



DEMANDING JUSTICE:

Women Migrant Workers Fighting Gender-Based Violence

A report on violence faced by women migrant garment and domestic workers from Africa, Asia and Latin America, ahead of the 108th Meeting of the International Labour Conference, 2019

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GAATW, 2019

Cover photo: Arthur Ancion
Taken for the Al Hassan Workers' Centre in Jordan

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OVERVIEW

Over the past year the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), in collaboration with members and partners, has been researching and documenting women migrant workers' experiences of gender-based violence at work in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Thirty organisations and individual researchers across twenty-two countries documented the nature of violence women migrant workers face, how they deal with it and their demands for change. They primarily used Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR). FPAR is a deliberately women-centred and participant-driven approach wherein knowledge comes from the community and is owned by them. Based on their lived experiences, the participants propose solutions so the research results become a tool to collectively organise actions.

In **Asia**, two multi-country feminist participatory action research projects in Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia took place in 2018-2019. GAATW's members and partners worked with groups of current and former migrants, primarily in the domestic and garment sectors.¹

In **Africa**, our partners, affiliates of the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Tanzania and Zanzibar, spoke to migrant domestic workers about the challenges they face, and what should be done differently to better protect their rights.²

In **Latin America**, our members in Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Peru, Brazil and Argentina spoke to women in multiple sectors about the forms and prevalence of gender-based violence they face and the strategies they employ to fight this violence.³

Many of the topics discussed in the research touched upon deeply traumatic and personal experiences of the workers. Great care had to be taken to establish trust and maintain

¹ The research was led by: Anti-Racism Movement (Lebanon), Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (Cambodia), International Domestic Workers Federation (Lebanon), Karmojibi Nari (Bangladesh), Legal Resources Center for Gender Justice and Human Rights (Indonesia), MAP Foundation (Thailand), Sandigan (Kuwait), Self Employed Women's Association (India), Society for Labour and Development (India), Women Forum for Women in Nepal (Nepal), OKUP (Bangladesh), Caritas (Sri Lanka), AMKAS (Nepal) and an independent researcher based in Jordan (Nadia Afrin), and coordinated by Ratna-Mathai Luke and Eunha Gim (GAATW).

² The research in Africa was conducted by IDWF affiliates: Uganda Hotels, Food, Tourism, Supermarkets and Allied Workers Union (HTS-UNION), 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 and Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA), and coordinated by Nkirote Laiboni (GAATW) as well as research by AGAR, Ethiopia.

³ The research in Latin America was conducted by ECPAT (Guatemala), ASBRAD (Brazil), SINTRASEDOM (Colombia), AMUMRA (Argentina), CHS Alternativo (Peru), Brigada Callejera (Mexico), Espacios de Mujer (Colombia), IBISS (Brazil) and coordinated by Chus Álvarez (GAATW).

This report was written by Leah Sullivan with editorial support from Borislav Gerasimov (GAATW).

confidentiality. Disclosing, or responding to these abuses is often all but impossible, due to the risk to retaliation, employment termination, deportation, bullying, intimidation, physical threats, and worse. Many returnees who have experienced violence and exploitation prefer not to talk about their experience and move on, let alone seek justice. Because of this, we feel it is safe to assume that of the vast range and depth of GBV that women migrant workers face, these reflections and examples represent just a tiny insight.

The below findings are the results of this research from two sectors which featured most prominently – the domestic and garment work sectors. We hope that the experiences of women workers recorded here will be taken on board by employers and States at the 108th International Labour Conference in 2019.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Overwhelmingly, the data across continents and work sectors pointed to similar trends. Women Migrant Workers (WMWs) experience a continuum of gender-based violence and harassment, ranging from verbal insults to severe physical abuse, rape and sexual assault, psychological abuse and bullying, before, during and after their migration.
- WMWs do not experience physical and sexual violence and harassment as stand-alone problems. They are part of a system in which labour is violently extracted from their bodies.
- Extreme economic pressure to provide for families, to maintain family “honour”, repay debts, as well as linguistic, social and cultural barriers that WMWs face:
 - 1) *Increase the risk of GBV, and*
 - 2) *Limit opportunities for redress: making women less likely to report GBV and harassment for fear of retaliation and losing their jobs.*
- GBV cannot be considered in isolation from the patriarchal, capitalist and racist system in which that violence is perpetrated. The work that many women do is systematically unrecognised and undervalued, in an economic system that seeks to continually drive down costs to extract profit at the expense of human welfare.
- The intersections of race, migrant status, work sector, caste, class, and others amplify the discrimination and marginalisation that many women migrant workers face.
- **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.**

GBV AGAINST WOMEN MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

Globally, there are 67.1 million domestic workers, of whom the majority are women, and 11.5 million are international migrants.⁴ The domestic work sector is very highly feminised, and segregated across racial and ethnic lines. Women from poorer countries, and historically disadvantaged groups – minority ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, low-caste and low-income groups – make up the majority of domestic workers in our countries of focus.

