

Summary of collaborative research on violence faced by women migrant garment workers from Asia and Latin America, ahead of the 108th Meeting of the International Labour Conference, 2019



Demanding Justice: Migrant Garment 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 researching and documenting women migrant garment workers' experiences of gender based violence at work in Asia¹ and Latin America.² The research was carried out by nine organisations and individual researchers across seven countries.

¹ The research was conducted by Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (Cambodia), Karmojibi Nari (Bangladesh), MAP Foundation (Thailand), Self Employed Women's Association (India), Society for Labour and Development (India), OKUP (Bangladesh) and Nadia Afrin, an independent researcher based in Jordan, and coordinated by Ratna-Mathai Luke and Eunha Gim (GAATW).

² The research in Latin America was conducted by ECPAT (Guatemala), ASBRAD (Brazil) AMUMRA (Argentina) and coordinated by Chus Alvarez (GAATW-IS).



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

- Q Women Migrant Workers (WMWs) experience a **spectrum 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. We have identified nine aspects of this range of violence below.
- Q WMWs do not experience physical and sexual violence and harassment as stand-alone problems – they face a **system of control and exploitation**. Poverty wages, punishing working conditions and production targets, grim living conditions, threats of deportation and employment termination, racism and discrimination, social stigma, along with the pressure that women are under often as sole breadwinners of families make recourse or resistance all but impossible.
- Q The intersections of race, migrant status, work sector, caste, class, and others amplify the discrimination and marginalisation that many migrant women workers 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) DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND GBV AT WORK:

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

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.

Many women internalised 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."*³ (a migrant worker from Guatemala.)

Social stigma: For migrant women from Bangladesh, there is a widespread social presumption that women who migrate for work are morally questionable: *"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."*⁴

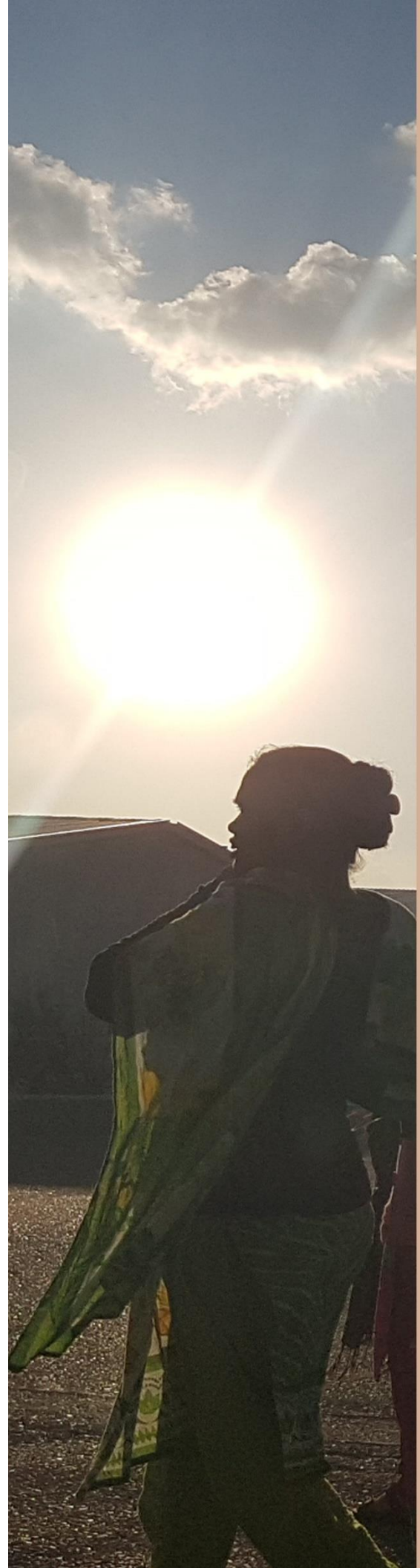
2) VERBAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

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.

