

# BRIEFING 7

## Covid-19

Taking action to end violence and harassment in the world of work requires a good understanding of the most important issues for transport workers, particularly for women transport workers.

This transport specific toolkit on C190 – the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) violence and harassment convention – consists of eight briefings which focus on aspects of violence and harassment that affect transport workers most significantly.

The briefings are available as separate documents, so that unions, officials, activists and members can focus on the issue or issues most important to them. Briefings can be hand-picked or the toolkit can be used in its entirety.

You are commencing **Briefing 7: Covid-19.**

### Understanding the issues

The Covid-19 pandemic is intensifying inequalities and exposing transport workers to an increased risk of violence and harassment.

There has been an alarming rise in reports of violence and harassment. More transport workers are facing economic insecurity and psychosocial risks because of changes at work. This is increasing their exposure to violence and harassment at work.

Domestic violence, which has been shown to be a workplace issue (see C190 briefing 3), surged alarmingly. For example, in France, cases of domestic violence have increased by 30% since the pandemic lockdown began. In Argentina, emergency calls relating to domestic violence increased by 25%. Domestic violence is now being referred to as the ‘shadow pandemic’. The UN estimates that globally, 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the last 12 months.<sup>66</sup>

Covid-19 is also creating new barriers for campaigning. With many countries still in lockdown or observing social distancing restrictions, unions must find creative ways to campaign for C190.

C190 is crucial for protecting workers against violence and harassment during this crisis and in recovery.

**C190 applies to all sectors – private and public, informal and formal economy, urban and rural areas. It recognises that informal workers have the right to be protected.**

Covid-19 is devastating the livelihoods of many informal transport workers. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that the first month of the crisis resulted in a 60% decline in the earnings of informal workers. In Africa and Latin America, the estimate was as high as 81%.<sup>67</sup>

Without access to social protection many workers are being forced to work in dangerous conditions or risk losing their livelihoods. The public transport industry, in many places almost entirely informal, has been hit particularly hard. Where governments have been unable to provide support, the industry faces financial ruin, with workers driven into poverty.

***“To die from hunger or from the virus is the all-too-real dilemma faced by many informal economy workers.” – ILO, 2020<sup>68</sup>***

Informal transport workers are facing increased violence and harassment, from third parties and from public authorities using violence to impose lockdowns, curfews, and social distancing. Women have suffered a disproportionate loss of livelihoods and are being forced into even more precarious work, whilst also having to bear additional burdens of unpaid and unequal caring responsibilities.

*“Informal workers are more scared of dying of hunger than they are of catching the disease. Women have the additional job of bringing food to the table and they eat last, after their husband and children. When food is scarce, maybe they don’t eat at all.” – Woman advocate, Nepal Yatayat Mazdoor Sangh union (NETWON) <sup>69</sup>*

**C190 protects all individuals in the world of work, irrespective of contractual status, including those whose employment has been terminated, and those belonging to vulnerable groups. It recognises that some sectors, occupations, and work arrangements increase the likelihood of exposure to violence and harassment and that governments and employers should take appropriate, targeted measures to protect them.**

Many workers have lost their jobs. Those working in cruise ships and civil aviation have been particularly impacted. Women are overrepresented in sectors and occupations hardest hit by the pandemic; work already characterised by low pay, poor working conditions and limited social protection including paid sick and family leave. Economic insecurity puts women at greater risk of sexual exploitation.

It is estimated that in all sectors of the global economy the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost in 2020 because of the pandemic, with women’s employment at more risk than men.<sup>70</sup>

**C190 recognises domestic violence as a workplace issue. Employers, governments, and unions should work together to mitigate the impacts of domestic violence in the world of work.**

The isolation measures brought in to control the pandemic – already established tactics for abusers – are increasing the prevalence of domestic violence. Lockdown measures have left many a survivor isolated in their home with their abuser. The move to remote working for many workers also means that survivors are unable to escape violence even temporarily. For many, the workplace has long been a safe escape from abuse at home.