Women migrant domestic workers we spoke to reported facing a **continuum of violence**, with abuse ranging from verbal abuse to severe physical abuse, rape and sexual assault, psychological abuse and bullying. They also reported very poor working conditions, long hours, underpayment and non-payment of wages, racism and discrimination – which cannot be dealt with in separation from the violence they face. Women migrant workers also experience a continuum of abuse and gender based **violence throughout their migration**: before they leave, during pre-departure and migration phases, in places of destination and on return.

Violence at home

“There is a stereotype that women are safest at home. However, this is not true because most gender-based violence in Bangladesh occurs at home.”⁵

Women who experienced GBV at work often cited **violence and discrimination at home and from husbands and male family members** as a major push factor for their migration. The lack of support from their communities in the face of domestic violence made many women feel they had nowhere to turn, and that gender-based violence was a broadly accepted and inescapable facet of their lives. One woman in Bangladesh, Farzana, said that a factor in her migration decision was the punishment she (and not her abuser) faced in her village court after being sexually abused by a relative at the age of 13.

“I was being abused physically and mentally by my husband but how could I go and complain? What will the society say? Because we are women we have to tolerate such abuses.”⁶ (A migrant domestic worker from Nepal)

One Bangladeshi returnee migrant worker reflected: “I didn’t want to migrate. But my husband was pushing me every day to go. After a few months I got pregnant, but he wanted me to have an abortion so that I could migrate. When I was 10 weeks pregnant, he forced me to do it. Then

⁴ MJ Tayah, *Decent Work for Domestic Workers: Moving the agenda forward*, ILO, Geneva, 2016, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_535596.pdf.

⁵ *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh*, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

⁶ *Power in work and migration: A Study of Returned Women Migrant Workers in Nepal*, AMKAS, 2019 (forthcoming).

I had to migrate to Saudi Arabia. I was brutally abused there, and came back after two months. My words or decision has no value to my husband as I am a woman.”⁷



Photo credit to Arthur Ancion

Physical violence at work

“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 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.”⁸ (Ethiopian returnee domestic worker)

All research groups of returnee migrant domestic workers reported severe physical violence. Women spoke about employers throwing things at them, slapping, pulling their hair, punching,

⁷ Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

⁸ 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).

kicking, and beating them with brooms, along with insults telling them they are stupid, lazy, idiot, a flirt and a liar.

- Anna from the Philippines reported being physically and psychologically abused by her employer almost every day while working in Kuwait. She was physically attacked by her employer who used a dumbbell, knife and scissors to cut and injure her for supposed wrongdoings. She was burnt with an iron, had her hair violently pulled out and her employer demanded that she drink washing detergent.⁹
- A former domestic worker in Guatemala said of her employer: *“He would explain things to me with blows, he would pinch me, he would hit me on the head. Because I needed money I had to stay on.”*¹⁰
- Shobhana from India was tricked with the promise of a good job in Riyadh, but found herself trapped with an abusive employer who forced her to do backbreaking work for long hours. She was only given a small amount of bread to eat. If the employer found her work to be unsatisfactory, she was forced to repeat it, or was punished by being denied water. After eventually escaping, her weight had dropped from 65kg to 40kg. One year on, she is still suffering from continuous headaches, back pain and remains deeply traumatised.¹¹

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.

Women domestic workers live in fear of men in the household preying on them during their work. One woman said, *“My employers’ son always came in wherever I was in the bathroom, kitchen, roof top, veranda. He used to touch my breasts and other sensitive parts of my body. There was nothing I could do.”*¹²

A migrant domestic worker from Ethiopia spoke about her sexual assault, rape and unwanted pregnancy while she was working in her employer’s house: *“One day, when my employer and*

⁹ *Expectations and Realities: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Filipino Household Workers in Kuwait*, Sandigan, 2019 (forthcoming).

¹⁰ *GBV against Women Domestic Workers in the World of Work*, SINTRASEDOM, 2019, (forthcoming).

¹¹ *Towards building safe and fair migration practices within the domestic workers communities in Kerala - Both cross border and interstate migrants*, SEWA, 2019 (forthcoming).

