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*“My co-worker commented on the way I look and said he wonders how I will look without clothes...”*

*“There are many cases in the company, but people are reluctant to talk about it...”*

*“I felt humiliated when he made remarks to other male members, and they laughed at me...”*

*“There must be more campaigns for LGBTQ so that everyone can stop making a joke that is actually name calling...”*

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**WORKERS ADDRESS GENDER-BASED  
VIOLENCE & HARASSMENT IN  
SOUTH AFRICA’S GARMENT FACTORIES  
AND CLOTHING RETAIL STORES**

NOVEMBER 2023

## INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the world of work is a global problem affecting tens of millions of workers, especially women, across all jobs and industries. It is an abuse of power and human rights violation that causes emotional and physical harm and undermines economic security. Women are disproportionately targeted, but anyone can be a target, particularly members of the LGBTQI community and others who do not conform to dominant social expectations about gender.

According to the International Labor Organization, GBVH is especially common in garment factories. The industry is often made up of women workers under the age of 30, many of whom migrate from rural areas or abroad and this is their first formal job. Clothing retail workers are also predominantly younger women working under precarious forms of employment. To better understand and find solutions to this challenge, 19 trade union activists and leaders conducted participatory action research (PAR), interviewing 117 workers to gain insight into workers' beliefs and experiences with GBVH, including what forms of violence and harassment they encountered or witnessed, and how they responded to such incidents. This report shares their findings and worker-driven recommendations for eliminating violence and harassment in the garment sector.

## SOUTH AFRICA'S GARMENT SECTOR

Clothing, textile, footwear, and leather companies employ approximately 212,000 people in South Africa with 92,000 of those jobs in manufacturing and 120,000 in retail.

The overall retail sector in South Africa is the second largest employer after the government and was hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. In their bid to stay afloat, companies undertook massive restructuring, resulting in increased working hours, job insecurity and more shift work for the largely female workforce. Pandemic-related job losses in the sector meant women who were the sole breadwinners or major contributors to household incomes saw a decline in the economic and social power they had held in their households. As a result, women workers find themselves in an increasingly precarious situation at home and in the workplace, where abuse and sexual harassment from customers or from managers promising to renew contracts in exchange for sexual acts is common.

## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The intention of our research was to identify strategies for preventing and addressing GBVH at work through giving voice to women workers and other marginalized workers as experts on their own experiences with GBVH in the workplace and as owners of the decision-making processes used to prevent and address GBVH in the workplace.

The Solidarity Center, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU), South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), the National Labour and Economic Development Institute and Labour Research Services partnered to design and conduct this participatory action research project.



**World of Work**, as defined by ILO C190, includes the workplace, including public and private spaces where they are a place of work; places where the worker is paid, takes a rest break or a meal, or uses sanitary, washing and changing facilities; work-related trips, travel, training, events or social activities; work-related communications, including those enabled by information and communication technologies; employer-provided accommodation; and the commute to and from work.

The two participating trade unions, SACTWU and SACCAWU, democratically nominated 15 workers (13 female and two male), two union administrators and one organizer, and one union official to participate as researchers. All are elected shop stewards and appointed union organizers. Other partners supported the worker researchers to develop the skills, confidence and sensitivity to conduct interviews with fellow workers about this sensitive topic. Through the PAR process, researchers increased their knowledge and information and became better equipped to inform union advocacy campaigns to address GBVH in the garment sector.

Participatory action research is rooted in collaboration, education, developing skills, and a *Do No Harm* ethos to avoid re-traumatizing interviewees. Throughout the process there was an acknowledgment that the researchers themselves might have been survivors of GBVH, which can be difficult to discuss. To address this, we created a safe space for worker researchers to debrief and freely share experiences where they felt uncomfortable or unsafe. National union leadership played a key role in supporting the researchers through difficult moments of the process.

