



COVID-19 and Gender-Based Violence: Workplace Risks and Responses

A Guidance Note for Employers



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2121 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20433

Internet: www.ifc.org

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This guidance note seeks to inform employers about the heightened risks of gender-based violence as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and outline ways in which employers can address these risks, improve employee and community well-being, and create a safe and resilient workplace.

1. Overview

Gender-based violence increases during public health emergencies.¹ Increases in violence can be due to reduced access to necessities, financial stress, the potential breakdown of societal infrastructures, quarantines and social isolation, family separation in conflict or fragile contexts, or the inability to escape abusive partners.²

The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic is a public health emergency of a global scale. Millions of people have been infected, hundreds of thousands have died and many more are suffering economically. Baseline forecasts envision a 5.2 percent contraction in global GDP in 2020—the deepest global recession in eight decades.³

Thirty-one million additional gender-based violence cases are expected globally in the first six months of COVID-19 lockdowns, and an additional 15 million cases of gender-based violence are expected for every three months that lockdowns continue.⁴ Many more people are working from home as a result of the lockdowns, increasing stress in domestic relationships and sometimes exacerbating violence.⁵

¹ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/618731587147227244/Gender-Dimensions-of-the-COVID-19-Pandemic>

² [Ibid](#)

³ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33748/211553-Ch01.pdf>

⁴ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf

⁵ <https://www.securitymagazine.com/articles/92085-managing-domestic-violence-in-a-work-at-home-world>



Furthermore, certain groups of people such as essential workers and those suspected to be carriers of COVID-19, may also be at risk of stigmatization, discrimination, and violence.⁶

Gender-based violence has serious negative consequences for people affected by violence, their families and communities, including immediate impacts on safety, mental, physical, and sexual health and well-being. Longer-term impacts can include mental, physical and sexual impairment, financial hardship, economic insecurity, and homelessness.

In addition to the harm caused to people directly affected, gender-based violence can negatively impact employers in a variety of ways, including:

- Exposing employees and customers to increased health risk
- Reducing productivity
- Increasing absenteeism or turnover of employees
- Reducing employee engagement
- Increasing safety and security costs, and
- Damaging the employers' public image or affecting customer satisfaction

In some countries, gender-based violence is estimated to cost up to 3.7 percent of GDP—more than double what most governments spend on education.⁷ Gender-based violence also directly affects the business bottom line, with research from Fiji showing that high rates of domestic and sexual violence translate into lost staff time and reduced productivity that is equivalent to almost 10 days of work per employee each year.⁸ While this research is specific to Fiji, similar costs of violence are expected in other contexts.

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/healthcare-workers-are-still-coming-under-attack-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-136573>

⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialdevelopment/brief/violence-against-women-and-girls>

⁸ https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/region_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/east+asia+and+the+pacific/resources/fiji-domestic+and+sexual+violence+report

COVID-19 creates gender-based violence risks for workplaces including:



Customer and client aggression: Unacceptable or hostile behaviors targeted toward employees



Workplace bullying: Repeated and unreasonable behavior directed toward a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety



Workplace sexual harassment: Unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, which makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated



Sexual exploitation and abuse connected to the workplace: Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes, including but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another



Domestic violence including physical, sexual, psychological, or financial abuse perpetrated by intimate partners, family or household members

Women, girls, boys and men can be victims of gender-based violence; however, women and children are disproportionately affected. Factors other than gender such as race, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual and gender orientation, or disability may also increase the risk of experiencing violence.

There are actions employers can take to address these risks and improve employee and community well-being and create a safe and resilient workplace.

2. Customer and Client Aggression

Employees may be at increased risk of customer and client aggression due to COVID-19. Customers and clients may be feeling stressed about access to goods and services that the company is providing or the impacts of COVID-19 generally. They may also refuse to follow precautions to minimize the risk of transmitting COVID-19. They may react with hostility toward employees, especially if employees are providing essential services such as access to food or other necessities, utilities, banking, and healthcare. Aggression may be particularly targeted at employees from marginalized groups and may be racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic.



