

# ALiGN

**Advancing Learning and  
Innovation on Gender Norms**



**BRIEFING NOTE**

## **How gender norms contribute to gender-based violence in the workplace in Malawi**

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## **About Revolution Human Aid and Transparency Initiative (REHAAT-INITIATIVE)**

Revolution Human Aid and Transparency Initiative (REHAAT-INITIATIVE) is a Malawian non-profit organisation that was first registered with the Malawian Government in 2014. The organisation was formed to promote full public participation in developing and implementing educational, environmental, human rights, governance, economic and sanitation programmes without discrimination in respect of gender, tribe, race or colour, creed or religious belief, sexual orientation, political affiliation, nationality, disability, or membership of minority group. REHAAT-INITIATIVE envisages a society that excels in education, human rights, environment, sanitation, food security and digital competency.

## Key findings

- The gender-based violence (GBV) that is highly prevalent in domestic and agricultural work in Malawi largely affects women.
- There are differences between the forms of GBV that affect women and men, with women being subjected to verbal, sexual and physical abuse while men largely encounter verbal abuse only.
- Women are the group most vulnerable to GBV. Every woman interviewed for this study reported experiencing GBV at some point.
- The main norms that underpin various forms of violence against women in domestic and agricultural work are the expectations that they will be submissive and will not criticise their superiors, and the non-intervention that results from passive cultural attitudes that tolerate such violence.
- Sexual abuse is more prevalent for women who work as domestic workers than for those working on farms.
- GBV leaves women disillusioned, frustrated and hopeless. It may deter them from seeking promotion and bargaining for better wages, trapping them in a perpetual cycle of poverty.
- Domestic and agricultural workers cannot protest or report abuse because they fear losing their job.
- There are growing calls for interventions by institutions of law and non-governmental organisations to curb the forms of GBV women encounter in the workplace.

## **Background**

Gender-based violence (GBV) in its various forms is on the rise in Malawi as a result of the country's gender norms, which are shaped by a highly patriarchal society. According to a National Survey on Violence against women conducted by the Ministry of Gender, 60% of women and girls in Malawi have experienced violence of some kind (Changwanda, 2018).

The Government of Malawi recognises the recurring nature of GBV and its impacts on vulnerable groups such as women, resulting in its commitment to prevent and respond to GBV through a variety of actions, including laws, policies, international commitments, programmes and services (Mellish et al., 2015). For example, laws safeguarding the rights of women and girls are outlined in Malawi's Gender Policy (2015) and the National Action Plan to Combat Gender-based Violence in Malawi (2014–2020) (Malanga, 2020).

Most studies on GBV in Malawi to date have concentrated on GBV by partners (in families) and other forms of GBV that are often highlighted in the media and other platforms (Bisika, 2008; Government of Malawi, 2014; Malanga, 2020). Existing reports and studies have often overlooked GBV's prevalence in low-paying and socially excluded professions, such as domestic work and agricultural and farm labour.

The most recent available data on the workforce dates back to the Malawi Labour Force Survey of 2013, which showed that the ratio of women to total employment stood at 58% in the agriculture sector and 46% in other services, which included domestic service (NSO, 2014). According to European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2020), agricultural work often takes place in remote, rural locations, increasing the opportunities for men to perpetrate sexual assault and harassment. The low visibility of women agricultural workers, coupled with their limited options to report GBV and receive support services, increase the risks they face (EBRD, 2020). Domestic workers, meanwhile, work mostly in closed, private spaces where more forms of GBV, such as sexual abuse, can easily go unnoticed.

## **Research objectives/rationale**

The challenges outlined above have prompted this study by REHAAT-INITIATIVE, with funding from the Advancing Learning in Gender Norms (ALIGN) initiative. The research aims to shine a light on all forms of GBV experienced by male and female victims who occupy low-paying jobs in the workplace and those working in highly stigmatised work environments such as domestic service and farm labour, which are seen as menial forms of work. The research also reveals the gender norms that have been institutionalised in Malawi's agricultural and domestic workplaces. The findings intend to inform policy direction by both government and non-state actors at a time when Malawi is experiencing increasing incidents and cases of sexual harassment, particularly rape and defilement.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Defilement in the Malawi context refers to sexual intercourse with a minor (whether with or without their consent). According to Section 138 of the Penal Code, a minor is anyone aged below 16 years.

