

# ALiGN

Advancing Learning and  
Innovation on Gender Norms



LEARNING REPORT

## ALiGN-Ford micro-grants: gender-based violence in the workplace

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## Introduction

ALIGN's [2021 round of micro-grants](#) supported innovative research on shifting norms to end gender-based violence (GBV) in the workplace. Grantees were selected through a competitive application process, with awards of up to £8000 made to organisations in Cameroon, Malawi, Nigeria, Nepal, Rwanda and two in Zimbabwe. Supported by the Ford Foundation, these grants provided funds that enabled awardees to build more specific knowledge by:

- conducting small scale research projects to initiate or build on existing research and practice
- informing future action on GBV, workplace rights, and changing gender norms.
- Connecting with others aiming to address workplace violence and utilising the ALIGN platform for communication and knowledge sharing.

## Changing gender norms in the workplace: An emerging field

Women's participation in the labour force has expanded, and they now [make up more than 40% of the labour force](#) in many countries, although rates lag behind in the Middle East, North Africa and India. As their participation has grown, so too has a recognition of the prevalence of workplace violence, and of the need to develop solutions to protect workforces from gendered harassment and abuse. However, while work to identify and challenge gender norms at the root of GBV is expanding, there has been relatively little focus on such violence in the workplace.

There is now a pressing need to better understand and address the norms that support and encourage abusive actions based on gender and power inequalities, that drive workplace violence, and that deter the reporting of violence and injustice. Such analysis can help to identify the actions (such as workplace regulations or educational programmes) that are required to address these injustices. Furthermore, simply putting these often-hidden issues on the policy radar is of fundamental importance.

This knowledge gap is a global problem and a 'blind spot' for actors on GBV. Workplace violence crosses continents, sectors and types of work, as pointed out by ALIGN's Senior Research Fellow, Rachel Marcus, in her blog '[Ending Violence Against Women in the Workplace: The Need to Shift Norms](#)'. Research by the UK's [Trade Unions Congress](#), for example, has found that over half the women interviewed had experienced sexual harassment; rising to almost two-thirds (63%) among women aged 18-24. Among women working in the horticulture sector in Tanzania, an ILO report reveals that up to 89% had [witnessed sexual harassment](#). In Ecuador's flower production industry, over [55% of surveyed workers](#) said that they experienced some form of sexual harassment – an estimate that rises to 70% for younger workers aged 20 to 24. And, in India and Bangladesh, [approximately 60% of garment factory workers surveys reported having experienced 'some type of harassment at work, verbal abuse or physical abuse.'](#) Worldwide, the least powerful workers – often those who are already marginalised – tend to face the [greatest risk of violence](#).

Addressing this violence requires a deeper understanding of how gender-based violence manifests differently in diverse settings, as well as of the potential solutions across areas of policy, law, workplace regulations, community-based work, individual actions and beyond. ALIGN's grantees were selected to help fill these knowledge gaps and to offer a deeper understanding of gender norms and GBV in the workplace within and across different countries and sectors.

## ALIGN's 2021 Micro-grantee partners: approaches and findings

ALIGN's 2021 awardees from Cameroon, Malawi, Nigeria, Nepal, Rwanda and Zimbabwe focused on a diverse set of both formal and informal workplaces, including artisanal mining, agricultural and domestic work, healthcare, the technology sector, and local and national government. While most of their projects focused on women's experiences of GBV in the workplace, the Rwanda-based project focused on violence experienced by those who identify as LGBTQI+ and their experiences in civil society organisations.

### The prevalence of violence

Three of the studies conducted small-scale surveys with local stakeholders to seek to understand the scale of gender-based violence in their particular settings.

- In [Cameroon](#), a survey of 128 respondents in 17 different health facilities (both public and private) in Buea Health District found that 43% of the female health sector workers who were interviewed reported experiencing physical violence at work, and 21% had experienced sexual violence (mostly sexual harassment).
- In [Rwanda](#), 74% of 160 LGBTQI+ respondents working in civil society organisations in Kigali reported experiencing emotional abuse and discrimination at work.
- In [Zimbabwe](#), between 68% and 85% of the 300 women surveyed who were working in artisanal mining settlements in three districts reported experiencing some form of GBV. Sexual harassment, physical violence and emotional abuse were the most common forms of violence, with many respondents reporting that they had experienced multiple forms of abuse.

## Gender norms and violence: How norms shape experiences and intersect with other factors to shape workplace violence

### Harmful gender norms within society

While the forms of violence documented in the studies were influenced by context-specific factors, all identified broader unequal, discriminatory and harmful gender norms in society as an important factor in shaping experiences of workplace violence.