¹² *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh*, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

other family members were not home, a relative of my employer dragged me to his room and raped me. I could not stop him...Later, I realised that I was pregnant.”¹³

Women migrant domestic workers experienced physical and sexual violence not only in their place of work, but also at an education and training shelter, as part of a pre-departure training. These victims of sexual violence reported being too **afraid of losing their jobs** to report the incidents to anyone.

Working conditions and psychological violence

“They think of us as a machine, not a human.”¹⁴

In addition to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, workers frequently reported **punishing working hours, substandard living and working conditions, and insufficient food**. Workers reported being denied access to time off, health insurance or even 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!”¹⁵*

*“The employers considered us as slaves. The household task was endless. We were overwhelmed and consumed by it. We were deprived of sleep all the time.”¹⁶
(Ethiopian former domestic worker, six years in Lebanon)*

Many migrant women likened their treatment to that of a slave, or an animal, or being in prison. Almost all domestic workers that took part in the research were “live-in” workers, meaning they were working and living in the same house as their employer. The sleeping arrangements offered little to nothing in the way of comfort, privacy or decency. Many slept in the same room as the children, others on the kitchen floor, under staircases in the homes of their employers, on a veranda, or in a tiny space in front of the toilet “like a dog or cat”.¹⁷

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

¹³ *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).*

¹⁴ *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).*

¹⁵ *Documenting the Experiences of Domestic Workers from Uganda, IDWF and HTS, 2019 (forthcoming).*

¹⁶ *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).*

¹⁷ *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).*

One domestic worker in Colombia recalled: *“The lady never called me by my name, she said ‘black, come here’, ‘black, do this’... that was very annoying for me...I am María and that's what I like to be called.”*¹⁸

Domestic workers from Tanzania and Zanzibar talked of being openly racially abused by employers and their children. One worker said the children of her employer would refuse to be served by her because of her darker skin.

This overwork, stress, constant bullying, humiliation and violence took a toll on their mental health.

“My employer and the family members yelled at me all the time. They insulted me without any reason. I could not resist. I could not adjust myself to their abusive behaviour. I became so stressed. Finally, I had a mental breakdown. I was admitted to a mental hospital for one month.” Ethiopian Returnee Domestic Worker.



Control and isolation

“Life was like hell to me in Lebanon but what to do? I had no one to go for help. I was scared that they would kill me. I wanted to return to my family alive.”

¹⁸ Women workers against GBV in the World of Work, SINTRASEDOM, 2019 (forthcoming).

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 banning communication with people outside the home. A Kenyan domestic worker spoke of being monitored by CCTV all the time, even when she slept.¹⁹ The women read this control as highly gendered, and a serious challenge to their potential to exercise solidarity and collective power:

“Men can go out and can make relationship with others but we can’t just because of being a woman. They can help each other during their problematic situation as they can make a community group, but if we fall into a problem, we found no one beside us.”²⁰

No justice

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.

“Be patient”

One Indonesian woman told researchers: *“I had been beaten using a broom and vacuum cleaner. My body was burnt all over. My face and my eyes also bled. I ran to the Indonesian Embassy, but they just told me to be patient.”²¹*

Bangladeshi domestic workers reported that if they called the embassy, the staff would just shout at them and tell them to stay with the abusive employer.

The agencies that had arranged their jobs were also of no help. Bangladeshi domestic workers said that if they complained, agency employees would respond by siding with the employer, beating them up, or sexually assaulting them. In general, they refused to let them change employers. If they agreed to let the worker change an abusive employer, the agency would confiscate a few months of the salary earned at the new employer’s house. If the employers did not want the worker anymore, and left a worker in the agency, the agency would “auction” her off to another potential employer, including by forcing the worker to remove her veil, to wear revealing clothes to advertise her as a sex object to potential male employers.²²

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.²³

¹⁹ *Documenting the experiences of Domestic Workers from Kenya*, IDWF and KUDIEHA, 2019 (forthcoming).

²⁰ *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh*, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

²¹ *Strengthening Sisterhood: Collective documentation of returnee migrant women’s lived experience in migration in Curut village, Central Java, Indonesia*, LRC JKHAM, 2019 (forthcoming).

²² *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh*, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

²³ *Documenting the Experiences of Domestic Workers from Uganda*, IDWF and HTS, 2019 (forthcoming).

Seeking justice for grave abuse on return was also often impossible. One woman, who sought to take a case against an agent who had trafficked her from Bangladesh, reported being offered a chance at justice in exchange for sex:

*“If I ask remedy to the chairman or influential person, he will offer me to sleep with him directly instead of ensuring justice for me”.*²⁴

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.

Poverty wages, underpayment and non-payment of wages

The wages received by domestic workers broadly fell far short of a living wage. They were often insufficient to be able to financially sustain families at home and to repay debts incurred for migration. Domestic workers reported often being paid less than promised, or not at all. This dramatically increased workers’ risk of violence and limited opportunities for recourse or redress.

