



Safe Accommodation for Women Workers

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Query: What is the evidence on international best practice on how to design and manage safe accommodation for housing women workers?

1. Overview

This query sets out a summary of evidence of good practice and internationally recognised guidance on ensuring safe accommodation for women workers. It covers the physical design of accommodation as well as good practice on accommodation management measures and approaches. The focus of this query is on what additional actions can be taken to ensure *female* worker safety; it is intended to build on more general best practice and international standards for worker accommodation set out by the ILO Workers Housing Recommendation 115 and others¹.

Key Findings

Overall, the evidence base on international best practice on how to design and manage safe accommodation for women workers is 'limited', using the categorisation set out in DFID's (2014) How to Note on Assessing the Strength of Evidence, i.e. moderate to low quality studies, medium size evidence body, low levels of consistency. Of particular reference is the IFC/EBRD (2009) guidance note on *Workers' Accommodation: Processes and Standards*. However, the guidance is not particularly gender-inclusive or detailed on how to prevent and respond to harassment or abuse.

There is particularly limited data on the following areas:

- **Rigorous evidence on 'best' practice** – Although there are some documented examples of innovative or interesting approaches to designing or managing safe accommodation for women workers, these have not been evaluated and there is little evidence available on impact. For the purpose of this query, these examples are therefore referred to as 'promising practice'.
- **Limited data on how to ensure accommodation is safe for the most vulnerable and marginalised groups**, such as new migrant workers, adolescent girls or young women. No information was available about how to design and manage accommodation for women workers that is disability-inclusive.
- **Harassment and abuse of male workers.** This query focuses on female workers, but it should also be noted that male workers can also be vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse, as well as homophobic or transphobic violence, exacerbated by all-male living environments, and this tends to be underreported.

¹ IHRB, 2019 <https://www.ihrb.org/focus-areas/built-environment/briefing-migrant-worker-accommodation>

While the evidence on international best practice is limited, the review highlights some promising practice from which important lessons and practical guidance for programming can be drawn. For the **design of worker accommodation**, key considerations for ensuring women's safety include the following:

- An **impact assessment specific to the workers' accommodation** should be undertaken to inform siting decisions and to optimise the design of dormitories. The assessment should identify risks and mitigation for women workers as well as women in the community and should include participatory approaches to data collection. The impact assessment findings should form part of the tender documentation and the responsibility to manage and mitigate risks passed down to the contract manager.
- Many women workers face gender based violence (GBV) and **harassment on public transport and walking to and from transport hubs**, on their way to and from their workplace. Where possible, living facilities should be located within a reasonable distance from the worksite, and transport and access routes from the living facilities to worksite should be safe and free.
- Construction of infrastructure projects, including **building accommodation for workers, presents a high-risk environment** for sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) both for any women construction workers as well as local communities. **Contractors should have capacity and systems in place** to avoid, mitigate and manage these risks e.g. provisions for reporting and responding to complaints of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, and whistle-blower protections.
- **Safe, secure and separate toilet/sanitary facilities and sleeping areas** for men and women can help prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG). Further measures can be taken to prevent physical abuse between female workers such as **avoiding overcrowding, lack of privacy and stress-inducing conditions** – see the EBRD/IFC minimum requirements for dorm room specifications.

Key lessons emerging for the **management of worker accommodation** include:

- **Regular monitoring** including spot-checks, inspections and independent audits are required to ensure agreed design specifications and standards are being implemented in practice.
- **Accessible and confidential reporting, referral and grievance redress mechanisms** must be in place, for both the workers and members of the community. A clear investigation process should be in place and should prioritise the safety and well-being of the complainant.
- While security services or staff can help ensure workers' safety in dormitories, they also present a risk given their relative position of power. **How security companies and guards are selected, trained, managed and monitored is critical** for preventing VAWG.
- Dormitories could offer measures to support and protect women who are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation such as **adolescent girls, new migrants and temporary contract workers**.