Emotional violence, for example, was found to be prevalent in [Nepal's study of Parliament](#). Violence and harassment was often subtle and difficult to redress, with women belittled by comments on their clothing, by being barred from certain conversations or by being made to feel less powerful. Participants in the Nepal study attributed this to a range of factors, including unequal treatment in the media and wider societal norms:

*'The society we have been brought up in has given all decision-making and economic rights to men... The Parliament is built with people from this society so the belief and understanding there is a reflection of the society.'*

Gender norms also shape how perpetrators behave, and the degree to which victims may feel able to speak out. It also contributes to a feeling that such violence is 'normal' – so much so that victims become accustomed to the experience.

In [Malawi](#), a female agricultural labourer said (of violence in her workplace):

*'It started way back. I also got used to it and I don't feel anything. There is nothing that is happening [if violence takes place] and I am just used to it.'*

In [Nigeria](#), the research stressed that gender norms shape people's perceptions of what women can do, and condition women's opportunities to succeed in technology companies. As a result women are bypassed by many leadership opportunities because of social expectations and workplace practices that are unfavourable to them, including issues of safety. As one female lecturer in information and communication technology (ICT) from the public sector noted:

*'...I know a lot of deals are made over beer and made at 1 am in the morning and how are these things possible if you also expect the woman to be the home maker? we have that norm and culture that it is the woman that has to be at home. If you see a woman outside by 1 am you don't even care where she's going to or if she's going for a business meeting or to close a deal, you just conclude that she's a prostitute that she's sleeping with men to get these deals.'*

### Intersecting norms

The studies also found that gender-based norms and related power inequalities can also intersect with other social norms to influence violence. Domestic workers in [Malawi](#) and ICT workers in [Nigeria](#), for example, reported prevailing attitudes and norms related to deference to older people and/ or those with more workplace seniority. This was found to increase the risks that younger and more junior women will experience (and be expected to tolerate) violence.

Language barriers and norms that marginalise minority communities who do not speak the dominant language can also intersect with gender norms to heighten the vulnerability of women from certain minorities in their workplaces. As one female parliamentarian interviewed in [Nepal](#) reflected:

*'Sometimes it may be due to lack of confidence and information, and at other times, representatives of certain marginalised communities cannot voice their concerns because there exists a fear of being mocked due to the language barrier.'*

### Precarious working conditions and abuse from those in power

Precarious working conditions can also increase the risks of GBV. In [Malawi](#), the study found that domestic workers often felt unable to resist advances from their bosses or co-workers (such as guards or gardeners). They also felt unable to complain about physical violence, for fear of losing their job. In [Zimbabwe](#), women in artisanal mines – who are often driven to this work because of a lack of any other opportunities – highlight their vulnerability to sexual attacks from gangs of machete-wielding men. A woman working in artisanal mining reported:

*'They call us all sorts of names but the most painful is how they degrade us by vilifying our vagina as a shameful part to have. Operating in such environments make us feel undressed and we endure stress and depression. Unfortunately, due to poverty, we are left with no option but to painfully endure this daily torture.'*

Several studies also revealed the lack of action from employers, and in one case, complicity from the police, who demand sexual favours in exchange for action in cases of assault. This

problem seems particularly acute in informal workplaces. Formal sector workplaces (such as hospitals, technology companies and civil society organisations) seem more likely to have complaint mechanisms in place and respondents identified some instances where complaints had led to action, for example in [ICT sector businesses in Nigeria](#). However, these regulations and complaint mechanisms may be in place without being operational. Findings from the study of the experience of female local councillors in [Zimbabwe](#) noted that while political parties and local authorities have policies related to GBV, these are not implemented systematically, exposing women to an unsafe and unregulated environment.

## Strategies for change

### Naming violence

Taken together, the studies highlight the need to better document and understand the multiple forms of violence found in the workplace, including sexual harassment, physical, online/digital and emotional violence. Naming these forms of violence, including within legal and policy frameworks, is important for the establishment of clear and specific standards that capture the range of experiences documented.

In the study on violence against female councillors in [Zimbabwe](#), for example, sexual harassment and abuse was identified as a prevalent form of violence, requiring greater explicit recognition within existing standards against violence in politics among political parties and local authorities.

In [Nepal](#), researchers found that verbal and emotional violence is not always recognised as such, and that existing protections against physical violence in Parliament could be expanded to address the prevalence of such violence experienced by women in parliaments, who are often ignored or made to feel 'less than' their male counterparts. Similarly, in [Rwandan civil society organisations](#) sexual and emotional violence was far more prevalent than physical violence, indicating a need for wider definitions of violence in workplace policies.