The roots of GBV at work are also found in the **legal and policy framework** around the work that women do and the ways they are forced to migrate:

- The **informality** of the domestic work sector means no protection – with no clear limits on the kinds of work that are supposed to be done, under what conditions, and for what salary, opening up possibilities for all kinds of exploitation.
- For migrant workers, **immigration control** facilitates their abuse and exploitation. Across West Asia migrant domestic workers are governed by the *kafala* system, whereby a worker’s legal status is tied to her employer. This gives the employer total power and authority over the status of migrant workers. Many domestic workers have their passports confiscated and are not allowed to leave the employers’ house.
- Many know that the police and justice system in countries of destination will protect the employer over them. Consequently, the **fear that they may be imprisoned or deported** keeps them from leaving abusive and exploitative situations.

Economic pressure to provide

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**. The Self-Employed Women’s Association

²⁴ *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh*, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

(SEWA) pointed out that in India, migration into precarious care work has come about because of macro-level economic decisions: structural adjustment policies and neoliberal reforms to the public sector and public services have increased demand for more feminised jobs, especially in the care sector.²⁵

In spite of the breadwinner role falling on women, decision-making power is still heavily patriarchal, and the decision to migrate is often not the woman's decision. In this way, women migrant workers are not only seen by states as a source of remittances, but by families, in such a way that their acceptance and love by family and community was heavily dependent on their "success" in migration.

- *"Family members start neglecting me once the earned money had finished. They started pressuring me, shouting and quarrelling, pushing me to remigrate."*²⁶
- *"Everyone receives us with great happiness if we come back with gifts in our bag, but if we return empty-handed, all we get is hurtful words and bad behaviour."*²⁷

GBV for women migrant domestic workers is compounded by **multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination**, based on gender, race, caste, class, and others. Many reported **social stigma** attached to their work and their migration, and felt shame and fear about sharing their stories.

*"I am embarrassed (to share my bad experience) ... The image of working people abroad is positive, as they only see the side of receiving a lot of money and improving the family's economy." Indonesian returnee domestic worker.*²⁸

Returnee women workers are perceived by families and communities to have been morally compromised, and sexually deviant – an attitude not faced by male migrants. One woman from Nepal described her relatives assuming that she had been sexually exploited and wanting to do a kind of ritual prayer to "cleanse" her body upon her return.²⁹

*"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."*³⁰

²⁵ Towards building safe and fair migration practices within the domestic workers communities in Kerala - Both cross border and interstate migrants, SEWA, 2019.

²⁶ *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh*, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Strengthening Sisterhood: Collective documentation of returnee migrant women's lived experience in migration in Curut village, Central Java, Indonesia, LRC JKHAM.

²⁹ Power in work and migration: Learning from the experiences of women migrant workers of Nepal, (A Study of Returned Women Migrant Workers in Nepal), AMKAS, 2019 (forthcoming).

³⁰ *Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh*, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

GBV AGAINST WOMEN MIGRANT GARMENT WORKERS



The garment industry, which has grown rapidly in the last half century, is highly feminised: in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, women workers represent between 80 and 95% of the garment workforce. Women occupy the lowest paid but often most labour intensive roles. This report draws on research from garment sector workers primarily in Jordan, Thailand, Cambodia, India, Guatemala and Brazil.

Women migrant garment workers also face a **spectrum of violence**, ranging from verbal insults, threats and intimidation, to physical assault, sexual harassment and violence, and experience this violence throughout their migration. Again, the violence that women face is not only that involving direct physical contact, or psychological abuse. Women migrant garment workers, and domestic workers, face a **system of control and exploitation**. Poverty wages, punishing working conditions and production targets, grim living conditions, threats of deportation and employment termination, a lack of access to services, racism and discrimination, social stigma, along with the pressure that women are under often as sole breadwinners of families, make gender-based violence a form of abuse exacerbated by that system, and make recourse or resistance all but impossible.

Pre-departure phases

Women migrant garment workers were also in some instances forced to migrate because of **gender-based violence and discrimination in their homes and communities**.

