



# VIOLENCE AGAINST HOME-BASED WORKERS IN SOUTH ASIA: A CROSS-COUNTRY STUDY



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence against home-based workers (HBWs) is a serious human and labour rights violation. Owing to the unorganised and informal nature of their work and overlap between home and workplace, HBWs remain at a grave risk of domestic and workplace violence. They are disproportionately affected by violence due to the intersection of their gender, unequal status and power relations, insecure working conditions, and their high concentration in the informal sector. Only a few studies have been conducted on violence against HBWs in South Asia, primarily in Nepal and in some parts of India. It has been recognised that available evidence on workplace violence from South Asia is most probably only the tip of the iceberg, and that it largely focuses on the formal sector. This qualitative, cross-country study was an attempt to understand violence against HBWs in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. The geographic scope of this study was limited to women HBWs in urban settings who were the primary participants and representatives of civil society organisations. They were selected purposely from one city in Bangladesh (Dhaka) and two cities each in India (Mumbai and Nashik) and Pakistan (Karachi and Lahore). In each study country, 20 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with HBWs, 1 focus group discussion (FGD) with 8-10 additional HBWs, and 1 key informant interview (KII) with a representative of a community organisation in each country were conducted.

The study describes in detail the nature, scope and context of violence faced by HBWs in domestic and work spheres; an overview of policy and legal frameworks in place for protection of HBWs; coping strategies and redressal mechanisms that HBWs opt to use to deal with violence; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HBWs and a set of recommendations to prevent and respond to violence against them.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Bangladesh:

- **Lived experience** narrated by HBWs revealed that violence in the domestic sphere were of different forms and were likely to be abused at any point of time. For instance, physical violence was often accompanied by verbal abuse and economic violence included gaining control over financial resources. These were coupled with psychological and emotional violence. Violence in the work sphere were experienced through economic exploitation, sexual violence, harassment and psychological violence. For instance, economic exploitation would consist of low pay, delay in payment and cutting wages by pointing out defects in the readied items. The usage of loud and rude tones to suppress HBWs voices by middlemen and contractors was also mentioned. Instances of sexual and psychological violence and harassment were reported predominantly when the HBWs went to collect raw materials from the middlemen or the lenders. For instance, asking for sexual favours in return of more work, touching hands inappropriately, coming very close or passing lewd comments, bullying in order to denigrate and criticise HBWs and blackmail in order to force women to extend sexual favours were mentioned.
- **Causes of violence** explicated by HBWs included patriarchy and gender discrimination as two interlinked factors that oppressed women and placed them at risk of exploitation and violence. Poverty, family members' anger over a perceived imbalance of work and household responsibility, and impunity of perpetrators were recognised as contributing factors.
- **Impact of violence** was reported to be in the form of physical health and psychological well-being. This caused HBWs extreme stress and in some cases led to suicidal tendencies. Marital discord and exposure of children to violence were noted as effects on the family. A few respondents mentioned the impact of violence resulted in interruption on the workflow, lowered productivity, and diminished

social life. Almost all the respondents noted economic hardship and violence during COVID-19 increased, but none shared their personal experience.

- **Coping with violence** was initially in the form of submission in order to protect the family and children. However, when violence escalated, HBWs mentioned showing resilience and courage by reasoning with perpetrators to stop violence. When that failed, voices were raised and an ultimatum to take further action was given.
- **Responding to violence** was in the form of being vocal about reporting the issue and finding a solution. Most respondents noted that they reported violence to community leaders who, through mediation or social sanctions against the perpetrators, tried to address and prevent various incidents. A large majority of study respondents spoke of reaching out to the helpline of a victim support centre, to local NGOs or government bodies to respond to violence.

## India:

- **Lived experience** narrated by HBWs revealed that, at any given point, they could face multiple forms of violence including physical, verbal, psychological and emotional violence. For instance, a majority of HBWs reported getting beaten, kicked and being hit at the hands of partners and in-laws which was often accompanied by verbal abuse. Threatening, insulting, creating fear, and maligning a woman's reputation were identified as key tactics for hurting women psychologically and emotionally not just by partners or in-laws but also from neighbours and community members. Violence in the work sphere was also experienced through multiple forms perpetrated by their contractors, sub contractors and customers. HBWs were criticised and humiliated in front of neighbours or they were bad-mouthed among other contractors. Sexual harassment was incited by contractors, sub contractors or customers who came to pick up readied goods. They would gaze at the HBWs or passed lewd comments. In some cases, the contractors touched HBWs inappropriately or demanded sexual favours for work. A few incidents of online violence were reported wherein women mentioned receiving anonymous calls from men in and around the workplace.
- **Causes of violence** explicated by HBWs was patriarchy as one of the root causes of violence. Forms of patriarchy in domestic, labour relations and social life were linked to gender discrimination and the power imbalance between men and women.

Many contributing factors such as culture of silence and normalisation, victim blaming and internalisation were directly linked to patriarchy and gender discrimination. Other contributing factors to violence identified were poverty, alcoholism/drug addiction, perceived imbalance between work household responsibilities, partner infidelity and suspicion, and instigation by partners' family and friends.

