

Violence Against Women In The World Of Work

VIOLENCE is found in all societies. It is not just an episodic problem, affecting two or more individuals but a structural, strategic problem rooted in wider social, economic, organizational and cultural factors. It is a social phenomenon which bears social costs. Both men and women are exposed to violence but women are subject to specific risks. Like violence, sexuality is socially shaped and the exercise of male power accounts for many instances of male violence against women. Violence against women is a gender problem anchored in attitudes and structures which demean women and confine them to a subordinate position in society. It impinges on their life and that of their family, and affects their access to work, earnings and livelihood.

Within the framework of its mandate to promote social justice and internationally recognized human and labour rights, the International Labour Organization is deeply committed to work towards a life free of violence against women. The ILO approaches violence against women as a three-pronged issue: a human rights issue, a labour issue and a health and safety issue. Its efforts focus primarily on three domains: violence against women at the workplace, trafficking of women and girl children and the survival of women and families in conflict-affected economies.

Violence at work

Violence at work is a multifaceted phenomenon. It affects the dignity and the quality of life of the persons at risk but also productivity because it has negative effects on the working environment. It is therefore, a costly burden for the worker, the enterprise and the community. Workers are exposed to violence generated both outside and inside the workplace. The risks vary with a person's occupation, but also with the circumstances or situations under which that person is performing his/her specific task or duty. In the context of work, violence is, in general, higher for women than for men.

Violence at work covers a wide diversity of behaviours ranging from physical to psychological violence. Traditionally attention focussed on physical violence but more recently, the impact and harm caused by psychological violence has also been taken into account. Attention is growing with respect to violence perpetrated through repeated behaviour such as sexual harassment, bullying or mobbing. The new profile of violence at work which emerges is one which gives equal emphasis to physical and psychological behaviour, and one which gives full recognition to the significance of minor acts of violence.

Vulnerability to violence varies with the type of job. Workers faced with the highest risk of violence are those dealing with money, with the public, those who make decisions over risk of violence are those dealing with money, with the public, those who make decisions over client's or patient's lives, those working in care giving institutions, in maintenance, working at night or working alone. Women are concentrated in many of these sectors, particularly as teachers, social workers, nurses and other health care workers, bank and shop workers, domestic workers etc.

Violence may also originate from fellow workers. Violence at work, including sexual harassment, can take the form of a power display, intimidation or abuse from a supervisor or co-workers. Violence is a means of

control to which women are more vulnerable because of their age or employment status. The continued segregation of women in low-paid, low status and precarious jobs, while men predominate in better-paid, authoritative and supervisory positions contributes to this problem. In some branches of activity the incidence of this type of violence is higher: catering (hotels and restaurants), cleaning etc.

Some categories of women workers are doubly vulnerable to violence:

— Migrants and workers of different ethnic origin experience a disproportionate share of violent incidents. The risk is even higher for clandestine immigrants. Abuses have included confiscation of passports, enforced change of contract, withholding of wages, deprivation of food and malnourishment, lack of access to medical and health services, imprisonment in the home of the employer, prohibition on engaging in social contacts, the interception of letters from home and physical and sexual violence.

— Women workers in export processing enterprises operating in free trade zones who often work under exploitative conditions.

In recent years the number of precarious and occasional jobs has grown in relative importance. Women in these jobs are more exposed to violence because of their marginal status within the labour market.

Sexual harassment at the workplace is defined as any unwanted sexual attention that is explicitly or implicitly made a condition for favourable decisions affecting one's employment or that which creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment. It is a specific form of violence which occurs all over the world. At times regarded as harmless "flirting," it is increasingly recognized that whatever the intent of the perpetrator, it can demean and damage the victim. Women themselves demand to be allowed to pursue their working lives with dignity.

Sexual harassment violates a worker's right to job security and equal opportunity. It can create working conditions that are hazardous to the psychological and physical well-being of workers. It also creates a poisoned work atmosphere that can distemper and demoralize workers. When ignored, sexual harassment exacts a high cost to a company in terms of loss of productivity, high absenteeism among affected employees, disruptions of work from long-term sick leaves, retraining of new personnel and low morale. It may also tarnish an enterprise's public image and decrease profits because of possible litigation costs.

Trafficking in women and girl children

Trafficking has a kaleidoscopic nature. The forms of trafficking range on a continuum from outright kidnapping to persuading the trafficked person to be smuggled voluntarily into jobs. For the International Organization for Migration "trafficking in women occurs when a woman in a country other than her own is exploited by another person against her will and for financial gain. The trafficking element may — cumulatively or illegally migration from the country of origin to the country of destination; deceiving victims into prostitution; or enforcing victims' exploitation through violence, threat of violence or other forms of coercion." The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has taken a wide view of trafficking explicitly including forced mar-

riages and forced labour within trafficking. Trafficking is closely linked to internal and international migration. Facilitated by globalization and modern communication technology, trafficking is becoming increasingly transitional in scope and dominated by organized networks often linked to criminal Mafias. The number of migrant women who resort to traffickers for organizing their migration has increased significantly in the recent past. Often the end result is labour exploitation, including sexual exploitation.