A garment worker in Guatemala framed the inequality she faced in migration in the context of the non-valuing of her unpaid work at home:

“In our homes, it is thought that women have to do everything and receive less payment, and because they teach you that at home, then you think that this is normal and you validate it.”³¹

For some, sexual harassment started prior to departure, from middlemen. For migrant women from Bangladesh, there is a widespread social presumption that women who migrate are morally questionable, marking them as “prostitutes” in the eyes of their community. Several women reported having to deal with such **stereotypes** and having to overcome strong objections from their families and community:

“We migrate at the cost of everything. We lose our husbands or their love, we are labelled as prostitutes, our children do not get enough care. Even family members do not trust us when we can’t send the required amount of money. What do we get in return? Not even an adequate salary.”³²

Mandatory **pre-departure medical tests** in place for migrant workers from Bangladesh are often demeaning to women. Women told us they were made to provide urine samples for pregnancy tests in spaces they perceived as violating their privacy. *“The door was open, and I was so rushed I did not even have time to fasten my pant strings again before having to come out.”³³*

“Be nice in the factory”

Much attention has been paid in migration governance to the importance of pre-departure orientation trainings. Bangladeshi migrant garment workers reported with regard to their pre-departure orientation that it was very short, covered only basic information and some pieces of paternalistic advice such as, “be nice in the factory.”³⁴

Economic pressure to provide

Garment workers described being pushed into precarious work with little choice because of a lack of jobs in their countries of origin, debt, **economic hardship** and the breadwinner role falling to women.

³¹ *Women Workers Against Violence at Work*, ECPAT Guatemala, 2019 (forthcoming).

³² *Safe and Fair Migration: Jordan Research Report*, Afrin and GAATW, 2019 (forthcoming).

³³ It is to be noted, however, that neither Jordanian labour law nor the UFC for all migrant workers contain any provision requiring the termination of contracts or deportation of pregnant migrant workers.

³⁴ *Safe and Fair Migration: Jordan Research Report*, Afrin and GAATW, 2019 (forthcoming).

Ninety per cent of those interviewed in Cambodia reported being driven to migration for garment work to repay a debt to a microfinancing institution.

Many women seemed to internalise patriarchal norms, such as the idea that women must tolerate hardship and prioritise their families' well-being over their own.

“There is a machismo that comes from home; they teach you that a good woman is the one who endures everything. And as one already comes with that mentality, one does not know how to value oneself.”³⁵ Returnee migrant worker in Guatemala.

It is not that they are not aware of the injustice, or do not want to resist or speak up, but for women who carry the burden of family responsibilities the risk of losing their jobs is too great.

“I just do my work regularly. I experience unfair treatment. I just try to be patient and forgiving. My aim is just to earn money and support my family. So, I just focus on my goal and work harder.”³⁶ Myanmar garment worker in Thailand.

Poverty wages

“The sheer need for work makes you accept whatever they offer and however they offer it to you.”³⁷

Poverty wages were a critical issue for garment workers across our findings.

- Migrant workers in Thailand reported being **paid less than the legal minimum wage** of 310 baht (10 USD) per day, with some being paid as little as 160 baht (USD 5) per day.
- According to our research with Cambodian garment trade union leaders, workers there are left with USD 2 per day to spend on food. Often times, workers cannot afford to eat.
- Some employers implement a piece-rate-pay structure, which puts workers in competition with each other. Managers were also reported to invent mistakes on garments to justify paying workers less:
 - *“As piece-rate paid workers, we work really hard to finish more products.... but the manager will try to find mistakes on the products so that he can pay less. So whether we do more or less work, we are treated unfairly.”³⁸*

³⁵ *Women Workers Against Violence at Work*, ECPAT Guatemala, 2019 (forthcoming).

³⁶ *Safe and Fair Migration: A Feminist Perspective of Myanmar Women Migrant Workers in Mae Sot Garment Factories on Women's Rights to Mobility and Decent Work*, MAP Foundation, 2019 (forthcoming).

³⁷ *Women Workers Against Violence at Work*, ECPAT Guatemala, 2019 (forthcoming).

³⁸ *Safe and Fair Migration: A Feminist Perspective of Myanmar Women Migrant Workers in Mae Sot Garment Factories on Women's Rights to Mobility and Decent Work*, MAP Foundation, 2019 (forthcoming).

- Workers in Brazil said that due to piece-rate payment schemes, they had to work 18-hour days in order to make just enough money to survive – an amount still only two thirds of the national minimum wage.³⁹

Across the garment workers interviewed as part of this research, the picture of working conditions that emerged was one of **extreme workloads, harsh working conditions** that tax them to the maximum of their capacities, resulting in exhaustion, frequent and chronic illnesses, anxiety and depression.⁴⁰

Gender-segregated work places and pay scales

Unequal wages and workloads between men and women were also common. Employers were said to extract more work from women workers, because they feel they can put more pressure on them without resistance.

