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# PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT



## INTRODUCTION

Preventing and responding to gender-based violence (GBV) is both a human rights imperative and a multifaceted economic issue. GBV creates barriers for economic opportunity and growth; impacts the world of work; and can be an unintended consequence of economic activity. Compounding this is COVID-19, which has increased rates of GBV and caused global economic hardship, especially for women.



The impacts of GBV extend beyond just the survivors: while an estimated **one in three women** around the world will experience GBV,<sup>i</sup> their families, communities, and nations also feel the ripple effects that can cost countries up to 3.7 percent of their GDP.<sup>ii</sup>

Discriminatory social norms and gender roles, the lack of laws that prohibit GBV in all of its forms or inadequate enforcement and implementation of existing laws, and poor collection of data on the linkages between women's economic empowerment and GBV must all be addressed before women can achieve sustainable advancement. Government policies and interventions that are not designed to account for GBV as a barrier to or consequence of economic empowerment risk undermining their own efficacy or potentially causing greater harm.

## GBV AS A BARRIER TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT

Acts of GBV such as domestic/intimate partner violence or sexual assault can serve as a barrier to women's economic empowerment. The physical and psychological impacts of GBV can prevent women from leaving their homes, or using public transportation to get to and from work. They can also disrupt required work functions and productivity, which employers may use to justify dismissal.



One study showed that **25 percent of rape survivors lose their job within a year of the assault and 30–53 percent of employed survivors of intimate partner violence lose their jobs due, at least in part, to the domestic violence.**<sup>iii</sup>

Economic coercion — a form of GBV — impedes women from controlling resources such as their paychecks, business profits, and land or other property, or from making decisions about the use of household income. Harmful practices such as school-related gender-based violence and child, early, and forced marriage often prevent adolescent girls from completing their education or learning essential skills to enter the workforce or increase their earnings. In fact, with each additional year of schooling, women earn about 11 percent more income, an opportunity often precluded by child marriage.<sup>iv</sup>

As the current COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, lockdowns coupled with increased economic strain from job loss and other financial stressors have increased GBV, particularly domestic/intimate partner violence, which has caused impacts on women's economic empowerment.<sup>v</sup> Women conducting business from home yet trapped with abusive partners due to stay-at-home measures or inability to afford alternative shelter may face more restrictions on their access to technology needed to work remotely. For those who can use technology for economic activities, they may endure cyber-harassment and other forms of digital violence. Without the ability to leave their homes, women experiencing violence in their households face difficulties accessing necessary services, safety nets and economic empowerment programs that would enable them to have the financial independence to leave an abusive relationship.<sup>vi</sup>

Given the impact of domestic violence particularly on women's employment, businesses and employers can play a critical role in responding to this abuse. For example, employers can institute leave and flexible work arrangements to accommodate court hearings; implement security measures to assist a worker trying to keep an abuser away from her workplace; and establish policies protecting survivors from retaliation in instances where they take time off to recover, come to work with visible injuries, or have had a perpetrator disrupt their workplace.<sup>vii</sup>

## GBV IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Violence and harassment in the world of work is particularly pernicious, having deep impacts on the targets of the abuse and on employers and industries. Women experiencing sexual harassment may endure physical, psychological and financial harm, which can cause secondary impacts on businesses. In employment, sexual harassment can have serious negative effects on women's work attendance, retention and ability to advance, as well as women's long-term earning capacity.<sup>viii</sup> For example, one study estimates the impacts of sexual harassment in Australia results in \$2.6 billion in lost productivity, or a loss of about 4 working days per case of sexual harassment.<sup>ix</sup> These impacts could be even greater in traditionally male-dominated industries and client-oriented services in which women face a higher risk of harassment in the workplace and stronger mental health impacts.<sup>x</sup>

For many, there are limited protections from harassment at work; in fact, one-fifth of countries do not have adequate laws addressing sexual harassment in the workplace.<sup>xi</sup> Even in countries with legal protections, implementation remains a challenge, so workers face insurmountable barriers registering complaints or receiving help, making violence and harassment an unwanted but normalized feature of work for many.<sup>xii</sup>



**Working in the informal economy — 92 percent of informal workers are women<sup>xiii</sup> — further exposes women to GBV in the workplace. The informal sector lacks social and legal protections or formal recourse for GBV in most countries,<sup>xiv</sup> which makes it difficult for women to prevent violence or access redress measures.**

Domestic workers, for example, are often not protected by national labor laws and oversight, isolating those facing GBV from help. COVID-19 has further exacerbated women's vulnerability to exploitation and abuse because women are increasingly reliant on income from the informal sector.

## UNINTENDED GBV CONSEQUENCES OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS

While employment or entrepreneurship can afford women the financial independence to leave abusive relationships or prevent GBV, some economic empowerment programs may potentially increase GBV. Due to discriminatory social norms that regard men as primary breadwinners, male family members may aim to reassert control by using violence against women who achieve economic success or become more active in economic activity outside of the home.

In designing and implementing women's economic empowerment programs and policies, it is critical to understand the context and the GBV risk factors and to engage men and boys to avoid unintended harm.