As one respondent in Nepal put it:

*'When we say there is no violence in the House of Representatives, there may not have been any forms of direct acts of violence in terms of physical or sexual abuse,' he said. 'However, can we ignore the fact that a deserving woman, whoever it may be, has been deprived of an opportunity this big, an opportunity rightfully guaranteed to her by the Constitution?'*

The study on the ICT sector in [Nigeria](#) highlighted the importance of recognising digital and online violence and harassment, with one respondent noting:

*'...it's as damaging as physical violence, you know. So, there should be laws against that.'*

The researchers in [Rwanda](#) found that some within the civil society sector ignored the existence of people with diverse sexualities/gender identities and actively discriminated against them. One key informant was even reported as saying:

*'Personally, I do not agree with these (LGBTQI) people. What they do is abominable. Our organisation has never employed them.'*

The invisibility of such communities within their own workplaces can compound invisible forms of (emotional) violence, highlighting the need for greater specification and naming of violence within distinct communities. If violence goes unnamed it can never be addressed.

### Encouraging and coordinating commitments

A common finding across research sites was the importance of employers supporting staff in the workplace to understand and think about violence, and to commit to upholding the rights of others as an effective strategy. The research in [Rwanda](#) found that where employees were asked to sign a document on the protection of vulnerable groups at work, LGBT+ staff members were four times less likely to experience any form of GBV at work.

In [Zimbabwe's study of local councillors](#), researchers identified the need to harmonise and standardise piecemeal and uncoordinated protections and commitments in politics. They call for the support of the central government to ensure that local municipalities, political parties and others have clear and coordinated standards on GBV.

### Implementing and enhancing protections

The [Nigeria](#) research suggested gaps between the public and private sectors in terms of the level of implementation of codes of conduct, signalling the need for a sharper focus on implementation in the public sector. Lack of awareness about existing reporting challenges can undermine the impact of such codes. The findings from [Cameroon, for example](#), revealed that one reason for inadequate responses by administrations to cases of GBV in hospitals is that most (92%) of the female staff in hospitals are not aware of the existence of internal policies or mechanism to address GBV. In addition, administrators themselves are ignorant about most of the forms of GBV, leading to inadequate response mechanisms. The ALiGN studies conclude that workplace anti-GBV policies have a role to play and recommend that they be strengthened.

Work to strengthen GBV policies also requires a greater recognition of the possible negative/unintended effects of gender equality policies on GBV. For example, in the studies on women in national and local politics in [Nepal](#) and [Zimbabwe](#), respondents raised the point that quota systems can sometimes have unintended impacts by minimising respect for female politicians, who are sometimes accused of lacking the merit required for their positions. A deeper understanding is needed of the ways in which policies that are intended to increase women's representation in the workplace can shape attitudes towards female colleagues and, by extension, their safety in the workplace, as this understanding can inform policies to mitigate against these possible unintended effects.

All researchers have stressed the need to implement existing laws that criminalise GBV, and to amend them where necessary to cover neglected issues (such as cyber-violence or, in one case, sexual assault). Most fundamentally, every study recommends investment in education about gender equality: in workplaces, in schools and in wider society. This investment could take the form of specific workplace training for formal-sector staff in hospitals, technology companies or councils and in parliaments. It could also mean strengthening community-based organisations that work on GBV prevention and attention, particularly as many of these have been badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has prevented them from organising effectively, as identified in the [study on artisanal mining in Zimbabwe](#). Such trainings could also form a component of wider educational programmes for disadvantaged workers in the informal sector.

## Looking ahead

The studies all highlight the need for more communication and sensitisation on issues related to gender-based violence in the workplace worldwide. This includes the need to rally local decision-makers to support strategies for change and to call out abuses, and to work with industry leaders and trade unions (where they exist) to better understand experiences of violence and stand up for the changes that are urgently needed. Further research to understand and document these abuses, which currently receive little exposure or attention, is essential to identify further areas for action and advocacy. At the same time, greater funds for advocacy and outreach around workplace violence are critical to ensure that research findings are translated into action.

This research has stimulated new interest in workplace violence from our contracted scholars as well as greatly deepening existing knowledge. The shocking extent of violence revealed by these research projects has encouraged partners to accelerate their action in this area. ALiGN's work on GBV will continue to contribute to cutting-edge research and knowledge sharing on this issue.