For both design and management of accommodation, the evidence suggests that inclusive consultation and engagement with representative groups could support VAWG prevention and response. Participatory methods could help optimise the design of dormitories to prevent and mitigate SEAH, while supporting engagement of representative groups around management of dormitories could also help prevent, mitigate and manage violence. However, the evidence on how to engage representative groups for this purpose is limited.

2. Methodology and evidence base

This query is based on a combination of literature review and consultations with key experts to share examples of good/poor practice and key evidence (see Section 5 for list of experts consulted). The desk review prioritised existing syntheses where possible in order to draw on the fullest range of evidence possible, given time constraints.

Search strategy: Studies were identified through searches using Google and relevant electronic databases (PubMed, Science Direct, and Google Scholar) for priority sources. Key search terms included: accommodation, dormitories, housing, camps, workplace, workers AND violence, abuse, harassment, exploitation AND women, female.

Criteria for inclusion: To be eligible for inclusion in this rapid mapping, evidence had to fulfil the following criteria:

- **Focus:** Research, evaluations and studies of safe accommodation for workers (focused on women workers and dormitory-style accommodation, although research on privately owned and rental accommodation for migrant workers was also briefly reviewed for any relevant lessons (e.g. Tguyen et al, 2016 from Vietnam).
- **Time period:** 2000 – March 2019.
- **Language:** English.
- **Publication status:** publicly available – in almost all cases published online.
- **Geographical focus:** low and middle-income countries but opened up to high-income countries in areas where evidence was lacking.

The consultations with key experts were used to gather additional anecdotal evidence, to triangulate findings from the desk review and to help address gaps. Experts were chosen based on their experience designing, delivering and auditing large scale urban infrastructure projects, often involving lengthy construction and operation phases, worker camps and extensive risk management requirements. The experts covered both commercial and developmental projects, experience in lower income and emerging economies, and included perspectives from both INGO and private sector managed projects. A list of the organisations and experts consulted is provided in the Bibliography.

3. Designing safe accommodation for housing women workers

Decisions on the design and siting of worker accommodation should be informed by an assessment of the likely impacts to workers and surrounding communities. This may be relevant both to the construction phase of the camp (or other accommodation) and during its operation. The arrival of workforces can disrupt the power dynamics in the surrounding communities and within households, as women in the community come into contact with mobile or temporary workmen in a variety of ways (DFID, 2019). Depending on the scale of the workforce and the absorptive capacity of the community, this can trigger unintended consequences such as violence and harassment against female workers in retaliation.

The EBRD/IFC 2009 guidance emphasises that *“risk identification and assessments specific to the workers’ accommodation should be undertaken as part of the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) and any related development of an Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP)”*. The impact assessment can also be used to determine whether contact between non-local

workforce and local communities should be encouraged or minimised and ensure the design and siting of accommodation takes this contextual information into account².

It is also crucial that workers that will use the facilities are consulted on the design of the housing to ensure it meets their requirements including in relation to safety (IHRB, 2019). While this issue has not been explored substantially in the literature for women's housing, it is something that is likely to be highly relevant when it comes to women's safety when accommodated in dormitories.

Women workers are at high risk of violence and harassment travelling to and from accommodation³, particularly in the dark if working long and unpredictable hours. Shift workers can be particularly at risk as they often travel at anti-social hours. While there are no statistics on the scale of violence and harassment, many women workers face GBV and harassment on public transport and walking to and from transport hubs, on their way to and from their workplace and there have been a number of high profile cases, including from Ethiopia.⁴ Official guidance by IFC/EBRD (2009) recommends that where possible, living facilities are located within a reasonable distance from the worksite, and that transport from the living facilities to the worksite is safe and free. Ensuring the project site has properly planned access routes (e.g. pedestrianised) with adequate lighting can increase safety for women, from both road accidents and VAWG.

