely to suffer harassment. However, in the West Bank women are employed across a more diverse range of sectors and there is greater interaction between men and women in the workplace leading to a higher level of GBV.

Table 1: Regional distribution of incidents of GBV in the workplace

Region	Sexual coercion	Unwanted sexual attention	Gender harassment
West Bank	25.5	5.7	4.6
Gaza Strip	14.5	2.1	1.4

Sources of violence

The main perpetrators of gender-based violence at work are clients and co-workers, with 34.7 per cent of the women surveyed saying they had been harassed by clients and 32.2 per cent by male co-workers.

Table 2. Sources of GBV

Source of GBV	Gender Harassment	
	No. of Incidents	Percentage %
Employer	51	6.5
Person in Charge	60	9
A Co-worker/males	215	32.2
Co-Worker/females	109	16.4
A Client	231	34.7
Total	667	100

Source of GBV	Unwanted Sexual Attention	
	No. of Incidents	Percentage %
Employer	1	1.1
Person in Charge	3	3.7
A Co-worker/males	41	46.3
Co-Worker/females	43	48.8
A Client	88	100
Total	176	100

Consequences of GBV in the workplace

The impact of GBV is far-reaching, with 51 per cent of women reporting that it had affected their lives in some way. Some 43.6 per cent of women reported that GBV had had a negative impact on their jobs, and 40.9 per cent said that it had affected their health and had psychological and social repercussions (see table 3). Women in insecure employment were especially worried about losing their jobs. However, 49 per cent of women said that the harassment had not affected their lives. This was either because the level of violence was insignificant or because of social and cultural perceptions that create a sense of indifference towards GBV in the workplace.

Table 3: How GBV in the workplace affects its victims

Consequences and its type	No	Yes
General Impact	49	51
Negative job related reactions	56.4	43.6
Negative health, psychological, and social effects	59.1	40.9

Reporting of incidents of GBV in the workplace

Only 19.5 per cent of women who had experienced GBV in the workplace had made a formal complaint to their employers. Some 61 per cent of women preferred to deal with the issue informally through friends or family connections to avoid ruining their family's reputation and because of concerns that they might be blamed for the harassment and things would get worse.

Table 4: Reporting GBV incidents in the workplace

Reporting the Incident	Formal	Informal
Yes	19.5	61.0
No	80.5	39.0
Percentage	100	100

Table 5: Reasons for not reporting GBV officially

Reasons	Number	Percent
I did not trust any of them	31	12.2%
I was worried that things will go worst	66	25.9%
I did not know to which entity I have to go	31	12.0%
I was afraid that I'll lose my job	25	9.9%
I want to keep on my reputation	43	16.9%

CONCLUSION

Despite interviewing only a small sample of women, this survey provides a useful preliminary baseline study on GBV in the workplace. This is the first time that a survey looking at this issue has taken place in the occupied Palestinian territory. The survey is an important tool for heightening awareness of the issue amongst policymakers, employers, campaigners and women.

The survey showed that GBV in the workplace has a greater effect on younger women than on older women, varies between regions, is most likely to be carried out by clients and co-workers, and is not typically reported through official channels.

It is hoped that future research will build on this study to improve our understanding of GBV in the workplace and to help develop appropriate strategies and measures to prevent it from happening in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to limit the impact of GBV in the workplace:

1. Legal Framework

There is a distinct lack of laws criminalizing domestic, sexual, and GBV at work within the occupied Palestinian territory. Furthermore, because of differences between the judicial systems in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, justice is often pursued inconsistently and customary laws are seen as being the most effective way of settling disputes.

Therefore, national legislation and institutional frameworks need to be developed that address this issue. Criminal, labour and civil service law all need to be changed so that GBV in the workplace is made illegal and victims receive the appropriate legal protection.

2. Research

Additional research is needed to further raise awareness of the issue and to ensure that appropriate measures are adopted. Future research should look at GBV at work within different sectors and different groups of workers. It should focus on the different forms and perceptions of GBV, how frequently it occurs, how frequently it is reported, and the behaviour of both perpetrators and their victims. Further studies could also look at the financial costs and loss of productivity incurred due to violence in the workplace. This would provide companies with a financial incentive to introduce measures limiting its impact.

3. Promoting Good Practices

The government, workers, employers and civil society organizations all have an important role to play in promoting good practices and creating violence-free workplaces. They can do this by:

- Establishing a clear definition of GBV in the workplace. This will help identify the different types of GBV and the groups and individuals who are most at risk.
- Encouraging companies to promote well-designed human resource policies that contain clear procedures for reporting grievances and complaints.
- Persuading and helping employees to communicate openly with each other. This would help them manage their problems and reduce the risk of violence at work. It will also encourage women to speak out more openly about any harassment they experience.
- Encouraging organizations to develop a checklist for new employees that includes a definition of GBV in the workplace and outlines the procedures for reporting such incidents. This will ensure employees are aware of their rights.
- Enhancing knowledge of GBV in the workplace by carrying out further studies, encouraging dialogue between women, and distributing information to workers and employers.
- Advocating for the appropriate legislation to be adopted to make violence in the workplace illegal.
- Providing legal services and counselling to support victims.

Key References

ILO (2009) 'Gender equality at the heart of decent work', Report of the Committee on Gender Equality, (Geneva)

ILO (2011) 'Gender Based Violence in the World of Work' (Geneva)

ILO (2003) 'Code of practice on workplace violence in service sectors and measures to combat this phenomenon. Meeting of Experts to Develop a Code of Practice on Violence and Stress at Work in Services: A Threat to Productivity and Decent Work, 8–15 October, (Geneva)

Contact information:

International Labour Organization Regional Office for Arab States

Aresco Centre, 11th & 12th floors
Justinien Street, Kantari, Beirut, Lebanon
Tel: (961) 1 752400 Fax: (961) 1 752406

Jerusalem Office

P.O. Box 51359
Tel: (972) 2 6260212 Fax: (972) 2 627646
<http://www.ilo.org.lb>
<http://www.ilo.org/gender>