- **Impact of violence** was reported to be in the form of physical health, psychological well-being, family life and overall productivity. Violence both in the domestic and work spheres affected HBWs focus and concentration levels while working, their family life and most importantly children, who could become targets of violence themselves at the hands of the perpetrator. A few respondents feared victim blaming if others came to know the issue. Due to the fear of stigma, they would avoid stepping out of the house, interacting with neighbours or attending social gatherings. Almost all the respondents noted that economic hardship and violence during COVID-19 increased, but none shared a personal experience of facing increased violence.
- **Coping with violence** was shown in the form of high levels of resilience to keep their families intact and for the sake of their children. Few respondents mentioned their individual strategies of coping with violence. For instance, having the son to answer call to avoid sexual harassment or directly confronting with the preparator in case of stalking and harassment. Few respondents mentioned having faith in God or a religious teacher as a coping mechanism.
- **Responding to violence** through an organised body such as HBWs unions or grassroots collectives for addressing issues of violence and other challenges was expressed by HBWs. All respondents were members of the union and noted that being a member of union, collective or a women's group renewed their socialisation processes and helped them realise their identity as a 'woman' and as a 'HBW'. Mobilising supportive neighbours and other women nearby to talk to the perpetrator worked in certain situations. Most respondents mentioned police as a last resort.



## Pakistan:

- **Lived experience** of violence narrative by HWs showed that the majority faced multiple forms of violence. Domestic violence was perpetuated by partners, in-laws or other relatives. For instance, they reported being slapped, punched, kicked, beaten, pushed and verbally abused. They were criticised, abused, shouted using foul language at home. Aggressive behaviour, coupled with threats of divorce, separating children, cutting access to economic resources and sending the HBW back to a parents' house were mentioned as psychological violence. Economic violence manifested in the form of restricting money for household and personal expenses. Many respondents also recognized marital rape as a form of violence. Violence in the work sphere were also in multiple forms. For instance, withholding of dues, delay in payments, low pay in work sphere, pointing out errors in the finished goods to cutting down the pay or wages and forcing HBWs to re-do the work without paying overtime. Speaking rudely, verbal arguments to re-negotiate the pay and use of abusive language to criticise their work when HBWs demanded pay were some forms of verbal abuse that contractors, sub contractors and middlemen resorted to. Psychological and emotional violence included threatening and blackmailing to complete work on a difficult deadline. Various instance of sexual violence at workplace were narrated by the respondents which included demanding sexual favours in exchange for more pay/work and touching inappropriately. They added if they rejected contractors' demands for sexual favours, they received differential treatment as opposed to those women who conceded. The latter were paid more and treated well.

- **Causes of violence** explicated by HBWs was patriarchy and the power imbalance between men and women. It was noted that religion, state and law all supported and sustained men's position of privilege and women were expected to subordinate them. Lack of education and gender-sensitive values; culture of silence; victim blaming; child marriage and other customs and lack of awareness among young girls were identified as contributing factors, among others.
- **Impact of violence** was reported to be in the form of physical health, psychological well-being, family life and overall productivity. These impacts ranged from stress, suicidal thoughts, health problems and disturbances to personal and social life. The effects on children and family life were also cited numerous times during the discussion. The respondents, in frustration, reported that they beat their children. In other cases, respondents stated that persistent exposure to violence had made the children violent too. Inability to contribute to household income and loss of husband's job intensified the situation at home and gave rise to violence. More than three women talked about specific instances of heightened violence during and due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Coping with violence** was shown mostly in the form of submission and culture of silence. They reached out to their family, friends and relatives. Only a few respondents in Pakistan raised their voice against violence. Few mentioned tolerating violence silently for the sake of their children.
- **Responding to violence** was mentioned to be in the form of reporting to police or legal action to address domestic violence. These were women who were divorced and were satisfied with the police intervention. Almost all respondents agreed that collective action was effective in cases of both domestic and workplace violence, provided women support each other. However, few respondents reported taking help from community level women's groups, connecting with other HBWs or reaching out to an NGO working on issues of HBWs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

For violence prevention, the following recommendations emerged:

- Ratification of international instruments such as ILO conventions C177 on Home Work and C190 on Preventing Violence and Harassment in the World of Work to prevent violence against HBWs.
- Adoption and enforcement of national legislation, policies and interventions for the prevention of violence against HBWs.
- Creation of responsible value chains that promote gender equity and protection for workers at all levels, including those who are in the unorganised sector.
- Strong Interdepartmental coordination among departments of labour and of women and child development, along with other relevant bodies to build capacity, awareness, social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) and community sensitisation on the different forms of violence and its impacts.
- Embracing non-violent and gender equitable social norms through SBCC interventions at individual, household and community levels that underscore why violence is wrong and must be stopped; its impact on women, children and household; and its social and economic cost for the community and nation as a whole.
- Capacitating and collectivising women and girls for preventing violence.
- Involvement of men and boys in preventing violence.
- Equipping government and civil society practitioners working on issues of HBWs through the provision of education materials to design, implement and evaluate prevention interventions.
- Advocacy to strengthen institutional and community commitments for violence prevention and prioritise violence against HBWs as a key labour rights issue.
- Reducing harmful alcohol and drug use through Governments and non-government agencies' interventions and longer-term treatment for problem drinkers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

To strengthen response to violence, the following actions are recommended:

- Community-based reporting and response mechanisms on addressing culture of silence, victim blaming and fear of reprisal after reporting violence.
- Establishment, expansion of helplines, online platforms and information sharing for reporting violence in a confidential manner.
- Ensuring access to response and support by Institutions and systems to respond to individuals affected by violence.
- Awareness creation around response, support services and punitive measures for violence.
- Holding perpetrators accountable
- Sensitisation of police and protection functionaries on issues faced by HBWs
- Sensitisation of public prosecutors and judiciary on issues faced by HBWs, most particularly their contributions, challenges and issues relating to discrimination and violence.