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:

³ Women Workers Against Violence at Work, ECPAT Guatemala and GAATW, 2019, forthcoming.

⁴ Safe and Fair Migration: Jordan Research Report, Afrin and GAATW, 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?'"⁵

"They say, 'Fuck your mother, have you come here to fuck? You slut!'"⁶

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

"Bangladeshis are cheap! If I send back one, I can get back ten!"⁷

Combined with threats of dismissal and deportation, this reinforced a sense of being treated as a disposable commodity.

"If we try to complain about anything, they tell us, 'Bangladeshis are beggars, we can easily bring more.'"⁸

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bangladeshi garment worker in interview. Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

3) 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 they are forced to keep quiet about the abuse.

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

4) PHYSICAL HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Workers in Jordan and Cambodia said that their health had suffered as a result of their work. Frequent complaints included headaches, back pain, and fatigue. 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 hundreds of women workers faint while working at the factory.

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.



5) 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.”⁹

Demanding workloads under abusive conditions, long hours of repetitive, physically demanding work, interpersonal conflict, job insecurity, frequent threats of dismissal, – the psychological impacts of this violence is immense and takes its toll on the mental health of workers.

“I feel worthless”¹⁰

Workers in Jordan reported stress, depression and insomnia, constant headaches, heart palpitations, and intense feelings of fear, suicidal thoughts because of abuse and work pressure. Several mentioned recent cases of co-workers’ suicides.

6) 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.

“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.”¹¹

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?’”¹²

⁹ Bangladeshi garment worker in interview. Safe and Fair Migration: Jordan Research Report, Afrin and GAATW, 2019

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bangladeshi garment worker in interview. Safe and Fair Migration: Jordan Research Report, Afrin and GAATW, 2019

¹² Proyecto Mujeres migrantes Contra la violencia y el acoso en El Mundo del Trabajo: los talleres de costura en São Paulo, ASBRAD, Brazil, 2019.

7) DENIAL OF RIGHTS AT WORK

“They are always watching us over CCTV or something” – worker in Cambodia.

Employers limit the ability of garment workers to associate, bargain for higher wages and better conditions. They were said to do this through ‘divide and rule’ strategies (pitting workers against each other), surveillance, physical violence and intimidation.

One woman interviewed said: *“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.”*¹³

Denying freedom of association and collective bargaining also forecloses important pathways for redress for gender based violence, furthering cultures of impunity around gender based violence.



Photo credit to MAP Foundation

¹³ Women Workers Against GBV, ECPAT Guatemala, 2019.

8) WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS:

“The sheer need for work makes you accept whatever they offer and however they offer it to you”¹⁴

Poverty wages were a critical issue for garment workers across our findings. Workers in many countries were paid less than the national minimum wage.

- According to **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. 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.

Across the garment workers interviewed as part of this study the picture of working conditions which 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.¹⁵

9) 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. 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. 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!”¹⁶ – Bolivian garment worker in Brazil.

In all countries, although 80-90% of workers in factories researched were women, men dominated the managerial positions.

¹⁴ Migrant women against violence in the world of work, ECPAT Guatemala, 2019.

¹⁵ 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/>

¹⁶ Migrant women against violence in the world of work, ASBRAD, Brazil, 2019.



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Nurjahan, 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 was 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 hundred and twenty thousand taka (USD 1430) 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.”¹⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

“We want to change the law. No one should be above the law.” - woman garment worker in Thailand.¹⁸

Garment 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 garment 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 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.**
- 🔗 Garment 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.**
- 🔗 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.**

¹⁷ Power in Migration and Work: Learning from the Experiences of Women Migrant Workers from Bangladesh, OKUP, 2019.

¹⁸ MAP Foundation Report 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

8 **Women's Rights Are Migrant Rights:** Immigration restrictions must not be used to discipline labour power. Women migrant garment workers want improved monitoring of recruitment and migration systems, and an end to gender and age discriminatory laws and policies. **To this end the, instrument must comprehensively include migrant workers regardless of status.**



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