“They pay more to men than to women, for the same piece produced. When we challenge it, they say that men work better, because they do not have to stop that much to go to the bathroom or to look after children. But that is not true because the payment is per unit, per piece made. If I made 10 shirts and a man also made 10 shirts, why does he get 55 cents and I get 50? It makes no sense!”⁴¹ Bolivian garment worker in Brazil.

Hierarchies in **Jordanian** garment factories are strictly divided along gender lines. On average, men hold 80 per cent of all middle and top management positions, whereas women can only be seen in line supervisor positions, and rarely progress beyond that level.

Similarly, in **Cambodia**, 85 per cent of workers in Cambodian garment factories were women, the majority of whom in lower-ranking positions, while men dominate upper-level positions. Even when the wages between men and women are the same, a local union leader shared *“the work is different. Women work more than men. The Chinese supervisors are afraid to ask male workers to do (the hard) jobs. Always pushing female workers to do more.”⁴²*

Verbal and physical abuse

Working conditions and associated pressure were made worse by the widespread verbal and physical abuse from line supervisors and managers. Across all groups, women workers reported that supervisors shout at them and push them if targets are not met, or for minor mistakes. The reprimands often had sexist and racist overtones:

³⁹ *Migrant women against violence in the world of work*, ASBRAD, Brazil, 2019 (forthcoming).

⁴⁰ *Women’s Right to Mobility and Right to Work: Perspectives from Migrant Women in India’s National Capital Region*, Society for Labour and Development, April 2019, and Asia Floor Wage Alliance et al (2018) *Gender Based Violence in the GAP Garment Supply Chain: Workers Voices From the Global Supply Chain*, A Report to the ILO 2018. Available online, Global Labor Justice Website: <https://www.globallaborjustice.org/gap-report/>.

⁴¹ *Migrant women against violence in the world of work*, ASBRAD, Brazil, 2019 (forthcoming).

⁴² [Safe and Fair Migration FPAR Report], Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions, 2019 (forthcoming).

“They told me, ‘You can eat, you can sleep, but you can’t work?! Have you come here to show your pretty face?’”⁴³

“They say, ‘Fuck your mother, have you come here to fuck? You slut!’”⁴⁴

Bangladeshi workers were also routinely threatened with being fired and deported:

“Bangladeshis are cheap! If I send back one, I can get back ten!”

“If we try to complain about anything, they tell us, ‘Bangladeshis are beggars, we can easily bring more.’”⁴⁵

Workers across all research sites reported **physical assault including pushing around, beating, slapping, kicking and punches to the face**, including for failing to reach exacting production targets. It was reported that this violence is often targeted in particular at union members, both women and men.



Sexual violence and harassment

Women migrant garment workers are also subject to **sexual violence and harassment**. Incidences of sexual harassment ranged from inappropriate remarks by male supervisors and managers to physical assaults.

In Cambodia women workers reported sexual harassment from male sewing machine mechanics who try to touch female workers’ bodies in return for the “favour” of fixing their machine. Because of the pressure to meet their production targets, workers are afraid that if their machine is not fixed they would not reach their target and face termination, so the women workers are forced to keep quiet about the abuse.

⁴³ *Safe and Fair Migration: Jordan Research Report*, Afrin and GAATW, 2019 (forthcoming)

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Among workers in Jordan, it was reported that supervisors and managers at times attempt to abuse their position of power to **blackmail** women into relationships or providing sexual favours. Researchers reported that with a culture of impunity, such practices seem to have become entrenched throughout the industry.

Women migrant garment workers are also subject to sexual harassment and SGBV **outside of their workplaces**, in the areas where they live, shop and commute.

- Women garment workers in **Cambodia** reported sexual harassment and intimidation on the way to and from work, saying that groups of men have followed them, and used vulgar language and gestures towards them.
- In **Jordan**, several women reported verbal and physical attacks by local men. Workers reported that there had been one case of rape and murder of a garment worker.
- Women in India reported being forced to work overtime late into the night, to reach production targets. Without safe transportation options, women workers face harassment, robbery, and other crimes on their way home. One woman described the walk home:

“After 10 pm at night it’s really scary to come alone on that road. It is not well lit. There are some streetlights, but they are placed far apart. Theft and purse snatching is common. Last week, one of my friends was robbed.”⁴⁶

Physical health

Participants in the research in Jordan said that their overall health condition had suffered as a result of their work. Frequent complaints included headaches, back pain, and fatigue.

These symptoms can be traced back to the pace and intensity of the work itself, which often leaves insufficient time for breaks and is physically demanding. Any treatment is superficial – for example, when several workers reported suffering from serious back pain caused by long hours of standing, the response of the employer was to administer strong painkillers and send the workers back to work immediately.