Specifically, the project aims to achieve the following five objectives.

1. To assess the understanding of GBV among low-income earners working as farm labourers and domestic workers.
2. To map and track dynamics in the understanding of gender norms among workers in the workplace.
3. To assess the comprehension and perception of gender norms among agricultural labourers and domestic workers.
4. To understand forms of GBV encountered by domestic service and farm labourers in the workplace.
5. To assess the impact of gender norms on power relations and how they reinforce systemic inequality in the workplace.

## Methodology

The research was conducted in three districts of Mzimba, Karonga and Nkhata-Bay in northern Malawi. The study interviewed 14 domestic workers, 26 agricultural labourers and 2 key informants from the Legal Aid Bureau and Malawi Congress of Trade Union respectively. In all, 30 females and 12 males took part in the study. Domestic workers were interviewed in Mzimba district and agricultural workers working in tea estates and agricultural cooperatives were targeted in Karonga and Nkhata-Bay districts. The study conducted in-depth interviews on estates as well as with farmers' cooperatives and domestic workers' groups.

The study adopted a qualitative design that targeted workers as individual interviewees and civil society organisations and government agencies as key informants. To collect enough information from the workers and to avoid putting them in a difficult position when talking about experiences of violence in front of other workers, each worker was interviewed in an isolated space on their own.

## Findings

### Prevalence of gender-based violence

The study unearthed a high prevalence of different forms of GBV in the workplace across Northern Malawi, pointing to a clear understanding of GBV by both domestic workers and agricultural labourers. The most prominent of the GBV forms reported were physical, psychological and sexual abuse. The study found that although all workers believed the violence was not selective based on gender, their responses pointed to women being the main victims of GBV. One female participant from Karonga observed that women faced more violence than men, saying 'Men also face abuse but mostly it happens to women'.

Most of the women interviewed also alluded – whether openly or subtly – to the existence of sexual abuse in their workplaces as a result of their weaker positions in power relations. A domestic worker from Mzimba revealed that fellow maids have admitted that they have been forced into sexual intercourse by their male bosses. In terms of physical abuse, one participant – a maid in Mzimba – revealed that her boss often hit her if she failed to complete domestic chores

or if she was not satisfying the boss's expectations, saying, 'This one time I failed to take care of a school bag belonging to his son because I did not see it. When he came back from work he found the bag and he hit me for failing to take care of it'. In this incident, the maid said she was hit because she had not put the bag in its usual 'clean' and safe place.

### **Economic factors that underpin GBV in the workplace**

The data collected show that economic factors were a major reason for persistent GBV in the workplace. A Legal Aid officer from Mzimba said it was common for female workers to be subjected to sexual abuse. She explained that domestic workers felt obliged to 'give themselves away to male bosses' to protect their jobs. The officer pointed out that this form of violence also affected male domestic workers, arguing that female bosses sometimes coerced them into sex. However, she indicated that such cases were very rare when compared to the sexual violence perpetrated against women, reporting that of all the cases reported since 2010, only 1% (2 cases in total) have concerned a man facing sexual violence. While this may be a result of norms that would consider a male worker to be weak if they reported such cases in a society that celebrates men's sexual exploits, none of the male participants reported having experienced sexual violence.

In contrast, the gravity and scale of GBV against female workers was well illustrated by complaints by many participants that so many rape cases go unreported because the victims and their acquaintances are scared of losing their jobs. A domestic worker from Mzimba said although most of the abuse she had encountered in person was verbal, she had learned from many conversations with fellow domestic workers that some male bosses had forced their workers to have sex with them and that rejections had resulted in physical violence.

