

Gender-based violence comes at high social and economic cost

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What is gender-based violence?

Adrienne Cruz: In 1993 the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defined such violence as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. This included marital rape, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, trafficking, and forced prostitution. This definition has since been broadened to include, among other things, systematic rape in armed conflicts, female infanticide and prenatal sex selection, as well as the economic exploitation of women.

The term “gender-based violence” captures the fact that such violence is rooted in unequal power between women and men. Gender-based violence both reflects and reinforces the subordinate status of females – who are the large majority of victims – in male-dominated societies. However, males can also be victims of such violence, especially those who do not conform to traditional societal expectations about “masculine” behaviour. And some women perpetuate violence against other females in order to assert their authority and dominance, such as a woman who abuses a domestic worker.

How are women and men workers vulnerable to such violence?

Adrienne Cruz: Due to life-long discrimination and job stereotyping, most women work in low-paying and lower-status jobs with little decision-making or bargaining power. They are over-represented in atypical and precarious jobs, which are risk factors for gender-based violence including sexual harassment and sexual abuse. Men at higher occupational risk include those working nightshifts in small stores, which are more exposed to armed robberies and violence, and those in law enforcement. Sectors where women are not present also contribute to higher exposure risk for some men – for example males who hold subordinate positions in relation to others in all-male workplaces are more vulnerable to sexual abuse from their co-workers.

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In addition to a human rights perspective, is there a business case for preventing gender-based violence?

Adrienne Cruz: No other form of sex discrimination violates so many fundamental human rights, and for women aged 15 to 44 years such violence is a major cause of disability and death. Yet in addition to preventing human pain and suffering, there is also a compelling “economic efficiency” argument for preventing gender-based violence.

A recent study in the United Kingdom estimated that domestic violence cost the economy £2.7 billion a year in decreased productivity, lost wages and sick pay, with the total direct and indirect costs at £23 billion annually. And in the United States last year, the Novartis Pharmaceutical Company was found liable in one of the country's biggest-ever sexual harassment and discrimination cases. The company was ordered to pay US\$3.3 million in compensatory damages and US\$250 million in punitive damages to a class of 5,600 female staff, who were also entitled to seek additional awards of up to US\$300,000 each.

Are some groups of workers particularly at risk of gender-based violence?

Adrienne Cruz: Definitely. High-risk groups include girls and boys who are in child labour, forced and bonded labourers, migrant workers, domestic workers, health services workers especially nurses, and sex workers.

Has the economic crisis had an impact on gender-based violence?

Adrienne Cruz: In many countries the economic crisis has exacerbated such violence. Evidence from some regions shows that more girls and boys are being forced into street work to survive, including sexual exploitation which heightens their risk to violence and HIV infection. And some men – whom many societies expect to be the traditional breadwinner – are experiencing sustained stress caused by job losses; when this is coupled with alcohol or substance abuse, they have a higher risk of perpetuating violence against their wives or partners. At the same time, there are many collective initiatives taken by men around the world to engage their fellow decision-makers and public opinion leaders to step up efforts to prevent gender-based violence.

What can ILO constituents do to prevent violence at the workplace?

Adrienne Cruz: While governments are responsible for ensuring that national legislation and institutional frameworks address gender-based violence, the workplace itself is recognized as a relevant context in which to develop policies and strategies to prevent it. Workers and managers can successfully overcome the work-related problems they often face through discussions, well-designed company human resources policies, and through collective bargaining. Strong commitment of both trade unions and management is instrumental in reducing the incidence of workplace violence, and the new ILO publication¹ contains almost 60 tools, measures and guides that feature good practices implemented in all sorts of workplaces around the world.

What is the role of the ILO in this respect?

Adrienne Cruz: Any kind of violence in the workplace has always been an important concern for ILO. Gender-based violence was described as one of the main challenges to gender equality by the International Labour Conference in its June 2009 Resolution concerning gender equality at the heart

¹ Adrienne Cruz and Sabine Klinger: Gender-based violence in the world of work: Overview and selected annotated bibliography (Geneva, ILO, 2011).

of decent work. The resolution contains workplace-related strategies by ILO constituents to address such violence and decrease women's vulnerability by promoting their economic empowerment.

Based on recommendations of the resolution, the ILO Bureau for Gender Equality (GENDER) took the lead in tracking current research, investigating trends and developing this new publication. It aims to contribute to policy development at national and sectoral levels, enhance knowledge-sharing on how to eliminate gender-based violence, and serve as an information resource for capacity building of governments and the social partners worldwide.

What's more, many ILO field offices conduct training courses for governments and for employer and worker organizations on sexual harassment provisions in legislation and specific policies, as well as workshops on codes of practice and other strategies. Capacity-building courses on gender equality and violence-related issues are also conducted by the Turin-based International Training Centre (ITC-ILO).