Promising practice: Free shuttle buses and reducing long working hours at Deuter, Vietnam

Fair Wear Foundation outdoor and sportswear member brand Deuter helped reduce safety risks for women working late into the night by reducing unpredictable and long working hours at its suppliers in Vietnam. Deuter also provided a free shuttle service from company accommodation to the factory, which positively impacted the retention of workers (Morris and Pillinger, 2019).

Safeguarding risks associated with construction of dormitories. Construction of infrastructure projects, including building accommodation for workers, presents a high-risk environment for sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment both for any women construction workers as well as local communities (DFID, 2019). An influx of predominantly male workers can expose women and girls living in the community to risks of sexual exploitation and violence, and the increased use of drugs and alcohol often associated with a mobile and temporary construction workforce can further exacerbate the risk of violence (Fraser et al, 2017). Contractors should have anti-sexual harassment policies, provisions for reporting and responding to complaints of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, and whistleblower protections (World Bank, 2017a).

Promising practice: DFID's new Safeguarding Tool for Infrastructure Projects

DFID has designed a new safeguarding tool to help advisers tackle sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) within infrastructure projects. The tool sets out priority risks of SEAH across each of the eight stages of the infrastructure project cycle, from inception through procurement, to construction and delivery of services. It aims to help DFID staff identify and manage SEAH risks as early as possible, including understanding what actions they can take themselves and require of partners to avoid, mitigate and manage these risks (DFID, forthcoming)

² The ESIA is about understanding the risks on the ground relating to the physical construction and operation of a project and findings feed into the Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP). The ESMP is the critical tool for managing and monitoring these risks and impacts, positive and negative. It forms part of the tender documentation and so the selected supplier/implementing partner is then bound to deliver on the requirements set out through their ESMP. It is therefore critical that the ESIA considers the full scope of opportunities and risks relating to women's safety.

³ Factory gates are common place for abuse and mobbing is frequently seen at these points, since they are seen as 'just outside' the jurisdiction of the management company

⁴ Davison, W. (2015) "Ethiopia's women vow to turn tide of violence, rape and murder", *The Guardian*, 27 January 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/27/ethiopia-women-violence-rape-murder>

Separate sleeping areas for men and women (except in family accommodation), with lockable doors and windows are important standards (IFC/EBRD, 2009). It is also crucial that separate beds are provided for each worker and sleeping areas arranged by shifts so that that workers on day and night shifts do not share a room (ILO, 2009)⁵.

Sanitary and toilet facilities located within the same buildings, which are not shared between men and women (except in family accommodation), are important safety considerations. The ILO (2009) notes that sanitary facilities should include a minimum of one toilet, one wash basin and one tub or shower for every six persons, at a convenient location which prevents stress-inducing conditions. There should be separate sanitary facilities provided for men and for women. Toilets, showers and bathrooms should be kept in good working condition and cleaned frequently, and appropriate cleaning staff should be recruited (IFC/EBRD, 2009)⁶. An undercover investigation at a dormitory complex in Shanghai by China Labour Watch found only one working toilet for every 40 workers (cited in Knowles, 2016).

Measures should be put in place to avoid overcrowding, lack of privacy and ‘stress-inducing’ conditions, which can trigger verbal abuse and physical violence, as noted in DFID’s briefing paper on VAWG, Infrastructure and Cities (Fraser et al, 2017). Ethnographic research in a Chinese dormitory in Southern China reported fierce physical fights between women workers: “These women were forced to live in an inhuman, harsh and intolerable environment. No one knew how long they could stand it. Suspicion, quarrelling, and even fighting were ways of releasing grievances, especially those suppressed for a long time” (Ngai, 2004: 158).