They may experience an increase in a range of unacceptable and hostile behaviors while at work or outside of work, including:

- Refusal to abide by local protective norms to minimize COVID-19 transmission, such as refusing to wear a mask, maintain social distance, or minimize personal contact with employees
- Hostile or threatening gestures such as aggressive facial expressions and invasion of their personal space
- Threatening or offensive behavior such as pointing, fist shaking, pounding counters, foot stomping, and door slamming
- Verbal abuse of either a personal or general nature by means of innuendo or insult, raised voice or obscenities, including racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic comments
- Physical violence such as hitting, kicking, seizing, pushing, or punching; or
- Physical violence against an employee's personal or company property

Employers could consider:

- Explaining to customers and clients what is expected of them, including what measures are being taken to minimize COVID-19 transmission, and customer and client obligations
- Communicating to employees, customers, and clients that unacceptable and hostile behavior toward employees will not be tolerated
- Developing and communicating guidelines on how employees and their supervisors should respond to and report customer and client aggression, including what to do during an incident, how to report the incident, and where to seek support
- Monitoring and evaluating incidents and responses to customer and client aggression and updating guidelines as necessary



3. Workplace Bullying and Sexual Harassment

Workplace bullying and sexual harassment are likely to increase as a result of COVID-19 as negative social discourse that is happening outside a workplace may make harassment inside the workplace more likely or perceived as more acceptable.⁹ Employees may repeat unhelpful or unsubstantiated beliefs on the causes and carriers of COVID-19 and may engage in disrespectful behavior toward colleagues who they feel are responsible for the pandemic and its impacts. Employees from groups perceived to be outsiders, such as migrant workers, those from ethnic minorities, those who do not speak the dominant language, or those from sexual and gender minorities may be at particular risk of stigmatization, discrimination, and violence from colleagues. In some countries, class or caste dynamics can also increase the vulnerability of some workers to violence. Workplace bullying and/or sexual harassment can take place between different genders or people of the same gender.

Employees who are working online are also likely to experience an increase in cyber-violence, including image-based abuse—when a nude or sexual image of a person is taken or shared without that person’s permission; cyber bullying; online harassment—intimidation, humiliation or threats; and illegal and harmful content, including child pornography.¹⁰ Employees may also be bullied or harassed by colleagues or supervisors using online technology. Those working remotely for the first time may also experience an increase in bullying and harassment from supervisors who may not have the skills to manage staff remotely or may not be responsive to the employee’s needs, such as flexible work hours because of additional childcare responsibilities caused by school closures.

Employees in frontline services are also likely to experience an increase in sexual harassment from customers and clients. Reports from China and Singapore show high levels of intimidation and aggression toward female health professionals, especially nurses, in the current crisis.¹¹

Employees are also at heightened risk of quid-pro quo sexual harassment at companies that are restructuring or downsizing.

⁹ https://www.eeoc.gov/select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace#_Toc453686321

¹⁰ <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/blog/covid-19-online-risks-reporting-and-response>

¹¹ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/618731587147227244/Gender-Dimensions-of-the-COVID-19-Pandemic>



Quid pro quo sexual harassment is an inappropriate use of power and occurs when some type of employment benefit is made or perceived to be contingent on sexual favors in some capacity. It includes requests for sexual favors, unwelcome advances, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when either of the following conditions is met:

- Agreeing to such request or conduct is made or perceived to be a term or condition of a person's employment; or
- The request or conduct is explicitly or implicitly used as the basis for employment decisions affecting that person.

Usually this type of sexual harassment occurs between someone in a position of power and a subordinate.

Quid pro quo sexual harassment is likely to increase when there are significant power disparities within workplaces, and supervisors feel emboldened to exploit lower-ranking employees. Gendered power disparities in highly hierarchical organizations, where a predominantly female workforce reports to predominantly male supervisors will also increase the risk of quid pro quo sexual harassment.¹²

Employees who are victimized may not report the harassment if they are afraid, particularly if the harasser has power to reduce their wages or shifts, reemploy them, stand them down, or make them redundant. Employees may also be deterred from reporting harassment if they feel there will be no accountability or if they feel that they will not have access to services and support. As such, it is important to encourage all employees to report any incidents that they witness or hear about.

Employers could consider:

- Promoting gender equality and diversity in their workforce and supply chain
- Ensuring that all processes around restructuring and downsizing are transparent and understood by employees
- Ensuring that all decisions about restructuring or downsizing are made by a gender balanced and diverse committee and are transparent to reduce the discretion of individual managers and thus the likelihood of quid pro quo sexual harassment

¹² https://www.eeoc.gov/select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace/#_Toc453686321



