

*Summary of collaborative research on GBV faced by migrant domestic workers from Africa, Asia and Latin America, ahead of the 108th Meeting of the International Labour Conference, 2019*



## **Demanding Justice: Migrant Domestic Workers and Gender Based Violence**

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The **Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW)**, in collaboration with members and partners, has been documenting women migrant domestic workers' experiences of gender-based violence (GBV) in Asia<sup>1</sup>, Africa<sup>2</sup>, and Latin America.<sup>3</sup> The work was carried out by 23 organisations and individual researchers across 18 countries using Feminist Participatory Action Research.

<sup>1</sup> The research was led by: Anti-Racism Movement (Lebanon), International Domestic Workers Federation (Lebanon), Legal Resources Center for Gender Justice and Human Rights (Indonesia), Sandigan (Kuwait), Self-Employed Women's Association (India), the National Workers Welfare Trust (India), Caritas (Sri Lanka), OKUP (Bangladesh) and AMKAS (Nepal) and coordinated by Ratna-Mathai Luke and Eunha Gim (GAATW, Thailand).

<sup>2</sup> The research in Africa was conducted by IDWF affiliates: Uganda Hotels, Food, Tourism, Supermarkets and Allied Workers Union (HTS-UNION), Uganda, Conservation, Hotels, Domestic, Social Services and Consultancy Workers Union (CHODAWU), Tanzania, Conservation of Hotel, Domestic Workers and Allied Union (CHODAWU-Z), Zanzibar, Domestic Services Workers Union (DSWU), Ghana, CVM Ethiopia, Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA), Kenya, and coordinated by Nkirote Laiboni (GAATW), as well as research by AGAR, Ethiopia.

<sup>3</sup> The research in Latin America was conducted by ECPAT (Guatemala), SINTRASEDOM (Colombia), AMUMRA (Argentina), and coordinated by Chus Alvarez (GAATW-IS).



## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

- Q Women migrant domestic workers face a **continuum of violence**, ranging from verbal abuse to severe physical abuse, rape and sexual assault, psychological abuse and bullying. They reported very poor working conditions, long hours, underpayment and non-payment of wages, racism and discrimination. Women experience a continuum of **violence throughout their migration**: before they leave, during pre-departure and migration phases, in places of work and upon return.
- Q Extreme economic pressure to provide for families, to maintain family “honour”, repay debts, as well as linguistic, the social and cultural barriers that women face:
  - o *Increase the risk of GBV*, and
  - o *Limit opportunities for redress*: making women less likely to report GBV and harassment for fear of retaliation and losing their jobs.
- Q The intersections of race, migrant status, work sector, caste, class, and others amplify the discrimination and marginalisation that many migrant DWs face.
- Q **To this end, an instrument on GBV in the World of Work must address structural factors of inequality and discrimination, as well as deliver tangible results for all people who work, paid and unpaid, and regardless of sector and migrant status.**
- Q **We call for support for a strong Convention and Recommendation this year at the ILC.**

### 1) GBV BEFORE MIGRATION:

Women who experienced GBV at work often cited **violence and discrimination at home and from husbands and family members** as a major push factor for their migration into precarious work.



*“I was being abused physically and mentally by my husband but how could I go and complain? What will society say? Because we are women we have to tolerate such abuses.”<sup>4</sup> (A migrant domestic worker from Nepal)*

Women described being pushed into precarious work with little choice because of a lack of jobs in countries of origin, debt, and economic hardship in concert with increasing pressure on women to provide for families through migration.

## **2) GBV AT WORK AND DURING MIGRATION:**

**Physical Violence:** All groups of returnee migrant domestic workers reported severe physical violence - employers throwing things at workers, slapping, pulling their hair, punching, kicking, and beating them.

