



## Legal Reforms to Protect Women at Home and at Work in São Tomé and Príncipe

Natália Mazoni Silva Martins and Claudia Lenny Corminales

This Brief examines the introduction of landmark reforms in São Tomé and Príncipe to counter domestic and family violence and to protect women, both at home and at work. The enactment of laws on domestic and family violence, and the subsequent introduction of the country's new Penal Code and, more recently, the Labor Code, were each made possible due to a combination of factors. Women's active participation in public life, multistakeholder coalitions, and awareness-raising campaigns advanced the reform agenda. The lessons learned from this process can provide insights to international organizations, advocates, and policymakers on the necessary elements to carry out meaningful reforms for gender equality.

### Ensuring women's rights in the home and beyond

When a story burst into the news in São Tomé and Príncipe in 2007 about a woman whose husband had cut her arm off in a domestic dispute, citizens of this small island state off the western coast of Central Africa were horrified. Appalled by the case, Dr. Maria das Neves Ceita Baptista de Sousa, who had served as the country's first woman Prime Minister (2002–04) and was at the time a member of the Parliamentary Commission for Human Rights, Gender and Citizenship, knew that something needed to be done. She gathered her colleagues from Parliament and visited the woman at the hospital. There she realized that several other women had been recently admitted to the facility in a similar—if not worse—condition after experiencing domestic violence.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the severity of the violence, seeking legal protection was not an option for those women. Cases of domestic violence were treated as simple assault and battery. This means that the crime of domestic violence was not defined or codified in the country's legislation, and victims could not seek redress for such cases by, for example, obtaining protection orders against their attackers. This lack of protection left women more vulnerable. das Neves' visit to the hospital led to her spearheading a fierce fight to enact important laws in 2008 that would finally codify domestic violence into Santomean legislation and provide some form of protection for women in the archipelago.

This Brief focuses on the reform process to enact Laws No. 11/2008 and No. 12/2008 on domestic and family violence in São

Tomé and Príncipe. Three main factors enabled this domestic violence legislation to be enacted and implemented. First, a strong women's movement, dating back to the 1960s, mobilized and sensitized society and policymakers alike. Second, a strategic collaboration between the government, civil society organizations (CSOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the international community provided both technical and financial support for reform efforts. Finally, grassroots awareness-raising campaigns encouraged the population to understand their rights under the law and call for their effective implementation.

The Brief also discusses additional steps taken after the passage of the domestic violence legislation to ensure women's safety beyond the home. The country enacted a new Penal Code in 2012, which codified the crime of domestic violence for the first time, and a Labor Code in 2019, which enhanced protections for women against sexual harassment in employment. Insights from these initiatives are equally important.

### Five decades of legal reforms in São Tomé and Príncipe

The period after São Tomé and Príncipe's independence from Portugal offered a valuable opportunity to enact new legislation in line with the fundamental human rights and respect for the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (UN 2016). The enactment of the Family Code in 1977, for example, granted women equal rights to property and inheritance; the ability

**Affiliations:** World Bank, Development Economics, Women, Business and the Law. For correspondence: [nmazoni@worldbank.org](mailto:nmazoni@worldbank.org); [ccorminales@worldbank.org](mailto:ccorminales@worldbank.org)  
**Acknowledgements:** This brief is a part of a series focusing on reforms in seven economies, as documented by the Women, Business and the Law (WBL) team. Previous Briefs include case studies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, South Africa, and Togo. Support for the series is provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. This Brief would not be possible without the generous and expert contributions of Marina Costa Cabral, Ana Maria Carvalho, João Pedro Cravid, Cristina Dias, Esther Dias, Celiza de Deus Lima, Ernestina Meneses Neves, Jessica Neves, Virna Neves, Jair Pimentel, Lurdes Maria Viegas dos Santos, Dr. Maria das Neves Ceita Baptista de Sousa, and the LexisNexis Rule of Law Foundation. The team is grateful for the valuable support provided by World Bank colleagues Flavia Carbonari, Ana Maria Carvalho, Camilla Gandini, Annia Sousa Medeiros da Graça, Elizabeth Susan Graybill, and Sandro Dalva Trigueiros. The team would also like to thank Norman Loayza, Tea Trumbic, and Davis Francis for comments and guiding the publication process. Nancy Morrison and Jacob Bathanti provided excellent editorial assistance.