- Ensuring that the impacts of restructuring or downsizing do not disproportionately impact any group based on race, religion, ethnicity, age, sexual and gender orientation, or disability
- Reminding employees of existing policies, grievance mechanisms and support services relating to workplace bullying and sexual harassment and consider refresher training
- Communicating with employees about the heightened risks of workplace bullying and sexual harassment during COVID-19 and encouraging any employee that experiences, witnesses or hears about such harassment to report it immediately through anonymous, informal, formal and/or online reporting mechanisms
- Acting promptly to investigate and resolve all issues raised in a safe and confidential manner
- Ensuring that any disciplinary action taken is based on the outcome of the investigation and proportionate to the impacts of the harassment

4. Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Connected to the Workplace

The risk of sexual exploitation and abuse being perpetrated by employees toward customers, clients and community members can increase during health emergencies.¹³ Employees may have more access to, and more power over, vulnerable populations and may engage in sexual misconduct that harms people and communities and damages the reputation of the employer. Teenage girls and other vulnerable populations may be groomed to engage in sexual relationships as a channel for financial support and/or there may be a rise in sexual violence.¹⁴

As with quid pro quo sexual harassment in the workplace, it is unlikely that victims of sexual exploitation and abuse will report the incidents, due to the power differentials between them and the perpetrator. As such, it is important to encourage bystanders, those who are not directly involved in the abuse, to report any incidents that they witness or hear about.

¹³ <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/618731587147227244/Gender-Dimensions-of-the-COVID-19-Pandemic>

¹⁴ *Ibid*



Employers could consider:

- Communicating with employees about the heightened risks of sexual exploitation and abuse during COVID-19 and encouraging any employee that experiences, witnesses or hears about such harassment to report it immediately, through anonymous, informal, formal, and/or online reporting mechanisms
- Reminding stakeholders such as community members in the vicinity of the business of existing policy and grievance mechanisms
- Acting promptly to investigate and resolve all issues raised

5. Domestic Violence

It is estimated that domestic violence incidences will increase by at least 20 percent globally during the first three months of lockdown due to COVID-19.¹⁵ Domestic violence can occur in intimate relationships between people of the same or different genders, within the family, or the household. COVID-19 and its impacts, such as stress, is not a direct cause of domestic violence but can contribute to more severe episodes of violence.

Employers could consider:

- Providing domestic violence information at the physical workplace, including existing company policies and support available to employees, as well as how to contact essential support services
- Creating a safe and private space in the workplace where employees can contact domestic violence services, and make reasonable adjustment to employees' work locations and schedules to ensure the employee's safety while at work
- Providing general information to employees via email about employee well-being, including information on healthy conflict resolution and healthy parenting, and advising employees how to access counselling services. Communication may include a brief reference to domestic violence

¹⁵ https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf



Employers should not:

- Provide in-depth information about domestic violence into employees' homes, as many employees may live with the perpetrator. Domestic violence information or enquiries may trigger the perpetrator and exacerbate the violence
- Survey workers or inquire about experiences of violence while the employee is working from home.¹⁶

If you are concerned that an employee is at risk of domestic violence:

- Ask the employee to attend a meeting with you away from their home, so that they can speak freely without the perpetrator being present
- If you are conducting this meeting virtually, double check that the employee is not in the presence of the perpetrator and provide employees with information on how to stay safe virtually including how to clear their browsing history
- If you need to urgently contact an employee in their home about being at risk of domestic violence, consult with a domestic violence service provider first and seek their support to reduce the risk of violence against the employee

6. Key Message

Employee and community well-being can be impacted by COVID-19 gender-based violence risks. These have long-term negative consequences for people, their families, communities, and businesses. Those who are directly impacted may be reluctant to report the abuse because of the heightened power differential between victims and perpetrators of abuse during this time and because of reduced access to support services or mobility restrictions. It is important that employers address these risks by encouraging all employees, and especially bystanders to abuse, to raise any issues and report incidents that they witness or hear about.

¹⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/issue-brief-violence-against-women-and-girls-data-collection-during-covid-19>



7. Resources

- **Podcast:** [What role can business play in tackling gender-based violence?](#)
- **Report:** [Respectful Workplaces: Exploring the Costs of Bullying and Sexual Harassment to Businesses in Myanmar](#)
- **Report:** [The Business Case for Workplace Responses to Domestic and Sexual Violence in Fiji](#)
- **Report:** [The Impact of Domestic and Sexual Violence on the Workplace in Solomon Islands](#)
- **Animation:** [The business case for addressing domestic violence in the workplace](#)

8. Contact

Shabnam Hameed

Global Lead, Workplace Responses to Gender-Based Violence

Gender and Economic Inclusion Group, IFC

Shameed2@ifc.org



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