## WORKERS TALKING WITH WORKERS ABOUT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

We wanted to know how respondents understood gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment (SH) before asking them about specific forms of harassment they faced. The workers tended to define GBV and SH as physical violence and rape/sexual assault respectively. This either reflects that physical violence is more prevalent than commonly understood, or that the workers focus on the more extreme forms. Our findings suggest that bullying and verbal abuse are common in workplaces, but physical forms of sexual harassment are also very prevalent. All of this points to a need for education and awareness raising about all the different forms of GBVH. It is important to be able to recognize the more subtle forms and stop them before escalating to more severe forms. It is equally important to ensure that workers have access to support and protection against *all* forms of violence and harassment at work.

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***“This program shook us up. The last two weeks, I discussed the new GBV policy of the company. You as a leader have to give the policy to workers and I also read it to them and I used this as a way of raising awareness and as a strategy to remind workers about their rights.”***

***—Worker Researcher***

### WORKERS INTERVIEWED

- 104 Women
- 11 Men
- 2 Non-binary individuals
- 65 Production workers
- 21 Cashiers or retail staff
- 12 Managers or supervisors
- 6 Admin staff

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***“So now I know if they whistle or wink or pinch or touch me this is wrong and is harassment.”***

Our research reveals disturbing levels of GBVH that women workers in the clothing, textile and retail sectors are subjected to. Among the 117 workers interviewed, 89 (77%) reported they had experienced some kind of GBVH. When they were asked differently i.e. *“Have you suffered any of these forms of GBVH?”* 115 (98%) said they had experienced one or more forms.

## TYPES OF GBVH EXPERIENCED BY 115 WORKERS

- 70 Physical abuse
- 50 Unwanted sexual advances
- 45 Psychological abuse
- 28 Bullying
- 26 Rape
- 25 Domestic violence
- 23 Stalking
- 22 Threatened with violence or negative consequences
- 18 Economic or financial abuse
- 13 Verbal abuse
  - 5 Sexual assault
  - 3 Coercion

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*“My co-worker commented on the way I look and said he wonders how I will look without clothes.”*

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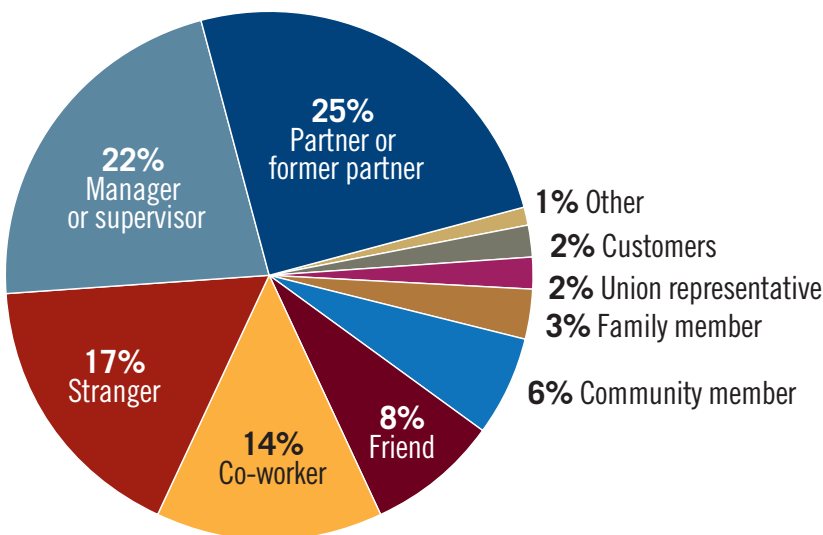
*“A male colleague slapped my bum in front of two other workers and they all laughed.”*

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*“My manager called me to his office and said that if I want to extend my hours of work, I must go out with him. He kept on asking, even forcefully and aggressively.”*

Managers and co-workers were identified as the key perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace.