**Objective and disclaimer:** This series of Global Indicators Briefs synthesizes existing research and data to shed light on a useful and interesting question for policy debate. Data for this Brief are extracted from the WBL database and supplemented by interviews conducted over the spring and summer of 2021 with women's rights experts from local civil society organizations, the public and private sectors, and international organizations in São Tomé and Príncipe. This Brief builds on the information collected during these interviews to reconstruct the development of the legal reforms and the success factors that allowed the reforms to pass. These Briefs carry the names of the authors and should be cited accordingly. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank Group, its Executive Directors, or the governments they represent. All Briefs in the series can be accessed via: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/research/brief/global-indicators-briefs-series>.

**Table 1** São Tomé and Príncipe's average score on the *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) index has increased impressively since the late 1970s

Year	WBL Index scores	Indicator	Reform description
1971	18.8	<b>Baseline</b>	
1977	21.9	Mobility	Enacted new legislation that no longer establishes differences in the application procedures for a married woman when applying for a passport.
1979	45.0	Assets	Granted spouses equal rights to immovable property and equal administrative authority over assets during marriage.
		Entrepreneurship	Enacted a new Family Law allowing a woman to sign a legally binding contract, register a business, and open a bank account without her husband's consent.
		Marriage	Allowed a woman to be head of household.
		Mobility	Introduced a Family Law allowing a woman to choose where to live in the same way as a man.
		Workplace	Allowed a woman to get a job without permission from her husband.
1980	47.5	Parenthood	Introduced a social security system that administers maternity benefits.
1981	50.6	Pension	Introduced an old-age pension system that does not establish an age at which women and men can retire with partial pension benefits.
1993	53.8	Workplace	Prohibited gender discrimination in employment.
2010	56.3	Marriage	Enacted legislation protecting women from domestic violence.
2014	62.5	Workplace	Enacted legislation protecting women from sexual harassment in employment. It also adopted criminal penalties for sexual harassment in employment.
2016	68.8	Pension	Equalized the ages at which women and men can retire with full pension benefits and the mandatory retirement ages for women and men. It also explicitly accounted for periods of absence due to child care in pension benefits.
2020	83.1	Parenthood	Prohibited the dismissal of pregnant workers and increased the duration of paid maternity leave to at least 14 weeks.
		Pay	Lifted restrictions on women's ability to work at night, in mining, and in jobs deemed dangerous.
2022	83.1	<b>Today</b>	

Source: *Source: Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) database.

Note: The WBL index scores 35 data points across eight indicators composed of four or five binary questions, with each indicator representing a different phase of a woman's life. Indicator-level scores are obtained by calculating the unweighted average of responses to the questions within that indicator and scaling the result to 100. For each question, Yes = 1 and No = 0. Overall scores are then calculated by taking the average of each indicator, with 100 representing the highest possible score. WBL reports reforms enacted one to two years before the WBL annual report is published.

to sign contracts, start businesses, and open bank accounts in their own names; and to get a job without their husbands' permission.

Despite these advances, several discriminatory provisions remained through the 1980s. The transition to democracy in the early 1990s and the amendment to the Constitution in 1991 incorporated principles of gender equality and fundamental human rights in the country's legal frameworks. In 1995, São Tomé and Príncipe became a signatory of the United Nations' Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Reforms introduced starting in the early 1990s aimed at improving women's livelihoods, protecting them from violence, and empowering them to join the labor market and thrive as both employees and entrepreneurs. Over the past 52 years, São Tomé and Príncipe has made significant progress by introducing 14 national legal reforms to promote women's economic inclusion from 1970 to 2021, as captured by the *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) index.