Companies often provide **guidance on maximum number of occupants per room** to avoid overcrowding – with standards ranging from 2 to 8 workers per room. Other standards to provide privacy and relieve overcrowding noted in the IFC/EBRD (2009) guidance include:

- Density standards are expressed either in terms of minimal volume per resident or of minimal floor space. Usual standards range from 10 to 12.5 cubic metres (volume) or 4 to 5.5 square metres (surface).
- A minimum ceiling height of 2.10 metres is provided.
- In collective rooms, which are minimised, in order to provide workers with some privacy, only a reasonable number of workers are allowed to share the same room. Standards range from 2 to 8 workers.
- There should be mobile partitions or curtains to ensure privacy.
- Every resident is provided with adequate furniture such as a table, a chair, a mirror and a bedside light.

4. Managing safe accommodation for housing women workers

Inspections and independent audits of safety & welfare arrangements in the dormitories are needed to ensure agreed standards around maximum numbers of employees per room are enforced in practice. For example, reports from an abandoned factory dormitory for Apple employees in Shanghai, China found rooms containing up to 12 bunk beds, despite Apple rules stating that no more than eight workers should share a room: “Even when stripped of personal

⁵ In many cases, day and night shift workers have been forced to share a room and swap beds as they swap shifts. This should be prohibited (consultation with Fair wear Foundation)

⁶ Note, that cleaning staff themselves can often be at greater risk from VAWG especially if they are from the surrounding communities, with protected characteristics (single mothers, people living with disabilities) and/or new to the workforce. These risks should be identified through the upfront impact assessment (ESIA) and should inform the employment of appropriate staff.

belongings, there is barely space for anything in the rooms other than the beds and the workers' metal lockers" (Knowles, 2016).

Promising practice: Regular government inspections for Jordan's dormitories

In 2016, an agreement⁷ was signed enabling government officials to inspect dormitories for Jordan's garment migrant workers, who mostly originate from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India. The agreement was partly in response to growing concerns about conditions in the dormitories, including a human trafficking case against two factories for seizure of passports, failure to pay salaries, and overcrowded living quarters. 75 inspectors were trained to conduct professional inspection reports in the dormitories and highlight any violations of living conditions, as well as respond to housing claims lodged through the labour ministry hotline. The agreement was welcomed by Better Work (a joint initiative of the ILO and International Finance Corporation) as a 'milestone' for tens of thousands of female garment workers in Jordan. During the first year of operation, the Department of Labour has noted that the number of complaints received about dormitories has 'dropped dramatically'. However, there is no rigorous evidence publically available on the programme's effectiveness to date.

(Better Work, 2016; Reznick, 2018).

Ensure women have a choice whether to stay at the dormitories or not, if feasible and appropriate. Employers should make sure that women workers are informed of accommodation conditions and transport options to and from the workplace before moving (BSR, 2010) and that they are free to move outside of the provided accommodation and the workplace in their free time.

Ensure reporting, referral and grievance mechanisms are in place to strengthen duty of care in dormitories. Reporting mechanisms should allow workers and local community members to report incidences of violence or harassment without fear of reprisal. These incidences should be fully investigated and disciplinary or punitive action taken, where appropriate (Fraser et al, 2017; USAID, 2015). Online platforms are increasingly being used (see example of DormWatch app below), but it is important to ensure the tools are accessible and confidential (e.g. equipped with strong encryption for secure communications, and users trained in digital security/privacy) (USAID, 2015).

Promising practice: DormWatch app, Singapore

In September 2018, the Singapore Manpower Ministry (MOM) introduced a new app, '[Dormwatch](#)', for foreign workers to report poor living conditions in dormitories. Workers can report incidents, upload photos and alert MOM of any problems with dormitory operators. The MOM can also communicate directly with foreign workers through the app. Although the app mainly focuses on reporting overcrowding, safety and hygiene levels, it provides potential for reporting other concerns (Bei Yi, 2018).

Security services or staff can help ensure workers' safety in dormitories, but it is important to assess and mitigate the safeguarding risks of such arrangements for women workers. For example, research from South India found that young migrant adolescent girls are vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse from security guards in dormitories owned or leased by garment factories. The workers often feel unable to complain for fear they will lose their accommodation and jobs (Morris and Pillinger, 2019). The box below provides guidance on how to ensure the implementing partner responsible for managing dormitories has strong institutional safeguards in place, particularly for staff recruitment, induction and training⁸.