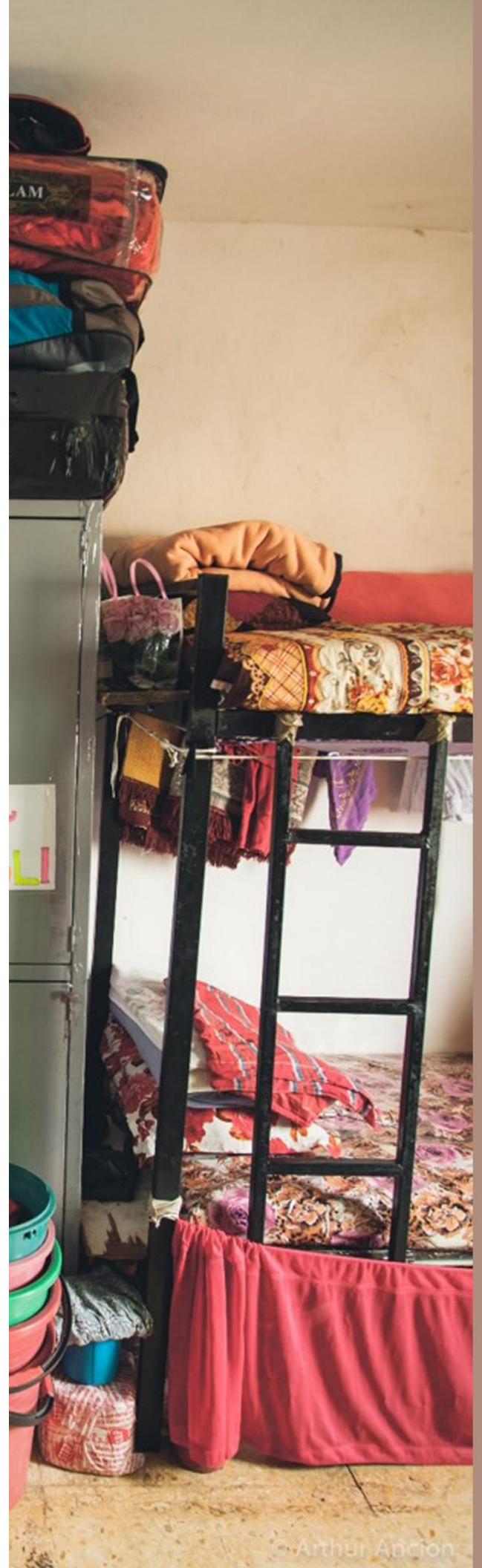
*“The madam frequently hit me with an electric cable... One day, while I was washing dishes I accidentally broke an ashtray. She became so angry at me. She came to me with a knife and pointed it to my stomach as if to stab me. As I tried to protect myself, she stabbed my hand. After struggling with her for a few seconds I was able to run out of the house. While running, people in the neighbourhood stopped me and brought me to the police. It was only then that I noticed how much I was bleeding.”<sup>5</sup> (Ethiopian returnee domestic worker)*

**Sexual Violence:** Many domestic workers told stories of sexual violence, often perpetrated by sons, brothers, uncles, fathers, and grandfathers living in the house. This included rape and sexual assault, groping, kissing, attempted rape, being forced to watch pornography with the male employers, or being asked to massage naked male employers.

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<sup>4</sup> Power in migration and work: A Study of Returned Women Migrant Workers in Nepal, AMKAS Nepal, 2019, forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Power in migration and work: learning from the experiences of Ethiopian migrant women returned from the Middle East countries - a feminist participatory action research, AGAR, 2019, forthcoming.



Women domestic workers live in fear of men in the household preying on them during their work:<sup>6</sup>



**Working conditions and psychological violence:** Workers frequently reported punishing working hours, substandard living and working conditions, insufficient food, being denied access to time off, or basic medical care. Domestic workers reported having to work for 15-20 hours a day, and not being allowed to sit down at all during their working hours. Many worked all week, without a day off, and had to continue working even when they were sick.

*One Ugandan worker recounted being shouted at; "You are not allowed to fall sick! We have paid a lot of money for you to come and work, so you have to pay it back by working. Get up!"<sup>7</sup>*

DWs reported being repeatedly insulted, belittled and threatened by employers and their families while working. This abuse was often characterised by racism:

One domestic worker in Colombia recalled: *"The lady never called me by my name, she said 'negra [black], come here', 'negra [black], do this'... that was very annoying for me...I am María and that's what I like to be called."<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>6</sup> Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh, OKUP, 2019, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> [ Documenting the Experiences of Domestic Workers from Uganda], IDWF and HTS, forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Domestic Worker in Interview. Women workers against GBV in the World of Work, SINTRASEDOM, Colombia, 2019.