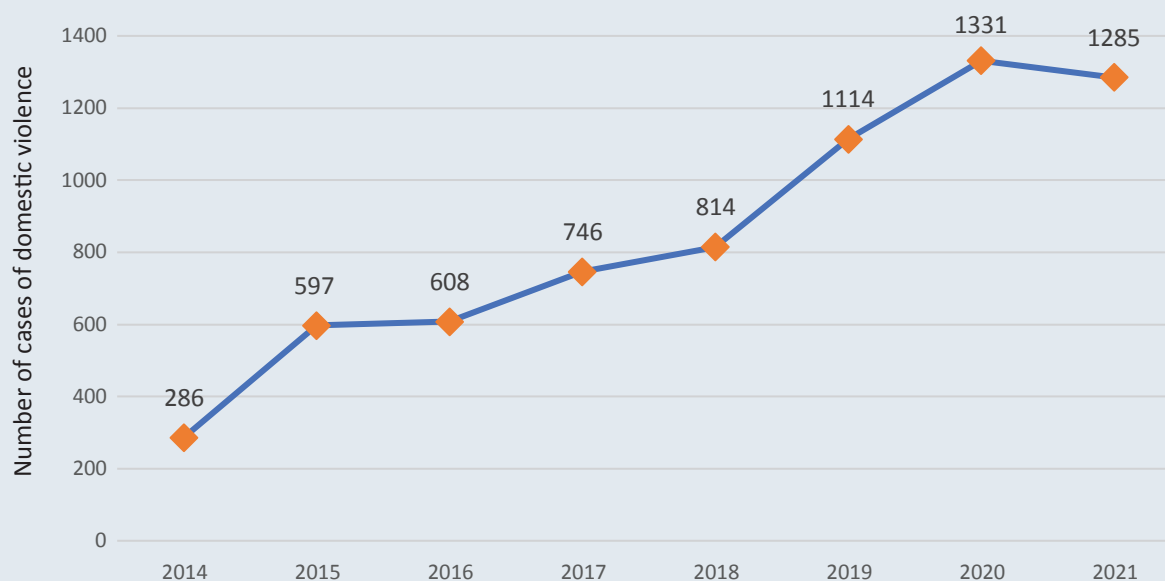
WBL measures the laws and regulations that affect women's economic opportunity in 190 economies. It presents eight indicators constructed around women's interaction with the law as

they move through their careers: Mobility, Workplace, Pay, Marriage, Parenthood, Entrepreneurship, Assets, and Pension. The project's objective is to highlight the importance of reforming laws to enable increases in women's economic empowerment and to inspire evidence-based policymaking.

The reforms enacted by São Tomé and Príncipe resulted in an impressive increase in the country's average score on the *Women, Business and the Law* (WBL) index, from 18.8 in 1970, to 83.1 in 2021 (table 1). These reforms prohibited gender-based discrimination in employment, introduced protection against domestic violence and sexual harassment in employment, lifted restrictions to women's work, and offered additional protection to working mothers.

The country's progress over the past few decades is representative of its commitment to making legal gender equality a reality for Santomean women. However, women's safety both at home and at work stands out as one of the most pressing challenges faced by Santomean women to date. The number of domestic violence cases reported to the National Police continues to rise (see

**Figure 1** The number of domestic violence cases reported to the National Police quadrupled from 2014 to 2021



Source: São Tomé and Príncipe, National Police (database), and National Police Annual Reports from 2014 to 2021.

figure 1). This trend is alarming, though in part may reflect that more women have stepped forward and reported such cases as legal protections have become available.

Laws No. 11/2008 and No. 12/2008 on domestic and family violence were important milestones to introduce the concept of domestic violence into national legislation and enforce legal mechanisms for the protection of survivors of domestic and family violence. The adoption of this landmark legislation was possible only because of years of grassroots advocacy work had been carried out by Santomean women over the past few decades.

While the history of São Tomé and Príncipe is marked by deep-rooted inequalities as well as violence against women and girls (Marinho and Lopes 2020), it is also marked by the bravery and resilience of trailblazing women, who over the years have advocated for their rights and those of their communities. This transgenerational movement laid the groundwork for women like Maria das Neves to take the fight to protect Santomean women to Parliament and provides important insights on how recent reforms came about.

### Santomean women's advocacy: A transgenerational movement

The active participation of Santomean women in public life precedes the country's independence from Portugal (Mén

Non-Associação de Mulheres de São Tomé e Príncipe 2018). Through the years, pioneering women occupied seats in ministries and the National Assembly, led the country as Prime Minister, held the highest seat of the judiciary, and ultimately enabled women to articulate their demands in a coordinated manner (see box 1). This transgenerational movement played—and still plays—an important role in advancing the dialogue on gender equality in São Tomé and Príncipe.

Since the mid-1960s, opposition to colonial rule had been openly expressed by groups such as the Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP). However, it was not until 1974, with Portugal's transition to democracy in the Carnation Revolution and the resultant end of the Portuguese Colonial War (Tomás 2016), that São Tomé and Príncipe advanced in the dialogue toward independence.

