

Submission of the International Transport Workers' Federation to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences: COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) is a global union federation representing 18.5 million worker members, from around 670 affiliate unions in 147 countries. In its support for women transport workers globally, important work streams of the ITF women's department include tackling violence in the workplace, domestic violence, and gender-based occupational segregation. While domestic violence work forms an established part of our work, during the Covid-19 pandemic this has been revealed as particularly vital as the danger has increased during national lockdown and quarantine measures.

Though we defer to organisations that focus on supporting survivors of domestic violence as best placed to provide statistics on the impact of the pandemic on rates of domestic violence and interruptions in service provision, the ITF is able to contribute its experience and expertise to broaden understanding of the impact of the pandemic on women's exposure to domestic and other violence.

Nevertheless, the preliminary results of a domestic violence study carried out by the ITF in India between October 2019 and May 2020, reveal that 24.4% of the 15,561 participants reported that they had directly experienced domestic violence in the past 12 months, and 23.2% reported that their experience with domestic violence was more than 12 months ago.¹ Although dates of the study do not correlate with the pandemic period and its aims were unrelated, the slight increase in the percentage this year could reveal the first impacts of the lockdown environment.

While the ITF hopes to highlight key themes and has taken the liberty of providing general thematic information in the context of a sectoral approach based on ITF research and projects, our submission will be most relevant to question eight posed by the Special Rapporteur, by providing examples of obstacles to preventing and combating domestic violence due to Covid-19.

The ITF hopes to draw attention to the nuance and complexity of the interrelationship between changes in the workplace environment due to Covid-19 and the rates of domestic violence, other forms of violence, and domestic violence in the workplace.

Loss of Livelihood

Gender stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination against women reinforce gender based occupational segregation in the workplace. This is widespread, but particularly prevalent in sectors such as the transport sector, which remain male-dominated.

Lack of fair access drives women into the informal sector where they are overrepresented. In most countries a higher share of informal workers are women.² Globally across all areas of work, 58.1% of women (740 million) work in the informal sector, rising to 92.1% and 84.5% (a higher percentage than men) in low and lower-middle income countries respectively.

¹ The ITF aims to publish a report of this study at the end of July 2020.

² ILO, ILO adopts historic labour standard to tackle the informal economy, 2015, https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/previous-sessions/104/media-centre/news/WCMS_375615/lang--en/index.htm.

According to ILO Recommendation 204 concerning the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy of 2015 (R204), women are among those “especially vulnerable to the most serious decent work deficits in the informal economy”.³

These jobs are often the most precarious and the lowest paid but, in times of international crisis, they often disappear completely, leaving workers with no income, job security, nor social protection provision to fall back on.

“Informal workers are more scared of dying of hunger than they are of catching the disease. Women have the additional job of bringing food to the table and they eat last; after their husband and children. When food is so scarce, maybe they don’t eat at all.” (Geeta, women's advocate NETWON, union (‘Nepal Yatayat Majdur Sangh’) organising e-rickshaw drivers in Nepal)

Certain industries have been particularly affected by Covid-19, including the travel, tourism and hospitality sectors. The majority of the world’s transport workers are informal workers. There is significant horizontal and vertical gender based occupational segregation in the tourism sector, including the hotel industry,⁴ which has ground to a halt with Covid-19.

Loss of Financial Independence and the Opportunity to Leave

As women lose their jobs and income during the Covid-19 pandemic, they lose their financial independence and the lifeline they need to leave a violent home environment.

The aforementioned ITF study on the impacts of domestic violence on workplaces in India defines domestic violence as any form of physical, sexual, verbal, cultural, spiritual, emotional, or psychological abuse, including financial control, neglect, stalking and harassment, occurring between past or current intimate partners of the opposite or same-sex, who may or may not be married, common law, or living together. Crucially, financial control in and of itself can amount to domestic violence. Economic violence was also reported by 11.9% of survivors in this study, second only to psychological and emotional abuse at 19.0%.

“Economic harm” is included in the article 1 definition of violence and harassment in Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the world of work (Convention 190). These domestic violence studies carried out in India, demonstrating the seriousness of the issue, are to be used as a launch pad for lobbying for the ratification of Convention 190 in the country.