⁷ Between Jordan's Ministries of Health and Labour, the Jordan Garments, Accessories and Textiles Exporters' Association and the General Trade Union of Workers in Textile, Garment and Clothing

⁸ [Refer to World Bank E&S Framework ESS4 part B on Security Personnel for further detail on how risks should be managed](#)

Security of worker's accommodation (IFC/EBRD Guidance)

Particular attention should be paid to the safety and security of women workers

1. A security plan including clear measures to protect workers against theft and attack is implemented.
2. A security plan including clear policies on the use of force has been carefully designed and is implemented.
3. Security staff have been checked to ensure that they have not been implicated in any previous crimes or abuses. Where appropriate, security staff from both genders are recruited.
4. Security staff have a clear mandate and have received clear instruction about their duties and responsibilities, in particular their duties not to harass, intimidate, discipline or discriminate against workers.
5. Security staff have received adequate training in dealing with domestic violence and the use of force.
6. Security staff have a good understanding about the importance of respecting workers' rights and the rights of the communities.
7. Body searches are only allowed in specific circumstances and are performed by specially trained security staff using the least-intrusive means possible. Pat down searches on female workers can only be performed by female security staff.
8. Security staff adopt an appropriate conduct towards workers and communities.
9. Workers and members of the surrounding communities have specific means to raise concerns about security arrangement and staff.

(IFC/EBRD, 2009: 20)

Dormitories could also consider providing support to women who are particularly vulnerable to abuse and harassment, such as new migrants and adolescent girls. Several studies have highlighted that young migrant workers are often isolated and vulnerable to exploitation and harassment. For example, research in garment factory hostels in Bangalore, India found evidence of five out of the eleven ILO indicators for forced labour: abuse of vulnerability, deception as a result of false promises (wages etc.), restriction of movement in the hostel, intimidation and threats, and abusive working and living conditions. Although local workers also experienced some of these conditions, they were more strongly experienced by migrant workers (Ray and Peepercamp, 2018). An example of promising practice in supporting young women migrants is transitional dormitories (see example from Bangladesh below).

Promising practice: NARI dormitories and training centres, Bangladesh

The NARI⁹ project (*nari* means women in Bangla) provides transitional accommodation, training, counselling and job placement services in dormitories and training centres (DTCs) to vulnerable young women workers recruited from remote areas of northern Bangladesh. The \$30 million World Bank-funded project (2011-2018) has three DTCs near the Export Processing Zones in Dhaka, Karnaphuli and Ishwardi.

In the DTCs, young women receive 4 months of transitional housing facilities with free food and security provisions, and 2.5 months training in life skills and cutting/sewing/quality control for garments. During this time, the project aims to give time to build young women's support networks and help them to learn how to adjust to life outside their homes and villages. They also learn about their rights as workers, what sexual harassment is, and how and where to report it.

⁹ NARI is also short for Bangladesh Northern Areas Reduction of Poverty Initiative

After considerable delays, the training programme started in August 2016. 8,030 women have been trained as of October 2018, with all trainees being offered employment through the job placement services. 5,025 women accepted jobs, with the rest returning homes and starting new businesses. The programme drop-out rate is 7%.

Final results from a rigorous impact assessment will be available in early-mid 2019. No data is publicly available on design/maintenance of the dormitories and training centres.

Sources: World Bank (2017b, 2018); Moyeen (2018)

Women’s vulnerability to abuse and exploitation, as well as their reluctance to report incidents, is exacerbated by temporary employment contracts.¹⁰ For example, qualitative research in an electronics factory in Guangdong in South China highlighted how women workers’ ability to fundamentally challenge the conditions of dormitory living is limited by the temporary nature of their employment contracts and their disempowered status as temporary urban residents. The Chinese dormitory labour system is characterised by short-tenure migrant labour within the factory compound (or close by), with young rural migrant women working in export-oriented industries – often without family or local connections, prevented from leaving and locked in at night (Ngai, 2009).