It is also clear that women from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds are more exposed to GBV perpetrated by males, corroborating findings in the 2014 National Plan of Action to Combat Gender-Based Violence in Malawi (2014-2020) (Government of Malawi, 2014). In line with this, a 2020 Gender, Inclusion, Power and Politics (GIPP) research report found that an unequal economic status increases the risk that women will engage in transactional sex in Malawi, which further increases their exposure to GBV (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020).

None of the male participants, however, reported any instances where they had encountered any form of physical violence that was GBV-related, other than verbal abuse. Such abuse mostly involves scolding and being addressed in a disrespectful manner over various work-related issues. A male domestic worker from Mzimba stated that the only form of violence he had been exposed to was verbal abuse, in addition to being underpaid (a recurring issue for all participants in the study, whose salaries ranged from MK20000 to MK36000 – about \$25 to \$45). One farm labourer from Nkhata-Bay also alluded to verbal abuse as the main challenge.

In terms of differences in treatment by employers and others with power, all the male participants said they were not sure whether it related to their gender, while most of the female participants believed their status as women was a contributing factor, together with their poor socioeconomic status. The existence of a vertical form of violence (from the bosses to the female workers) was also accompanied by revelations of horizontal violence linked to GBV, with some male workers wanting to exploit their female counterparts. One domestic worker in Mzimba, for example, complained that she had to deal with sexual advances from both her boss

and a male co-worker who was a guard. She said she had a bad relationship with the guard because 'he wanted us to have a sexual affair but I have been refusing him. So he always tells the boss about my mistakes'. All of this happens in addition to the challenges of bullying and low payment that appeared to be commonplace among those interviewed. Table 1 summarises the variations reflected in the participants' responses in terms of reported abuses, gender and type of work.

**Table 1. Variations in abuse by gender and type of work**

| Type of abuse reported           | Gender of respondent | Type of work    |               |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|---------------|
|                                  |                      | Domestic worker | Farm labourer |
| Verbal abuse                     | Male/Female          | Yes             | Yes           |
| Paid below minimum wage          | Male/Female          | Yes             | Yes           |
| Sexual abuse                     | Female               | Yes             | No            |
| Working beyond recommended hours | Female/Male          | Yes             | No            |
| Physical abuse                   | Female               | Yes             | Yes           |

### Gender norms that influence GBV in the workplace

The cases of violence against women as uncovered in this study are underpinned by norms that can be considered key in both their working environments and across society in general. These include female submissiveness, not criticising superiors, and non-intervention resulting from passive cultural attitudes that tolerate such violence.

#### *Female submissiveness*

In a society characterised by patriarchy in various spheres, a general perspective towards females is that they should be submissive to male counterparts. This manifests in the entitlement portrayed by male employers and bosses as well as co-workers in their sexual advances towards female workers and colleagues. It also manifests in women's inability to stand up for themselves when they feel aggrieved as a result of some forms of violence and ill-treatment.

This submissiveness can be deciphered from the fear and resignation demonstrated by some female participants in the study when queried on whether they had a voice in decisions that affect their work. One female worker from Mzimba complained that there is nothing she can do when she had grievances that needed to be addressed, such as delays in payment, stating she just leaves it to the will of the employer to pay her when they wish to do so. Another participant from Mzimba said she could not say anything because she was scared she would have nowhere to go if she lost her job. This was reiterated by another participant from Mzimba who argued that women were at high risk of exposure to violence 'because they can easily be harassed sexually by male employers'. This reflects the perception that women are weak and submissive, which underpins all the forms of violence related to GBV in the workplace.

### *Not criticising superiors*

Another norm that underlies the violence perpetrated against women is the deep-seated belief that a superior should never be criticised openly. This extends to power relations in the domestic and farm work industries where the bosses are not subjected to any scrutiny – at least not from juniors or employees – because of the power that they hold. This can also be regarded as contributing to the non/under-reporting of different forms of violence by the women to various authorities.