Household Income

The above survivor study also reports that monthly earnings have an impact on who reports experiences of domestic violence over their lifetime. Those who report earning less than a certain amount per month report more violence (73.3%). This may reflect lower household income as a stressor or an emasculation of a partner as a ‘provider’, the risk of which increases with a loss of livelihood, of not only a survivor, but also that of the (potentially) abusive partner. The ILO estimates that 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy – nearly half of the global workforce – are in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed due to Covid-19.⁵

³ R204 - Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204).

⁴ UNWTO Global Report on Women in Tourism, 2019, <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284420384>

⁵ https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_743036/lang--en/index.htm

“Women don’t know in which difficult conditions men work. If men get less salary then they beat their wives. He may not be happy to do so, but he does it because he is under stress. He cannot concentrate on his work due to that”. – Study respondent, ITF domestic violence perpetrator study carried out in Maharashtra, India with NGO SAMYAK (Domestic Violence and Workplace: A Qualitative Study with Men, report forthcoming).

“If man is under stress, he commits violence. If women dose [sic] any mistake in household work then it’s okay to beat her”. - Study respondent ITF domestic violence perpetrator study (report forthcoming).

Survivor Isolation and Corresponding Increase in Power and Control of a Dominant Partner

Almost all respondents in the above ITF study of perpetrators of domestic violence agreed with the statement “men should control their wives.” This context of control becomes more grave in a global lockdown situation in which entire populations have been forced to stay at home, and/or the grocery store or pharmacy are the only other places a person is permitted to be.

“Abusers are weaponizing public health measures. We know that isolation is already an established tactic for domestic violence abusers. Even outside of a pandemic context; and that includes different forms of isolation. Isolation is a control tactic. So it is social isolation - from family, from friends. And it can also be physical or geographical isolation - as well as victim surveillance. Regulation of daily activities like sleeping and showering. So those were already tactics being used, but now we have laws that we need to protect us from the virus and those laws are actually reinforcing women being cut off from their social supports. So home isolation, however vital it is to fight against the pandemic, is giving more power to abusers. These social distancing measures are increasing women and their children’s day-to-day exposure to abuse of men. We know when family members are in close proximity, under conditions of duress for extended periods of time, rates of violence against women as well as violence against children increase.” (Barb MacQuarrie, forthcoming ITF Podcast 2020, Community Director of The Centre of Education on Violence against Women and Children, Western University, Ontario)

“Perpetrators, no matter where they live in the world, are feeling a loss of control during the quarantines, the social distancing/social isolation measures, the economic uncertainty that is coming with all of that. So their controlling behaviours and their acts of violence, are actually coping measures for them to deal with the sense that ‘they’ve lost control’.” (Barb MacQuarrie, ITF Podcast 2020, Community Director of The Centre of Education on Violence against Women and Children, Western University, Ontario)

Loss of Support Network in the Workplace

The absence of workplace support is certainly a factor in increased rates of domestic violence during Covid-19. The workplace can have a positive role in supporting a survivor of domestic violence.

“It is a bitter truth that women workers often say that the workplace is a better, supportive environment for them than their own homes. In this survey, we met thousands of women workers. One of the repeated responses we received is that the women facing violence at home feel safer in their work environment. The women facing domestic violence are totally frustrated with their homes and are continuously living under a burden. But as they come to their workplace they feel free and feel that their mind is without fear. They can share their experiences with others, they can get guidance from their colleagues and friends to tackle the situation, and sometimes they can get in contact with doctors, lawyers or counsellors when they are at work-place. All of this is not possible from home. Thsat is why

they are eager to go to their workplace, to be able to breathe freely and speak their mind. They expressed that workplaces are comfortable and a good support when they are facing violence. This makes the workplace and even having a job very important for women, and that is why we need C190 or at least a change in our national law so that domestic violence does not remain an issue that women deal with alone inside the four walls of her home, but can also get support from her employer.” (Sheela Naikwade, ITF Podcast 2020,⁶ Union leader from MSTKS, India; a contributor to the development of the ITF Women’s Advocate Programme and leader of the Indian National Survey on Domestic Violence at Work).