On September 19 of that year, a group of women led by the poet and activist Alda Neves da Graça do Espírito Santo took to the streets of São Tomé to demand the country's complete emancipation from Portugal (Gates 2012). The group, comprised mostly of teachers and intellectuals, including a young Maria das Neves Ceita Baptista de Sousa, wore black dresses as a symbol of mourning. They marched toward the office of Governor Pires Veloso to demand the formal recognition of MLSTP as a key interlocutor to represent the Santomean population in the dialogue for independence (Sá and Perlasia 2008; Santos 2015). This group

### Box 1 Trailblazing women's rights activists in São Tomé and Príncipe

**Alda do Espírito Santo**, first woman to hold a Ministerial seat in the country's transitional government in 1974. After the independence, she became President of the National Assembly, presided over the Women's Forum of São Tomé and Príncipe, and directed the National Union of Writers and Artists of São Tomé and Príncipe.

**Maria do Carmo Silveira**, first woman to hold the position of Director of the Central Bank in 1999.

**Maria das Neves Ceita Baptista de Sousa**, first woman Prime Minister of São Tomé and Príncipe (2002–04).

**Maria Alice Carvalho**, first woman to become President of the Supreme Court in 2011.

Source: Mén Non-Associação de Mulheres de São Tomé e Príncipe 2018.

of women became what is now known as the Organização das Mulheres de São Tomé e Príncipe (OMSTEP). Founded in 1975, it is considered the first organized women's movement in the country that placed women's issues front and center during the first decade after independence.

In 1975, there were no women judges, lawyers, engineers, economists, or business managers in the country, and none in the police or military (Mén Non-Associação de Mulheres de São Tomé e Príncipe 2018). Aware of women's lack of representation, OMSTEP organized events and performances that showcased women working in male-dominated activities to sensitize politicians and community leaders on women's right to participate in the various sectors of life. Such interventions served as catalysts for important changes in social norms in the country and opened doors for women to hold jobs that were once exclusive to men, such as driving a bus or serving in the National Police (Santos 2015).

From early activity in the late 1970s and 1980s, the associative movement in São Tomé and Príncipe gained strength in the 1990s, due to the momentum of democratization and the newly guaranteed freedom of association under the 1991 amendment to the Constitution. Guided by the principles of fundamental human rights, the amended Constitution established that women and men were equal in their rights and duties, and were guaranteed full participation in the country's socioeconomic, political, and cultural life (Constitution of the Democratic Republic São Tomé and Príncipe 1991).

In the decades that followed, several women-focused CSOs and NGOs were created, such as the Associação das Mulheres Empresárias e Profissionais de São Tomé e Príncipe (1998), Rede de Mulheres Parlamentares (2004), Associação São-tomense de Mulheres Juristas (2009), Instituto Nacional para a Igualdade e Equidade de Género (2007), Plataforma para Direitos Humanos e Equidade de Género (2013), and SOS Mulher (2016).

The rise of such groups enabled women to articulate their demands with different stakeholders, including the government and the international community, on topics ranging from economic inclusion and labor force participation to the protection of women and girls against gender-based violence (GBV). The presence of a Santomean delegation at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 solidified the country's willingness to build a gender-focused policy agenda to tackle inequalities and promote legal reforms that would hopefully have long-lasting effects (UN 1995).

This commitment was carried forward through the decades that followed. In 2006, the government of São Tomé and Príncipe took an important first step toward addressing the issue of domestic violence in the country through the creation of the Centro de Aconselhamento Contra a Violência Doméstica (CACVD 2020), with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The center is part of the Ministry of Justice, and its main purpose is to raise awareness, provide protection, and support services to women survivors of domestic violence. Another important milestone was the adoption of the first-ever National Strategy for Gender Equality and Equity (ENIEG) (Decree No. 14/2007) in 2007, which was developed with the technical and financial support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). To support the implementation of the national gender strategy, the government created the National Institute for the Promotion of Equality and Equity (INPG) in 2007 (Oliveira et al. 2016).

## A new legal framework to protect women from domestic violence

The high rates of gender-based violence, combined with the need to comply with the terms of the Convention on the

Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the creation of the public institutions CACVD and INPG in 2007, spurred several debates regarding the alarming state of women's health and safety in the country (São Tomé and Príncipe, CAVD 2020).

The reform that introduced Laws No. 11/2008 and No. 12/2008 on domestic and family violence gained momentum in 2007, when the story of a woman that had her arm amputated by her husband broke the news and shocked the country. At the time, Dr. Maria das Neves, the first woman Prime Minister of São Tomé and Príncipe (2002–04) was the only woman in the 55-member Parliament. In the aftermath of this brutal case, she and other colleagues from the Commission visited the hospital where the survivor was receiving care. Dr. das Neves shared in an interview that her conversation with the hospital director revealed an eerie reality: this was not an isolated case, and the hospital had recently admitted several women whose stories of violence were devastatingly similar (interview conducted by the authors with Ceita Baptista de Sousa and Maria das Neves, August 5, 2021).