## PERPETRATORS OF GBVH




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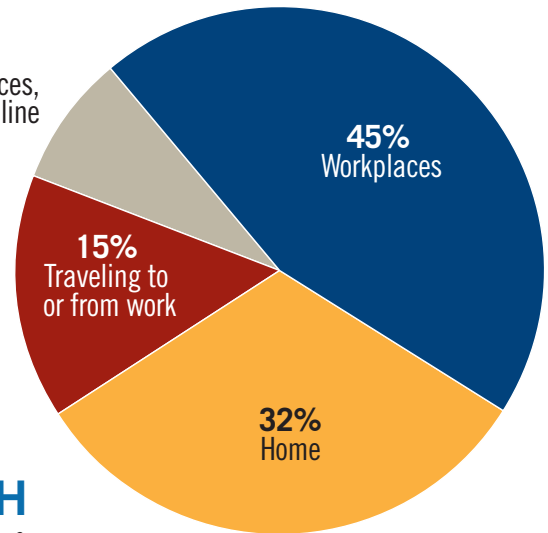
*“We broke up because he is abusive, and he doesn’t want to see me speaking with other men in a workplace. Sometimes we start fights at lunchtime verbally. When we are out of work, he beats me. My ex-boyfriend forces me to sleep with him. We are working in the same department, so it is traumatic for me.”*

Most incidents of GBVH took place at work, but many workers interviewed experienced violations at home by a partner or former partner.

Sixty-five percent of the interviewees spoke of recurring incidents and of GBVH “happening all of the time,” to the point where violence and harassment have become the norm, and workers are afraid to report it so perpetrators continue without fear of being caught or punished.

## PLACES WHERE GBVH HAPPENS

8% Public spaces, meetings, online



## CHALLENGES IN CONFRONTING GBVH

The biggest challenge in confronting GBVH in the world of work is lack of reporting. While 98% of workers said they had experienced GBVH, only 30% of respondents (35 out of 117) reported those incidents. This aligns with underreporting that turns up in research on GBVH globally.

### BARRIERS TO REPORTING GBVH

- 20% were confused about what to do
- 20% were too stressed/afraid
- 15% feared for their safety
- 13% feared stigmatization
- 9% feared losing their relationship
- 9% feared losing their job
- 5% feared their perpetrator would lose their job
- 3% didn't report because there was no clear policy and procedure in the workplace
- 3% didn't report because the incident didn't happen at work or it happened in a public space
- 2% dealt with the incident themselves
- 1% were afraid of the customer responsible for the incident

### MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO GVBH REPORTS

- 23% issued a warning or took disciplinary action against the perpetrator
- 19% protected the perpetrator
- 15% did nothing
- 13% met with the union
- 11% was not informed about the case
- 11% instituted an investigation/procedure
- 4% reported the matter to the police
- 4% other

*“There are many cases in the company, but people are reluctant to talk about it. There are also many cases of people who are abused at home and this impacts on them when they come to the workplace – and that is why absenteeism is high.”*

“In 40% of GBVH cases reported to management the union was not involved, either because the union was not informed (30%), the victim was not a union member (5%) or the union did not respond (5%). The case studies show that if a shop steward has spoken about GBVH in workplace meetings, and taken up cases previously, other workers are more likely to approach them with issues of this nature.

Fifty-one percent of victims who reported incidents said they were relieved or satisfied with the outcome. But 49% were angry that the incident was not dealt with and said it made them feel alone, helpless, victimized, unsafe or scared.

Overall, we found there is an overwhelming need for stronger interventions on GBVH from the government, especially around protection orders and harsher sentences for those found guilty of GBVH. There is a need for clearer reporting procedures and training so people taking reports know how to competently deal with cases of GBVH. And there must be people in places of authority encouraging victims and witnesses to speak out on GBVH.

Only 37 (43%) out of 86 people who responded to this question claimed to have witnessed GBVH. The finding that less than half of respondents claim to have witnessed GBVH does not align with what worker researchers describe as a culture of intimidation, bullying and violence both in the workplace and community. This finding could reflect the culture of silence around GBVH than its prevalence. Worker researchers confirmed the fears witnesses expressed about acknowledging that they had witnessed incidents of GBVH. They also spoke about a culture of “not wanting to be involved.”