**Gender analysis throughout the process, including before the program is implemented, can ensure that program activities account for the various underlying social norms, gender roles and other factors.**

This includes the impact of women's race, ability and social class, which often contribute to GBV in economic empowerment programs. For example, village savings groups that focus on improving women's access to savings and loans are often paired with programs to improve communication between spouses and have proven effective in preventing domestic violence.<sup>xv</sup>

# U.S. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Ensure that U.S. efforts to advance women’s economic empowerment globally incorporate measures to address GBV as a key barrier to women’s economic empowerment and a critical component of establishing an enabling environment.**  
This should include efforts to improve and expand the focus of the current initiative on women’s economic empowerment. This issue is bipartisan and aligns with the bipartisan Women’s Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-428).
- 2. The United States should join the Economic Justice Action Coalition for the Generation Equality Forum** and should make commitments on addressing GBV as a barrier to women’s economic empowerment, in the world of work, and as an unintended consequence.
- 3. Given U.S. support for International Labor Organization Convention 190, incorporate core tenets into trade and international assistance programming, strategies, policies and action plans,** including U.S. investments through International Financial Institutions, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, and activities supported by the Department of Commerce and U.S. Trade Representative. Specific focus should include, for example:
  - Programs that assist governments to enact or strengthen implementation of laws against workplace GBV and enable employers and employees to effectively apply those regulations in their work;
  - Measures urging businesses to institute and implement policies for preventing, reporting and addressing violence and harassment in the world of work as defined by Convention 190.
- 4. Conduct and integrate an intersectional gender analysis and address GBV in all U.S. Government programs and policies,** including COVID response and economic recovery plans.
  - Integrate GBV prevention, mitigation, and ‘Do No Harm’ principles into all programs, including integrating it into monitoring and evaluation;
  - Ensure funding is directed to support GBV programming to increase prevention activities and to support survivors.
  - Collect and share specific indicators on the linkages between WEE and GBV as part of monitoring and evaluation for WEE and GBV related programs.

The **Coalition for Women’s Economic Empowerment and Equality (CWEEE)** is an advocacy coalition that seeks to advance women’s economic empowerment and equality as a foreign policy priority of the U.S. government and multilateral development institutions. Our members are technical experts, implementing NGOs, advocacy-focused NGOs, and research organizations.



<sup>i</sup>UN Women, Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

<sup>ii</sup>The World Bank, Gender Based Violence (Violence Against Women and Girls). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialsustainability/brief/violence-against-women-and-girls>

<sup>iii</sup>AFL-CIO, “Ending Gender-Based Violence in the World of Work in the United States,” April 2017, <https://aflcio.org/sites/default/files/2017-04/Ending%20Gender%20Based%20Violence%20in%20the%20World%20of%20Work%20USA%20Report%20%28002%29.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup>World Bank Group (WBG) et al., Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls, July 2018, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29956/HighCostOfNotEducatingGirls.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>v</sup>Peterman, Amber and O’Donnell, Megan, “COVID-19 and Violence against Women and Children: A Second Research Round Up,” Center for Global Development, September 2020.

<sup>vi</sup>Human Rights Watch, “Submission to the UN special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences regarding COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women”, July 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/03/submission-un-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-its-causes-and-consequences#>

<sup>vii</sup>Human Rights Watch, “Safety and Dignity at Work”, June 2020. [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2020/06/ILO\\_advocacy\\_brochure\\_0620.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/06/ILO_advocacy_brochure_0620.pdf); Futures Without Violence, “Workplaces Respond to Domestic and Sexual Violence”. <https://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/workplace-safety-equity/workplaces-respond-to-domestic-and-sexual-violence/>

<sup>viii</sup>“APEC WOMEN @ WORK”, September 2019. <https://www.nathaninc.com/insight/apec-women-at-work/>

<sup>ix</sup>Deloitte, The economic costs of sexual harassment in the workplace. March 2019. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economic-costs-sexual-harassment-workplace-240320.pdf>

<sup>x</sup>Heather McLaughlin, Christopher Uggen, and Amy Blackstone, “The Economic and Career Effects of Sexual Harassment on Working Women,” Gender and Society, vol. 31 June 2017; Victor E. Sojo, Robert E. Wood, and Anna E. Genat, “Harmful Workplace Experiences and Women’s Occupational Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis” August 27 2015; APEC WOMEN @ WORK, September 2019. <https://www.nathaninc.com/insight/apec-women-at-work/>

<sup>xi</sup>World Bank, More than 1 billion women lack legal protection against domestic sexual violence, finds World Bank study. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/02/01/more-than-1-billion-women-lack-legal-protection-against-domestic-sexual-violence-finds-world-bank-study>

<sup>xii</sup>Human Rights Watch, “Safety and Dignity at Work”, June 2020 [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2020/06/ILO\\_advocacy\\_brochure\\_0620.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/06/ILO_advocacy_brochure_0620.pdf)

<sup>xiii</sup>Bonnet, Florence, Joann Vanek and Martha Chen. 2019. Women and Men in the Informal Economy – A Statistical Brief. Manchester, UK: WIEGO. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms\\_711798.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_711798.pdf)

<sup>xiv</sup>Oxfam, Dignity not Destitution.; CWEEE, COVID-19 and Women’s Economic.

<sup>xv</sup>CARE, “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Program II: Evaluation Report 2019,” [https://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/GEWEP-II-Endline-Evaluation-Report\\_Final-Rwanda.pdf](https://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/GEWEP-II-Endline-Evaluation-Report_Final-Rwanda.pdf)