Moved by the plight of this particular woman, das Neves spearheaded a nationwide debate about the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in the country. On one occasion, she helped set up a gallery in the corridors of the National Assembly to display images of the harm experienced by survivors of domestic violence in order to catch the attention of her fellow Parliamentarians. This powerful strategy was crucial to elevating a specialized domestic violence law to the top of the legislative agenda.

Despite the clear urgency of the matter, the process to actually draft and approve the law was not an easy one. Two female lawyers—Dr. Ilza dos Santos Amado Vaz and Dr. Célia Posser—drafted the text of the laws, with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). CSOs and women's groups participated in the drafting process, offering their feedback on the content and scope. Meanwhile, Dr. das Neves continued to urge her all-male colleagues to take a stance against domestic violence and vote in favor of the law, saying: "If you vote against it, that means you are part of the problem and not the solution." When the bill went up for a vote in the National Assembly, it was approved with 48 votes out of 55, and only 2 abstentions.

On October 29, 2008, São Tomé and Príncipe enacted Law No. 11/2008 on domestic and family violence, popularly known as "Lei Maria das Neves" (Ribeiro 2021). The law introduced the concept of domestic violence as being "*any action or omission arising within the family or household that causes the death, injury, physical, sexual or psychological suffering, moral or patrimonial damage, or deprivation of liberty in situations within the scope of the home, in the family and in any intimate relationship of affection.*" It establishes measures and mechanisms to prevent and punish domestic violence, incorporating the principles and guidelines outlined by CEDAW. Later that same year, São Tomé and Príncipe enacted Law No. 12/2008 to reinforce legal mechanisms for the protection of survivors of domestic and family violence.

## From laws to effective implementation: The critical role of campaigns to raise awareness

While much has been done to advance women's rights in São Tomé and Príncipe over the past five decades, challenges in the implementation of laws remain. The introduction of domestic violence legislation in 2008 was an important step in offering women protection. Cases of domestic violence have been underreported for many years, and the passage of these laws, combined with awareness-raising campaigns coordinated by the government in partnership with civil society, allowed women to seek redress under the law.



## Box 2 National awareness-raising campaigns on gender equality

### 2012: Campaign to Raise Awareness about Domestic Violence

Launched by the Network of Women Parliamentarians with the support of several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) in the country, the campaign aimed at raising awareness about the increase in cases of domestic violence in the country and the need for a coordinated action to tackle this issue (Lopes 2012).

### 2018: “Raising Awareness of Domestic Violence” Project (Sensibilizar para a Violência Doméstica)

Organized by the Portuguese Association to Support Victims (APAV), the Australian Embassy, and the Portuguese General Directorate of Health, this campaign was implemented in São Tomé and Príncipe with support from Centro de Aconselhamento Contra a Violência Doméstica (CACVD) to encourage women to report domestic violence cases (APAV 2018).

### 2019: Green Bow (Laço Verde)

With the motto “Defend yourself, protect yourself, and do not be silent,” the campaign was launched by the Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Human Rights to inform and sensitize the Santomean population on issues surrounding domestic violence, sexual abuse of children, and the consumption of alcohol and drugs (UNFPA 2019).

### 2020: Do Not Hide, Report! (Não se esconda, denuncie!)

This initiative was launched by the National Police to raise awareness about the reasons survivors may choose to remain in the home when facing domestic violence, and to encourage everyone to report such cases (São Tomé and Príncipe, National Police 2020).

### 2021: Time to Change (Hora de Mudar)

The Network of Women Parliamentarians launched this effort to advocate for the adoption and implementation of the Parity Law, which aims to guarantee women’s full and effective participation in public life, to eliminate violence, and to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls (UNFPA 2021).

In one such instance, Dr. Maria das Neves spearheaded a campaign to educate the population in the archipelago about the newly enacted laws on domestic and family violence (São Tomé and Príncipe, CAVD 2020). Going door to door, volunteers handed out brochures explaining the content of the domestic violence legislation. According to Dr. Maria das Neves, the goal was to tell people that the law was theirs, and they should take ownership of it.

Since 2012, several national awareness-raising campaigns to advance the conversation about gender equality and the effective elimination of gender-based violence have been implemented in the country (see box 2).