If there was an illness requiring off-site treatment, a portion of the wages was deducted. In such an environment, many migrant workers felt discouraged from seeking medical attention at all.

Mass fainting due to undernourishment, overwork and inadequate ventilation and temperature control was reported by Cambodian garment factory workers. They said that during the hot season, hundreds of women workers faint while working at the factory.

⁴⁶ *Women’s Right to Mobility and Right to Work; Perspectives from Migrant Women in India’s National Capital Region*, Society for Labour and Development, 2019.



Health Workshop with Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. Photo by GAATW.

Reproductive health

Workers from Bangladesh in Jordan and Mauritius, as well as Myanmar workers in Thailand reported a range of gender-based violence and discrimination related to reproductive rights. There was a trend **of punishing women for becoming pregnant and having a child:**

- In **Jordan**, despite the labour law having clear references to the right to maternity leave for all workers, women reported that there is a practice of sending pregnant workers back home. In order to avoid this, instances of secret abortions were reported.
- Bangladeshi migrant garment workers reported that if a worker becomes pregnant while working in Mauritius, she would be fired and sent home, and banned from migrating again.
- Myanmar workers in **Thailand** reported that pregnant workers' right to take maternal leave and sick leave are completely ignored. They have to be at work unless they are giving birth and if the employers insist, they must return to work immediately after giving birth.

Mental health and psychological wellbeing

“I don’t want to wake up in the morning and go to work. I wish I would never have to wake up again.”⁴⁷

Demanding workloads under difficult and abusive conditions, long hours of repetitive, physically demanding work, interpersonal conflict, job insecurity, including frequent threats of dismissal, often linked to allegations of underperformance – the psychological impacts of this continuum of gender-based violence is immense and takes its toll on the mental health of the workers.

“I feel worthless.”⁴⁸

Virtually all research participants in Jordan reported stress, depression and insomnia, constant headaches, heart palpitations, and intense feelings of fear. Contributing to their stress are financial insecurity (low salaries and loans), and worries about their families back home. Two-thirds of individual interviewees reported feeling constantly stressed and anxious about reaching production targets and being the object of verbal and physical abuse from supervisors. Three out of 15 female participants in individual interviews mentioned that they had experienced suicidal thoughts because of different kinds of abuse and work pressure.

Several mentioned recent cases of co-workers’ suicides. According to participants, these were triggered by a combination of factors, including verbal abuse, work pressure, problems in personal relationships, anxiety about the situation back home, and financial worries.

Threats, retaliation and blacklisting

“We can’t trust anybody.”

Options to resist violence and discrimination are severely limited by the economic pressure women are under to send money home, by the threats of retaliation through physical, sexual violence, and the practice of blacklisting workers who report workplace violence. Across all countries, women discussed how routine threats of employment termination discourage them from resisting abuse and overwork.

Where grievance mechanisms exist, women expressed scepticism whether complaints about this kind of harassment would be believed, and effective action would ever be taken. As one participant said:

“We are afraid of losing our jobs. We are also afraid of being stigmatised by our managers and other fellow workers as ‘bad women’. We can’t trust anybody.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Safe and Fair Migration: Jordan Research Report*, Afrin and GAATW, 2019, (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Threats of employment termination mean that women put themselves under serious physical and mental pressure to reach production targets. Women in Cambodia reported trying not to drink water so that they could skip toilet breaks, in order to reach their target and avoid the threat of employment termination.

Garment workers in Brazil spoke of being taunted with threats of dismissal and destitution:

“Every time the boss arrives, he makes jokes like: ‘There are many people out there who want a job... Do you want to see your child sleeping on the sidewalk?’”⁵⁰

Denial of rights at work

“They are always watching us over CCTV or something.” Worker in Cambodia.⁵¹



The manufacturing sector has long been a site of potential collectivisation and resistance to labour exploitation. Employers, seeing the potential for organising and bargaining as a threat to profitability, go to great lengths to limit the ability of garment workers to associate, bargain for higher wages and better conditions. They were said to do this through “divide and conquer” strategies, (pitting workers against each other), surveillance, physical violence and intimidation.

One woman interviewed by ECPAT Guatemala spoke of efforts to organise for better conditions: *“Once, with some friends, we tried to create a small union and we were doing so secretly, to denounce the company. I do not know how, but the information leaked and one of the women was killed.”⁵²*

⁵⁰ *Migrant women against violence in the world of work*, ASBRAD, Brazil, 2019 (forthcoming).

⁵¹ [Safe and Fair Migration FPAR Report], Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions, 2019 (forthcoming).

⁵² *Migrant women against violence in the world of work*, ECPAT Guatemala, 2019 (forthcoming).