Of the Indian individuals who reported experiences of domestic violence in the aforementioned national survey, the majority reported that they discussed their experience with somebody at work (76.1%) including: co-workers (92.2%); their union (42.5%); their manager (11.6%); human resources, a sexual harassment committee, an internal complaint committee (ICC) and/or a local complaint committee (LCC; 11.5%); a designated person at work who handles situations of domestic violence (9.4%); and/or others (1.4%). Respondents also reported ways in which these individuals supported them, including being helpful or sympathetic and discussing a safety plan. These offer opportunities to find a way out of their home situation, and provide important mental health support.

The ITF Women’s Advocate Programme

There are many reasons why women find it difficult to report domestic violence. Patriarchy and normalisation of social/cultural gender stereotypes and roles means that often emotional, psychological and economic forms of domestic violence are overlooked.

Myths of domestic violence and social stigma also form barriers for women to disclose and under-reporting has always been and remains a huge challenge. In Covid-19 times, for reasons listed above, these challenges are exacerbated. According to Unifor, the Canadian trade union that developed a women’s advocate programme in 1989, women are five times more likely to reach out for support to someone that they know. This is one of the reasons why the role of a women’s advocate is so important.

Based on the success of the Unifor model, the [ITF women’s advocacy programme](#) trains union activists to support survivors of violence, link them with community support and advocate for workplace safety planning and job security. They also campaign for prevention in the workplace and with allies in wider society.

“A bus conductor recently called me in critical need of support, as she couldn’t access medical services for her unplanned pregnancy during lockdown which triggered domestic violence. Thankfully we have our community alliances that I could refer her to, and they were able to support her in this critical time”. - Sheila Naikwade, ITF women transport workers’ committee member, MSTKS India.

Some good practice examples of actions by governments, civil society or employers to combat domestic violence, other violence against women, and other gendered impacts of COVID-19 received by our affiliate unions include support for pregnant women, or women with dependent children/elderly relatives, or designating women’s shelters as essential services. Unifor union in Canada noted the particular mental health needs of women who may be vulnerable to domestic violence in its Covid-19 Mental Health Resource [guide](#). One specific example is the Women’s Aid support organisation’s ‘[Rail to refuge](#)’ scheme which, in partnership with some of the southern UK rail networks, provides women with a train ticket to escape a situation of violence and abuse at home.

⁶ To be published shortly.

ILO Convention 190 enshrined that the labour market institutions can help address the impacts of domestic violence, and calls on state members to recognise and help mitigate these effects (article 10(f)), and places certain duties on employers.

Prior to the adoption of Convention 190 by the ILO in June 2019, [New Zealand](#) and Australia both enacted legislation to provide for additional leave in cases of domestic abuse. New Zealand granted ten days' paid leave, while [Australia](#) granted five days of unpaid leave, for the purposes of survivors to leave their partners and find a place to live. Such leave is also protected in the Philippines by its Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004, and in the Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Ontario. It is now a specific measure put forward in ILO Recommendation 206, supplementary to Convention 190.

Increased Violence *Within* the Workplace Due to Covid-19

In addition to the impact of loss of work and livelihoods on women's vulnerability to domestic violence, and decreased independence to leave their situation, the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on women's exposure to violence within the workplace where they remain in role.

The gender-based occupational segregation discussed above leads women to be traditionally hired into more customer-facing roles, demonstrated in the transport sector via an overrepresentation in ticketing, cleaning, and the public transport sector, and underrepresentation in road logistics transportation or merchant seafaring jobs.

The majority of women ([56%](#) of women in Canada) have traditionally worked in the "five Cs" - cashiering, caring, catering, cleaning and clerical, which have more contact with the public. Furthermore, at least 70 percent of the global health and social care workers are women, and more than 56 percent of the services sector that continued to operate during lockdown were women.⁷

In these kind of roles, women are more exposed to the public, the virus, and with that a new kind of violence. With recent dramatic and unprecedented international upheaval, social isolation, community tensions, individual anxieties, personal stress and mental health triggers are likely to have increased the risk of violent tendencies. Transport, food retail are other key workers on the front lines are some of the few people that isolated and potentially volatile people may come into contact with. The global unions [report](#) cases of verbal and physical abuse against nurses, care workers and others on the frontlines.