Trafficking is a violation of basic human rights and a serious form of violence against women and girls. Most trafficked women find themselves in a vulnerable position because they go into individualized work situations (especially in domestic service and entertainment). They are less likely to have access to networks of information and social support to help them defend themselves against exploitative conditions of work and a sizable number are lured into prostitution. Trafficking in children can serve multiple purposes: prostitution, domestic work, (bonded) labour, marriage, false adoption, sex tourism and entertainment, pornography, begging, criminal activities. Not all trafficked children are coerced. A growing number of girls are simply persuaded into a job, well aware of the trafficking process but not of the levels of indebtedness they will experience. Children from economically, culturally, intellectually, socially and emotionally disadvantaged groups are particularly exposed to high risks.

New routes for trafficking have appeared. Because of the illicit nature of trafficking it is difficult to estimate accurately the magnitude of the phenomenon but alarming evidence shows that cross-border flows for prostitution and the international trafficking in women and children have been growing. Several thousands of women from Central and Eastern Europe are reportedly forced to prostitute themselves in countries of the European Union and trafficking in children has emerged as a major issue of global concern, especially in Asia. Some figures are horrifying: one million children under the age of 18 are reported to work in the sex trade in South East Asia. Child prostitution should be considered as forced labour, hence an unacceptable form of exploitation which must be eliminated.

The work hazards to which trafficked victims are exposed are intolerable. The majority of trafficked women and children work under appalling conditions and are often exposed to drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases including (HIV/AIDS). As illegal migrants, they have no access to health and social services or insurance. Many children are trapped, through deceit, with high debts for advance payments to parents, the agent's fee, and travel and recruitment costs. Many trafficked children are bonded labourers. Their indenture, the absence of legal support combined with their illegal status, leave them at the mercy of employers and authorities. The nature of their work, especially in the case of prostitution, and their isolation from the rest of "normal" society mean that they have little or no resource to support structures or to the law to redress the unequal power relations they are subjected to.

Violence against women workers in conflict affected countries

Violence against women exists outside conflict situations, but

its incidence increases at the time of generalized conflict or war. An alarming trend in armed conflicts characterizes the world today. Anti-humanitarian and anti-human rights practices are widespread. Because of the changed nature of modern warfare, many more civilians are directly affected. Some armed conflicts resort to extreme sexual violence against civilian populations: forced recruitment of young girls for the pleasure of combatants range from women to children. Other practices are the destruction of essential means of survival; withholding food for civilians, capturing civilians as forced labour. Women and children have been reportedly captured for sale as slaves.

Violence against women and children is used as a weapon to weaken communities. Rape can be both systematic and endemic during conflicts and a product of normalized violence and a brutal expression of power. The physical, social and economic consequences of rape are long-term. In addition to the increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, women suffer from unwanted and dangerous pregnancies and torture. In many cases, rape brings shame not only to women but to their families and community from which the survivors may be subsequently ostracized. This will bear strongly on a woman's entitlement to resources, to find a marriage partner, and generate a livelihood.

Beside psychological, medical and social consequences of such violence, one must look also at the disruption of economic activities and the environment of work of women. Many women find it unsafe to work in the fields, sell on the markets or perform any economic activity outside the house because of the threat of violence. Yet, they are forced to venture outside to provide some food for the family while the men protect the family property or hide for fear of being killed.

The exposure of women and children to this violence is unacceptable. Even in countries where sexual violence is not used as a structural tactic between opposite factions, it is clear that war-widows, refugees, girl child soldiers, etc. are much more vulnerable to violence. As women are the main providers of food and protection for their children, this inhuman and adverse economic position of women in conflict countries has devastating and lasting effects.

Causes of violence

Poverty, unemployment, economic crises, insecurity, collapse of the state, competition over economic and property resources, unequal distribution of wealth, wars, are all grounds from which violence against women develops. Furthermore, against a background of extremely deteriorated working and living conditions, of political and social exploitation, violence can evolve towards one of the worst type—the poor against the poorer.

Migration and trafficking flows are related to perceive economic disparities.

Communities from where trafficked victims originate have specific social, cultural, political and economic set-ups that make them vulnerable. Some common denominators apply to all poverty, limited educational opportunities, dysfunctional families, politically and socially excluded communities, and social exclusion. Ethnic minorities, tribal groups, undocumented migrant workers, stateless people and people in refugee camps are particularly vulnerable.

(To be continued)