Denying freedom of association and collective bargaining also forecloses important pathways for redress for gender-based violence. Barriers to freedom of association and collective bargaining prevent workers from responding collectively to violence, furthering cultures of impunity around gender based violence.

Nurjahan, from Bangladesh:

“At the age of ten, I joined a local garment factory. When I was fourteen, I got married. I was not ready for marriage; my family forced me. I was pregnant within a month. I wanted the baby, but my husband forced me to get an abortion.

So I decided to go to Jordan as a machine operator. The workload was overwhelming. We had to work from 7 am to 11 pm. In addition, my salary much less than what I was promised.

One day I had an accident and broke my leg. I was in massive pain and could not place my leg on the machine. However, the employer did not grant me leave. They denied me any medical treatment. I asked them to send me back to Bangladesh, but the boss demanded around 120,000 taka (USD 1,430) for my return. I was completely lost and did not know what to do.

I had to take a big loan from a relative, which I have not been able to pay off. I returned to Bangladesh but still I cannot walk properly. Unemployed life is hell.”⁵³

⁵³ Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of WMWs from Bangladesh, OKUP, 2019 (forthcoming).

MOVING FORWARD: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ILC

"We want to change the law. No one should be above the law." Woman garment worker in Mae Sot, Thailand.⁵⁴

Women migrant workers across Africa, Asia and Latin America are demanding justice. As their stories tell, this is a fight that needs to be fought on many levels, critically through building worker power to transform the structural factors that underpin GBV at work, as well as through the ratification of international labour standards, and the effective implementation of national legislation on GBV and labour rights. This year, the negotiation of a new international instrument "Ending violence and harassment in the world of work" presents a critical opportunity to push states to address gender-based violence at work, and we call on States to support a strong Convention and Recommendation at the International Labour Conference.

The recommendations from the research below are focused in particular on those that can be addressed at this year's discussion:

- A lack of local jobs and decent income opportunities in countries of origin are among the reasons women migrate. These dynamics are coming about in part due to macro-level economic decisions: structural adjustment policies, neoliberal reforms to the public sector and public services have increased demand for more feminised jobs. Discussions on GBV must consider these dynamics. Labour market segregation, low and unequal pay, the informalisation of work and the unequal status and power relations in our societies and economies put women, migrants, people of colour, LGBTI, tribal and minority ethnic groups, among many others, at a greater risk of gender-based violence. If this instrument is to be effective, it must **address the structural roots of violence comprehensively and expose its embeddedness in neoliberal globalisation. To this end, the structural factors of GBV must be considered and addressed in the scope of this instrument.**
- Women 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, building trust with workers and providing spaces where workers can share their issues without fear.
- Women also want Governments to improve monitoring of employers, including through labour inspections, and in the case of garment factories to hold factories accountable for their sub-contractors. **To this end, the instrument must result in real, on the ground changes for workers.**

⁵⁴ *Safe and Fair Migration: A Feminist Perspective of Myanmar Women Migrant Workers in Mae Sot Garment Factories on Women's Rights to Mobility and Decent Work*, MAP Foundation, 2019 (forthcoming).

- **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.**
- Women face GBV not only at the workplace but also on their daily journeys to and from work, and in accommodation provided by the employer. To this end, States and employers must respond to these risks and **the instrument must cover journeys to and from work, and employer-provided accommodation and transport.**
- 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 women’s provisioning labour, where it is criminalised and in the private sphere, such as for domestic and care workers. **No group should be excluded by the instrument and it must provide for inclusive understandings of work and where it happens.**
- The Instruments must cover all people who work. Particularly for informal sector, self-employed and own account workers, in lieu of a direct employer, the worker interacts with the State as an employer. To this end, the instrument must include the **State as a perpetrator of gender-based violence.**
- **Women want decent work:** Low wages were often the biggest problem women faced. Workers identified economic pressure, low wages and a lack of jobs as factors increasing the risk of and limiting the ability to respond to GBV. To this end, 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. Women in garment factories also wanted production targets to be lowered to manageable levels.
- **Women want rights at work.** Women workers need full freedom of association and collective bargaining, including by ratifying ILO Convention No. 87, to facilitate effective self-organising. They also suggest that Workers’ Centres should be established so that migrant workers have space to organise and access services.
- **Women workers want rights as migrants:** Workers are calling for the abolishment of the *kafala* system. They also want:
 - Improved monitoring of recruitment and migration systems for migrant workers;
 - Active roles for labour attachés in the destination countries in handling GBV cases, and the availability of legal support;
 - An end to gender and age discriminatory government bans on migration. **To this end the instrument must comprehensively include migrant workers regardless of status.**

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