All participants interviewed indicated that they did not have a voice. While some said they raise their issues with their superiors, they also said that the feedback is always negative and often includes threats of being sacked, forcing them to recoil into silence. This was perfectly illustrated by two domestic workers from Mzimba who stated that they just watch in silence when such abuses occur. Most of the agricultural labourers interviewed in Nkhata-Bay said they only raise their issues through trade unions and that this does not generate any particular results.

### *Non-intervention*

The lack of intervention by communities in response to ongoing violence also emerged as a recurring norm throughout the interviews. Although data from the interviews showed a variety of reactions from people who had observed some form of violence, it appeared their interventions were limited to highlighting the anomalies of such a working relationship, and did not offer any tangible help. Their interventions, therefore, were limited to offering advice to the victims.

This points to a laissez-faire approach by society that we might consider to be instinctive in a society that is highly passive (Tembo, 2015). One interviewee from Mzimba was explicit about this, arguing that people did not intervene because they often considered the violence to be normal. This was a view shared by another participant from Karonga who said that people did nothing about it. According to a female farm labourer from Nkhata-Bay, such indifference is the result of the workers' resignation and despair. She stated that people were simply used to it, saying, 'It started way back. I also got used to it and I don't feel anything. There is nothing that is happening and I am just used to it'.

The expectation that women should be submissive in male-dominated societies such as Malawi and the concept of according respect to superiors to the extent that they are not subjected to criticism is a fertile breeding ground for various forms of abuse. This is the case because those in power are well aware that they will not be held to account, even in the event that female employees report their encounters to their immediate circle of friends and family or to other responsible authorities in the community.

This expectation also accounts for the fact that every female interviewee highlighted various forms of violence that affected their work. The employee-employer relationship is, therefore, heavily influenced by the fact that Malawians are culturally submissive (Tembo, 2015) (as also argued by one of the participants, a Legal Aid Officer). In addition, the researchers (through their own personal and observed experiences) also understand that people in the Malawian society who have a lower status tend to defer to those whose status is higher.

These norms are largely upheld by both the perpetrators (those in power, such as the bosses) and to a lesser extent by the victims (the workers). The workers, however, appears to have few alternatives or options, given their socioeconomic conditions. They are often scared of losing their jobs, a fact that was raised repeatedly in the interviews.

According to our interviewees, these norms appeared to be deeply embedded in society as every participant (male and female; domestic servants and farm workers) appeared to perceive GBV as normal. There were a few instances where farm workers talked about workers' unions – but even the unions appeared to mainly focus on financial issues. The participants' failure to report cases of GBV to relevant authorities also points, in part, to the normalisation of such violence, as well as a valid fear of losing their jobs.

### **Variations in experiences of GBV**

Significant differences emerged across the interviews in terms of norms and the experience of GBV between female workers and male workers. While the main forms of violence cited by male workers were low pay and verbal abuse, the female participants talked about the existence of sexual and physical abuse in their workplace. Most female participants bemoaned the societal perceptions that view them as weak as being the main reason they are targeted for physical and sexual abuse by the bosses.

There were also differences in the prevalence of sexual abuse, with female domestic servants citing sexual abuse as a challenge more regularly than those working in farms, whose major concerns appeared to relate to salaries and work overload. This could reflect the different nature of the spaces in which these two groups of women work. As one male interviewee from Mzimba argued, women are more exposed to sexual abuse when left alone with their male bosses. However, while women who work as farm labourers are at high risk of sexual abuse, their working environment (where they work as part of a mixed-gender group and mostly in open spaces) means that they are less exposed to sexual abuse in the physical spaces of the farms when compared to domestic servants. In every example where participants referred to sexual abuse, they clearly indicated that it was coercion into sex by either their superiors or – for one female domestic worker in Mzimba – fellow workers (men). None of the participants mentioned any occurrence of violence on their way to or from work.