Support Freedom of Association for workers (core ILO standard), and engagement with worker representatives around the management of dormitories. There are various examples of collective action around workplace violence and harassment by employee representatives and trade unions, either at a sector level or company/workplace level, for example around training on SEAH, administering complaints procedures, and running self-defence courses for women (Taylor, 2015; Fraser and Mohan, 2016). Although not as well documented, there are a few examples of collective action around improving safety for women workers in dormitories (see box below from Jordan) but to date there is no publically available evidence on best practice in engaging with worker representatives on how to design and manage safe accommodation for women workers.

Promising practice: Garment Workers Union in Jordan

In Jordan, the General Trade Union of Workers in Textile, Garment and Clothing Industries represents all 75,000 textile workers, including migrant workers who make up 71% of the country’s garment factory workforce. Migrant workers are housed in employer-owned dormitories, which often do not meet the Ministry of Health’s safety and health standards, including overcrowding and harassment. The union helps workers who have experienced verbal or physical abuse, have had their passports confiscated, or need other assistance. It also helps raise workers’ awareness of their legal rights. In addition, textile workers receive trainings on combating labour trafficking and exploitation¹¹. However, programmes and dormitory management should be sensitive to power dynamics within trade unions, for example the leadership of the garment workers union is Jordanian-only, with little participation from more marginalised migrant voices such as recent Syrian refugee workers (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2018).

There could be potential to increase safety for women workers through workplace prevention initiatives that use a ‘whole company approach’, including for example gender-transformative training for middle-management and workers; workplace-wide campaigns; and wider community campaigns. Workplaces in general can provide a unique setting to address norms around gender and violence at scale, in a setting where individuals often spend large periods of times together (Fraser and Mohun, 2016). To date, these programmes have not yet included a focus on GBV in workers’

¹⁰ Temporary contracts create inbuilt insecurity for women workers; ideally contracts should last between 2-3years (consultation with Fair wear Foundation)

¹¹ Based on information from the Solidarity Center: <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/i-was-a-garment-worker-and-i-know-exploitation/>

accommodation, although there is potential to build in a focus on prevention of violence and harassment in dormitories. Programmes that have used a ‘whole company approach’ with internal champions and links to the wider community to shift social norms around GBV are relatively new but are showing promising results. For example, an impact evaluation of the workplace intervention ‘Namagaagi Naave’ (‘It’s our life, it’s our responsibility’) implemented in two garment factories in Bengaluru, India found that intervention group survey respondents expressed greater gender-equitable attitudes, were less likely to report that intimate partner violence (IPV) is acceptable against a wife or husband, and more knowledgeable of IPV support services (Krishnan et al, 2016). In China, an evaluation of a gender-transformative training programme with male factory workers in a large, multinational consumer electronics and home appliances company found that workers reported significant decreases in violence towards their female partners¹² (Pulerwitz et al, 2015). See also an example of a DFID-funded workplace intervention in Bangladesh which, though not specifically focused on dormitories, could offer relevant approaches for wider application.

Promising Practice: HERrespect workplace intervention, Bangladesh

DFID is currently funding an innovative project under the *What Works to Prevent VAWG* flagship global research programme aimed at reducing violence against female garment workers in and Dhaka, Bangladesh. The project trained male and female workers to be peer educators and advocates who challenge social norms that support violence. The peer educators engage the rest of the workplace and wider community through sessions organised in workers’ cafes. The project also engaged in factor-wide and community-based campaigns, as well as awareness raising among top management.

¹² For example, the proportion of workers who reported perpetration of emotional violence against their partners in the past three months decreased from 12% to 2% (no significant change was found for physical violence)

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