As unemployment and insecurity increase, violence and harassment will continue to escalate and put a strain on support services. Job losses will make it harder for women to escape abusive situations.

During the pandemic, women from the Maharashtra State Transport Kamgar Sanghatana (MSTKS) union, India have been using their well-established digital activism to organise and mobilise thousands of women workers. They have been using the WhatsApp platform for their union meetings and to provide support for those affected by domestic violence during the pandemic.<sup>71</sup>

**C190 covers the world of work, not just the traditional workplace. This includes the commute to and from work, employer-provided accommodation, sanitation, and work-related communications. C190 helps to tackle violence and harassment beyond the physical workplace.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed how and where many people work. Job cuts and border closures left millions of workers isolated or stranded in their workplace. For example, at the height of the pandemic, in September 2020, 400,000 seafarers, including many women, who finished their contracts were unable to leave their ships due to government restrictions.

Many of the already limited sanitation facilities available to transport workers, such as public toilets and restaurant bathrooms, have been closed due to Covid-19 restrictions. There have been reports of drivers being on the road for many hours with no access to toilets or washing facilities. Some women seafarers have had no sanitary products while being stranded in a foreign country under lockdown. The pandemic has highlighted transport workers’ need for proper access to sanitation facilities and health and safety provisions.

Some transport workers have moved to remote working during the pandemic. The shift to online working comes with a different form of violence and harassment, particularly cyber bullying. For example, in Australia, reports of online abuse and bullying have increased by 50% since social distancing began.<sup>72</sup> Those with limited digital skills and access, particularly women, are facing a ‘digital divide’. Studies suggest that women are at a disadvantage in the changing digital economy, with 250 million fewer women online than men. This inequality is largely due to the educational disadvantage that women face, as well as bias and inequality in digital management systems. Women working in the digital economy are exposed to a greater risk of online violence.<sup>73</sup>

C190 recognises that addressing violence and harassment requires governments, employers, and workers to address psychosocial risks as occupational safety and health (OSH) risks. C190 calls for violence and harassment to be integrated into national OSH policies, and into workplace policies and OSH measures.

Increased economic insecurity and reduced or cut-off support services have left women at greater risk of violence and harassment. In transport, women are overrepresented in public-facing roles, meaning that they have been concentrated on the frontlines of the pandemic with a higher risk of infection. Economic necessity has forced many to continue working despite the risk of infection for them and their families. Some employers have been slow to implement hygiene and protective measures. Thousands of workers across the world have died from Covid-19, and thousands more have been infected with the disease.

*“We are lacking PPE kits and fear carrying the virus home, so we try to keep our children away from us. Even with these challenges, we feel proud to play an important role maintaining cleanliness for everyone.”  
– Railway worker, India<sup>74</sup>*

**C190 acknowledges that an “inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach which tackles underlying causes and risk factors, including gender stereotypes, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and unequal gender-based power relations” is essential to ending violence and harassment in the world of work.**

Covid-19 has exacerbated harmful gender inequalities.

The pandemic is pushing more women into poverty. UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated that by 2021 around 435 million women and girls would be living on less than \$1.90 a day — 47 million of which was a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>75</sup>

Beyond this, for many women the pandemic has also increased ‘time poverty’. Before Covid-19, women spent on average 19% of their time daily on unpaid care work, compared with 8% for men.<sup>76</sup> The pandemic has exacerbated the already unequal share of unpaid care work faced by women at home, alongside increased pressure at work.

Responses to disease outbreaks have historically not addressed gendered impacts, and the response to Covid-19 seems no different. The shift of funds towards a largely gender-blind pandemic response is limiting women’s access to support, and sexual and reproductive health services. Many equality initiatives have also been put aside to divert resources to the pandemic response. The impact of the pandemic will have far-reaching consequences for the global economy and for women’s equality, with concerns that it could set gender equality back decades. There is a need to recognise how disease outbreaks differently affect women and men. Authorities need to address this with equitable interventions.<sup>77</sup>

Some workers who face intersecting forms of discrimination are being disproportionately affected, facing an increased risk of infection as well as violence and harassment on the job. For example, in the UK it was found that black women are 4.3 times more likely than white women to die from Covid-19.<sup>78</sup> One fatal example happened in the UK when a black woman railway worker died after being spat on at work by a man who said he had the virus.