### **Impact of norms on the experience of women**

The norms that underlie violence in the workplace for domestic workers and farm labourers have adverse impacts on the experience of women. The expectation that they will submit to males and employers, coupled with a culture of silence, implies continued perpetration of the violence against them. This is exacerbated by the non- or under-reporting of violence and the resulting lack of action by the community. In terms of where they can report violence, interviewees cited the police, trade unions and traditional chiefs in the location of their workplace as the right authorities.

In the end however, workplaces for domestic and farm workers still remain hazardous for female employees. The interviews, therefore, indicated that women are among the most vulnerable to GBV, given that every woman interviewed said that she had experienced GBV in her workplace at one point or another. One participant who acknowledged this fact explicitly was an interviewee in Karonga who argued that some groups were at more risk than others – especially

women – adding that they are looked down upon as women because ‘they think that we can’t go anywhere even if we are abused, they fear a man because they know that that they can’t fight a man...’.

While domestic workers appear to be at greater risk of sexual abuse, the data generated did not uncover any other insights on particular groups such as young women, unmarried women, women with low levels of education or mothers. This can be considered as implying the widespread nature of violence across different social groups, although asserting this would require further studies.

### **Implications of GBV on women’s abilities**

The various forms of GBV as experienced by domestic workers and farm labourers have implications for women’s ability to work, seek promotion and bargain for better wages. First, these women work in toxic environments in which their presence is objectified. As a result, they are often treated as sexual objects, as demonstrated by the abuse they endure at the hands of their superiors.

The very nature of domestic work and farm labour in Malawi means that these are very low paying jobs, with most employers failing to honour even the government-stipulated monthly minimum wage of MK38000 (about \$48). Therefore, where women secure jobs in homes and farms – the most common types of jobs available to women with low levels of education in the northern region – their main target is simply survival. However, their survival implies, where possible, attempts to progress to a more desirable job with better pay. In some instances, such forms of employment can be selected by women attempting to fund the education of their children, or by older girls working to fund their own education. In such cases, their efforts are often frustrated by the violence they witness or experience in the workplace.

Where women working in various homes and on farms aim to focus on their jobs, the existence of GBV in their workplaces means they must divide their attention between keeping their job and navigating around the impacts of violence on their psyche. This may lead to disillusioned workers, resulting in the resignation and despair that was observed as being so apparent in the passivity of the communities to which these women belong. As such, it is practically impossible for the women to gain promotion to the supervisor level or bargain for better pay in their domestic position. In the end, this can kill the dreams and ambitions of many women who lack any viable alternative options: even if they quit their current job, the next workplace is likely to have similar problems.

As argued earlier, the existence of these norms implies an opportunity to exploit the weaker party in the power relations in domestic and farm work. This enables employers to flout legal stipulations in terms of signed contracts and wages. As expressed by one farm worker in Nkhata-Bay, the contracts are usually drafted against the workers:

*‘We sign a 1-year contract and I have 3 months remaining (up to June 2021). And after a year, they deduct the money based on the number of days one has missed work. As people, falling sick is inevitable and sometimes you simply become exhausted. And it is hard to get a day off work when you are sick. We even face challenges accessing health care at the company’s clinic. We get proper assistance when we go to government clinic.’*

In relation to such complaints, the Legal Aid officer in Mzimba noted that there were so many cases of abuse and violence in estates and domestic workplaces, with violence faced by agricultural workers being the most common case handled by the Legal Aid Bureau. In her experience, most cases relate to non-payment of wages by employers. In most instances, most employees experience lower and late payments despite an existing minimum wage for workers, but fail to act because they are on the bottom rung of power in their workplace and fear losing their jobs if they report. As encountered throughout the study, most workers just wait upon the will of their employers in cases of delayed payment, with individual protests failing to materialize.

Their submissiveness is exacerbated by the fact that they must deal directly with the people who oppress them on regular basis. In practical terms, this makes it difficult for them to open up about any abuse faced in their workplaces, given their fear of repercussions. By extension, this submissiveness can be considered as being cemented by underlying socioeconomic conditions that force workers to stick to an employer, even when the working conditions are far from ideal.