**Control and Isolation:** Women domestic workers lived in prison-like situations – employers sought to exercise total control over their lives, and in many cases sought to prevent their contact with the outside world by confiscating phones and passports.

Domestic workers facing such violence had nowhere to turn for help. Efforts to seek support from agents and embassies were met with indifference or violence. Ugandan domestic workers reported that when a problem arose between them and their employer, the employer would return workers to recruitment and placement agencies, where they were beaten and raped by agents before being returned to the employers' house<sup>9</sup>.

One Indonesian woman told researchers: *"I had been beaten using a broom and vacuum cleaner. My body was burnt all over. I ran to the Indonesian Embassy, but they just told me to be patient."*<sup>10</sup>

**A system of control and exploitation:** Women described the GBV they faced not as isolated incidents, but as events within a continuum of violence that they face throughout and in every aspect of their lives. The GBV was exacerbated by **poverty wages, underpayment and nonpayment of wages**. It was underpinned by:

- The **informality** of the sector opening up possibilities for all kinds of exploitation.
- **Immigration control** (including the *kafala* system) facilitating abuse and exploitation. The fear that they may be imprisoned or deported keeps them from leaving abusive and exploitative situations.

<sup>9</sup> [ Documenting the Experiences of Domestic Workers from Uganda], IDWF and HTS, forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Indonesian DW in interview. Strengthening Sisterhood: Collective documentation of returnee migrant women's lived experience in migration in Curut village, Central Java, Indonesia, LRC JKHAM, 2019.

**GBV after migration:** For some domestic workers, reintegration was heavily dependent on their “success” in migration.

*“Family members started neglecting me once the earned money had finished. They started pressuring me, shouting and quarrelling, pushing me to remigrate.”*

Many reported **social stigma** attached to their work and their migration, and felt shame and fear about sharing their stories. *“My neighbours used to say that I have earned money by sleeping with other men during this long migration period as I came back with a good amount of money.”<sup>11</sup>*

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Domestic workers are demanding justice. As their stories tell, this is a fight that needs to be fought at many levels. This negotiation of a new international instrument “Ending Violence and Harassment in the World of Work” presents a critical opportunity to push states to address the GBV that domestic workers face.

- 🔗 **Structural factors in our economies and societies put women, in all of our diversity, at a greater risk of gender based violence.** A lack of local jobs and decent income opportunities at home are among the reasons women are forced to migrate for domestic work. Women are demanding decent work, including a living wage, equal pay for work of equal value, rights to organise and bargain collectively, permanent jobs and paid leave. If this instrument is to be effective, it must address the structural roots of violence comprehensively. **To this end, the structural factors of GBV must be considered and addressed in the scope of this instrument.**
- 🔗 Domestic workers want employers and Governments to respond and act on the existence of physical and verbal abuse at work by establishing **effective grievance redress mechanisms**, and the monitoring of employers, including through labour inspections. **The instrument must result in real, on the ground changes for workers.**
- 🔗 **Domestic violence** pushes women into precarious work and migration, and acts as a compounding factor for GBV at workplaces. To this end, the instrument **must recognise the impact of domestic violence on the world of work.**
- 🔗 All people should be covered by the protection of labour laws, regardless of the sector, and regardless of their migration status. This must include work in places that are not formally recognised, including in the private sphere. **No group should be excluded by the instrument and it must provide for inclusive understandings of work.**
- 🔗 **Women’s Rights are Migrant Rights:** Workers are calling for the abolishment of the *kafala* system. They also want: improved monitoring of recruitment and migration systems and an end to gender and age discriminatory bans on migration. **To this end the instrument must comprehensively include migrant workers regardless of status.**

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<sup>11</sup> Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh, OKUP, 2019.



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