As the world rebuilds after Covid-19, it is likely that workers will experience increased privatisation, digitalisation and cost-cutting. Women will be the worst affected. But most countries are not releasing regular gender-disaggregated data on the impact of the crisis on women. Women are typically underrepresented in decision-making bodies created to respond to the pandemic. A 2020 study found that of 115 dedicated Covid-19 taskforces in 87 countries, 85.2% were made up of mainly men, and only 3.5% had gender parity.<sup>79</sup>

To promote a more equal and safe working environment for all workers, any recovery plan must be **inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive**. It must take a holistic approach, have a broad scope of protection, include action at different levels and with different stakeholders, and address underlying causes and risk factors. C190 includes specific measures to address violence and harassment within this approach.

## Union Action for a #GenderEqualNewNormal

After the pandemic, we cannot go back to 'normal'. For women transport workers, 'normal' means being overrepresented in precarious employment without social protection, underrepresented in leadership and decision-making, facing violence at work and home, and having inadequate access to sanitation. The crisis provides an opportunity to create a '**gender equal new normal**'.

The ITF has identified key demands for unions to make to employers, governments, and investors for women transport workers in the Covid-19 response and recovery. These demands include:

- 1. Women on all decision-making bodies**
- 2. Income and social protection**
- 3. Access to sanitation and appropriate PPE**
- 4. Secure work**
- 5. Care before profit**
- 6. End violence and harassment against women**
- 7. New technology to benefit women workers**
- 8. Gender impact assessments**
- 9. Gender-responsive economic stimulus**

Demands specific to violence and harassment against women workers<sup>80</sup> include:

- Safe commuting measures
- Safety measures and reporting protocols for workers and passengers
- Ratifying and implementing C190
- Declaring gender-based violence related services essential services
- Ensuring coordinated responses between health authorities, police, courts and social services
- Awareness raising campaigns to address gender-based violence, including myths, stigma and underreporting
- Providing information about support services
- Increasing financial support to shelters, hotlines, and counselling services to meet increased demand
- Increasing availability of alternative accommodation to avoid confinement with abusers
- Implementing accessible systems to alert authorities and protect survivors

# ACTIVITY TO ENCOURAGE UNION ACTION

## Facilitator notes

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### Aim

The aim of this activity is to encourage participants to consider how ITF demands can be incorporated in their collective bargaining agenda to build a #GenderEqualNewNormal.

### Tasks

Organise participants into small groups. Ask them to read the 'ITF demands for a Gender Equal New Normal(Covid 19 Women's statement)'.<sup>181</sup> Then, using the questions for guidance, ask each group to consider how to integrate the demands specific to addressing violence and harassment against women workers into the union bargaining agenda with stakeholders at different levels. Ask participants to feedback to the group in a plenary discussion.

For more information see the 'Joint Global Union Toolkit':

- For further information about concrete action points that unions can take see: **Section 2.**

## Activity

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### Aim

This activity will encourage us to consider how we can take action to build a 'gender equal new normal.'

### Tasks

In small groups, discuss the questions below and consider how to integrate the demands specific to addressing violence and harassment against women workers into negotiations with key stakeholders at different levels – i.e., **employers, governments, and investors.**

- Why are these demands important?
- How does each demand link to C190?
- What arguments and/or evidence can we use to highlight the importance of addressing these demands?
- What measures could we ask stakeholders to develop to address these demands?
- How can we build a strong campaign, alliances, and visibility around these demands?
- Are there any other out of the eight demands that you want to take into consideration, and how it links with C190?

### Useful resources

- [Women Transport Workers' Rights and Covid-19, ITF](#)
- [Covid-19 and Women's Advocacy – podcast, ITF](#)
- [Domestic Violence and Covid-19 – podcast, ITF](#)