## WITNESSING GVBH AT WORK

*37 witnesses of GVBH reported these impacts:*

- 12 felt stressed and did not want to go to work
- 5 felt unsafe, invisible and unprotected
- 5 felt angry and miserable
- 4 experienced no impact
- 3 were afraid to intervene
- 3 felt traumatized and disappointed
- 3 felt uncomfortable in the presence of the perpetrator
- 2 got support/help
- 2 felt afraid they would be victimized

Another serious problem for those likely to be harassed or assaulted is that late trading is a feature of the retail sector and the provision of secure transport by employers, particularly female employees who are forced to work late at night, is important for the safety and security of workers.

The limited availability of public transport and the dangers women face when using public transport particularly at night is well known. When asked if safety policies for traveling to and from work are provided for by the company, only 10% of respondents indicated that company policies exist.

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***“There must be more campaigns for LGBTQ so that everyone can stop making a joke that is actually name calling and is rude.”***

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***“My male colleague kept on staring at me, especially my backside, twice he asked me to go out with him because he liked me. I felt humiliated when he made remarks to other male members, and they laughed at me. The shop steward reported it as a grievance to the manager, who reported it to the HR manager... There was a grievance meeting and the perpetrator was given a warning.”***

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Every worker has the right to a working environment free from all forms of violence and harassment. There is a critical need to mobilize against GBVH through workplace policies, government interventions, and campaigns by workers, trade unions, and employers to prevent, address GBVH.

Based on participatory action research, workers and researchers make the following recommendations to the South African government, employers and trade union federations to address GBVH in the garment industry. The entire industry needs stronger and clearer procedures for reporting GBVH in the workplace, so victims know what to do when they're harassed or assaulted. In addition, it is very beneficial for overall visibility and worker security if union stewards or those in authority in stores and factories proactively bring up GBVH and signal they are aware this is a problem.

### Recommendations for Employers

- Implement zero tolerance policies on GBVH, with investigations when incidents are reported and disciplinary procedures to hold perpetrators accountable.
- Ensure workers have the right to organize and collectively bargain for workplaces free of GBVH.
- Build on the landmark Lesotho Agreements to end GBVH in the garment supply chain by negotiating binding agreements with global brands, unions and women's groups to end GBVH in the workplace.
- Have social workers that workers can contact when violence and harassment occur as well as anonymous help lines.
- Train managers on what is acceptable and how to handle situations when GBVH occurs so that managers are better equipped to handle cases properly using a survivor-centered approach.
- Publicly post anti-harassment policies and make them easy for workers to access, and make sure managers are implementing these policies.
- Offer protection and support for GBVH survivors like counseling and (paid) time off, and assurances that reports will be taken seriously, and victims protected from retaliation.
- Display posters raising awareness about what GBVH is and what workers' rights are in stores and factories. Place notices at the entrance to stores to inform customers that GBVH will not be tolerated.
- Provide support for workers dealing with partner abuse/domestic violence.

### Recommendations for Trade Unions & Federations

- Negotiate strong workplace policies protecting workers from GBVH. Advocate for the adoption of policies in companies that don't have them and amend policies to make sure there is a transparent process for reporting incidents.
- Use collective action to force management to take incidents of GBVH more seriously and advance women and LGBTQ workers' safety.
- Train shop stewards to act as anti-sexual harassment officers. Make sure there is a shop steward in each factory trained on GBVH and participatory action research.
- Speak up about GBVH regularly and teach workers about their rights in union meetings.
- Run awareness and action campaigns and crack down on GBVH within unions.
- Play a more active role in coalitions to represent workers' voices in efforts to jointly prevent and address GBVH.

## Recommendations for the Government

- Ensure that labor laws and practices are in line with ILO Convention 190 concerning Violence and Harassment in the World of Work.
- Take the lead on education and awareness campaigns targeting boys and young men. Helpful measures would include school programs to teach about gender equality from a young age, billboards and social media campaigns explaining what GBVH is, and encouraging churches, communities and families to treat girls with respect.
- Improve the investigations into GBVH and prosecution against people accused of GBVH or femicide.
- Build the capacity of government departments and service providers including police departments and crisis or women’s centers to offer better support to GBVH survivors, namely counseling and trauma-informed care.
- Increase the number, accessibility and quality of services for survivors of GBVH.