All of these factors mean that GBV and other forms of violence against women in the workplace go unreported, and that finding solutions remains a major challenge. This is corroborated by available literature, including a 2018 Gender Links report that stated that poverty was a big hindrance in the fight against GBV (Changwanda, 2018).

The prevalence of the various forms of abuse has compelled domestic and agricultural workers to turn to workers' unions to safeguard their interests. They rely primarily on the Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU). A domestic worker from Mzuzu said that the MCTU intervenes when a worker lodges a complaint against an employer. Similarly, a farm labourer from Nkhata-Bay said that victims raise their concerns through the Workers Union based at the farm, although their complaints rarely get any results saying, 'But ever since we started raising our issues till now, none has ever been resolved'. The failure by the farm's trade union to act swiftly led to other ideas as possible alternatives to resolve cases of GBV that affect workers, especially women.

The Legal Aid officer, for example, argued that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need to sensitize people on their rights in rural areas. She also highlighted the need for public institutions in Malawi, such as the Labour Office and the courts, to be more active in looking into the abuses. This was supported by some workers (e.g. one from Mzimba) who argued that the government should establish an organisation to protect the workers' interests. In relation to this, some workers (e.g. one from Karonga and one from Nkhata-Bay) also believed that in addition to civic education on workers' rights, NGOs could also intervene to curb cases of GBV in these areas of work. They could do this by reporting cases to relevant authorities such as the police and acting as the workers' advocates. Another worker also highlighted the need for the various forms of GBV to be reported to police so that perpetrators can be dealt with by law. This reporting could be done through unions to ensure that workers do not face repercussions as individuals. However, where the unions do not appear to be effective, the workers can report on their own.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The study hypothesised that both women and men face gender-based violence in domestic and farm workplaces and that this GBV is influenced by gender norms. The study findings show that both men and women face different forms of GBV at different levels in the workplace, confirming that hypothesis. However, there are differences in terms of gravity of the abuse experienced by gender, with women experiencing more violence than men.

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

- There should be deliberate efforts and policies by companies and organisations to mainstream gender issues into their operations. This will promote gender equality in the workplace and institutionalise positive gender norms among workers. Such efforts should include raising awareness about what constitutes GBV, its illegality, and the action that organisations and employees should take if they witness it in the workplace. This will promote respect and dignity towards women and girls working in low-paying jobs.
- Government and non-state actors should intensify efforts to raise awareness on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) number 5 and 8, which seek to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls; and to promote decent work and economic growth respectively. Some of the aspirations in these two SDGs are crucial for the achievement of gender equality, inculcating positive gender norms among workers and ending GBV in the workplace. Essentially, this will lead to creation of an environment in which women rights are respected in the workplace.
- The State and employers should create an environment that is conducive for the fulfilment of Articles 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which enshrines the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association respectively. These rights would promote the more active involvement of low-income workers in associations such as the MCTU, domestic workers associations and workers unions, among other organisations. This will, in turn, amplify their voice, enabling them to demand better conditions and fair treatment in their workplaces.
- The Government of Malawi should devise and adopt strategies that enforce adherence to the minimum wage policy. While the Government has put in place a policy to regulate the minimum wage, this has not been accompanied by enforcement mechanisms to ensure adherence. Without such mechanisms, low-income workers will continue to be exploited by their employers.
- There should be deliberate educational programmes that are infused with messages on gender norms in the workplace to empower agricultural labourers both socially and economically. Agricultural labourers are characterised by low literacy levels as most of them have not attained a basic education. There is an urgent need to introduce educational programmes targeting farm labourers so that they can understand and demand their rights, as well as engage in economic and social activities.
- Domestic workers need to be introduced to 'online assembly and association' in which they can discuss the issues that affect them without physically meeting and report the violence they experience in closed workspaces. This will increase reporting of cases of violence and eventually lead to a decrease in the GBV faced by domestic workers.

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**About ALIGN**

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers, practitioners and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms.

Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

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