New forms of aggression and violence directly linked to the virus have also been experienced, including spitting and coughing as a form of attack. One such incident of this kind of violence at work during the pandemic was an incident involving a ticket officer in London, [Belly Mujinga](#), who was spat at by a customer who claimed to have Covid-19. She and a fellow colleague became infected within days and Belly later died of the virus.

Beyond transport workers, the Convention 190 protections from violence and harassment in the workplace extend to the commute, which has formed much of the continuing essential travel. With lockdowns, restrictions in mobility of the global population and the corresponding decrease in demand and use of public transport, there has been a reduction in the provision and regularity of these services. This has increased the risks for women associated with travel, in line with the extended waiting times between services and the fewer witnesses or allies who normally travel with them on these routes. For much of this time only key workers have been working and travelling to work.

⁷ Chidi King, ITUC, Webinar on ILO Convention 190, the impact of Covid-19 on violence in the world of work, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxCB_4fseGM&t=6s

Transport workers, for example, are key workers who have been continuing to provide commuter services to other key workers, such as medical staff.

As ILO Convention 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work applies when commuting to and from work, the employer should be responsible for considering the safety of the commute when scheduling shift work to finish at a time when public transport is unavailable. Research shows that there is an increase in the risk of being harassed when using public transport in the evening,⁸ relevant to the transport worker as a worker and as a user. This risk has been exacerbated during lockdown, particularly with diminishing provision for transport workers on early/late shifts.

In Bogota for example, we know that women ticket sellers on the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in the city have to leave the house at 2am for the first shift with no transport provided by employers and Covid-19 lockdowns have directly contributed to a rise in muggings of this group of workers.

Globally, key workers required to continue commuting have been encouraged to use cars rather than communal modes of public transport. However, women are disproportionately affected by poverty - 70% of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty are women.⁹ Furthermore, the benefit is not equally accessible in the sense that women are far less likely to own a car, or have access to a shared family vehicle, than a man.¹⁰ Family car access is usually secondary for women after the male members of household. Public transport therefore continues to be vital for women's access to economic opportunity, requiring women to be at increased risk of violence, as well as the virus, during this pandemic.

Working from Home

It must be noted that, where possible, many have been instructed by their employer to work from home, meaning that the home has become the workplace. There is greater exposure and stress on home relationships, more of an opportunity for domestic violence to occur, and working in this environment can be harmful to productivity and career progression, beyond health and safety.¹¹

In the context of the pandemic, the Supreme Court of New South Wales, Australia has [ruled](#) in June 2020 an employer can be held responsible for family violence when staff work from home, ensuring that domestic violence is taken into account by employers. Many women have been forced to work from home with their abusers during the pandemic, without ever being asked if it was safe, and employers will be expected to provide for women to safely communicate concerns about their own safety and develop policies for their protection.

This is in line with ILO Recommendation 206 supplementing Convention 190, which sets out inclusion of domestic violence in workplace risk assessments and other specific measures to mitigate the impact of domestic violence in the world of work, such as temporary protection against dismissal and leave for survivors, which are particularly important in the context of the pandemic (para 18).

⁸ Risk Management and Healthcare Policy Journal, Sexual harassment in public transportation among female student in Kathmandu valley, Volume 2019:12, 8 July 2019, 105—113.

⁹ UNDP figure, cited in SUTP Gender and Urban Transport Factsheet, <https://bit.ly/2C7gH6J>.

¹⁰ SUTP, Approaches for Gender Responsive Urban Mobility, May 2018, p19.

¹¹ ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190): 12 ways it can support the COVID-19 response and recovery, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/working-conditions-2/WCMS_747240/lang-en/index.htm

A [Webinar](#) organised by ActionAid, CARE, ITUC Asia Pacific and IWRAW Asia Pacific on ILO Convention 190 “The World of Work is Changing: Why ILO 190 Matters More than Ever” was held on 18 June 2020 and discussed how Covid-19 is impacting gender-based violence in the world of work.

C190 is a powerful tool for governments to prevent gender-based violence. The ITF and other global unions have been at the forefront of the campaign for the development, urgent ratification and effective implementation of C190.

The ILO has put together a [brief](#) of the ways in which the ratification and implementation of Convention 190 and its complementary recommendation 206 are key to the Covid-19 response and recovery, as well to building better resilience in the face of future crises.