Surges in the number of domestic violence cases reported to the National Police in recent years, as shown in figure 1, do not necessarily indicate that such cases are on the rise. Instead, it demonstrates an increase on the reporting of domestic violence cases to the National Police due to the population’s increased awareness of the resources available and the legal consequences for such violent acts (São Tomé and Príncipe, National Strategy to Fight Gender-Based Violence 2019–2023). Such awareness-raising campaigns are still indispensable to continuously sensitize the population to the devastating effects of domestic violence on the country’s society and economy, and hopefully decrease the incidence of cases in the long run.

Another key constraint to full implementation of the law is a lack of funding to operate shelters and facilities that provide essential services to survivors. A qualitative service mapping carried out by the World Bank in early 2022 identified that only 13 out of 18 organizations and/or institutions in the country have complied with minimum standards to provide services to survivors of GBV.

In addition to specific pieces of legislation on domestic violence and accompanying measures to implement them, strengthening the legal framework to combat gender-based violence is key to provide women with adequate protection both at home and at work. Insights on the enactment of São Tomé and Príncipe’s new Penal Code and, more recently, Labor Code are therefore important.

## Increasing women’s protection beyond the home

In order to increase women’s protection beyond the home, the country enacted Law No. 6/2012, which introduced a new Penal Code replacing the colonial-era one that had been in force since 1886. Among the biggest changes of the new Penal Code was the codification of domestic violence (Oliveira et al. 2016) as a crime in the Santomean legal system for the first time, solidifying the protection initially offered by Laws No. 11/2008 and No. 12/2008 on domestic and family violence. The drafting of the new Penal Code was undertaken by the Ministry of Justice and the Public Ministry, with technical support provided by UNDP.

The new Penal Code included in its Art. 166 provisions protecting women from sexual harassment in employment, as well as criminal penalties for such cases. Sexual harassment in the workplace not only impairs the well-being of workers, but it also undermines their careers and their motivation to work (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone 2017). Legal provisions against sexual harassment are key not only to ensure a work environment in which women feel safe and protected, but to achieve important labor market goals such as closing the gender wage gap (Deloitte 2019; Lancaster and van der Meulen Rodgers 2020).

While provisions regarding sexual harassment in employment were included in the Penal Code of 2012, such legal protections were transposed into the labor legislation only in 2019 with the enactment of the new Labor Code (Law No. 6/2019). The new Labor Code includes articles that prohibit discrimination in employment and clearly describes the practices that constitute sexual harassment in the workplace. The adoption of the new labor legislation is the latest in a series of reforms implemented by São Tomé and Príncipe, as recorded by the WBL index, and was an essential step for the country to align its laws with international standards.

The first law regulating labor relations was enacted in São Tomé and Príncipe in 1992. Women’s labor force participation rose in the early 1990s, largely due to women’s inclusion in the formal labor market. However, women’s participation has been stagnant over the past decade (Penal Code 2012; World Bank Database 2021).

To address challenges related to decent work that "respects the fundamental rights of the human person as well as the rights of workers in terms of conditions of work safety and remuneration" (Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 2006), São Tomé and Príncipe implemented its first-ever Decent Work Promotion Program in 2013 (DWPP 2013–2017) with technical assistance from the International Labour Organization (ILO 2017). The government then carried out a situational analysis of the status of decent work in the country for the period of 2018–21. The process included an analysis of the country's main strategic documents, as well as consultations with constituents: namely, the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs and other sectoral ministries, the São Tomé and Príncipe Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Agriculture and Services, the National Organization of Workers of São Tomé and Príncipe, and the General Union of Workers.

This exercise identified key gaps in the Legal Regimes for Individual Labor Conditions (Law No. 6/1992), which did not address critical considerations in the world of work, such as the adequate provision of maternity protection and women's labor force participation. To respond to such considerations and comply with international labor standards, the government of São Tomé and Príncipe enacted a new Labor Code (Law No. 6/2019) on April 11, 2019, which took into account key aspects for women's autonomy and labor force participation. The duration of paid maternity leave was increased to 14 weeks (98 days), in line with the recommendation in the ILO Convention 183. Another key reform was the ban on dismissing pregnant workers. Restriction on women's ability to work in mining, in jobs deemed dangerous, and at night were lifted, opening women's access to higher-paying jobs in the formal labor market.

The drafting and approval of the new Labor Code was a long process that spanned eight years and two legislative terms. The new Labor Code attempted to bring the country's legal framework closer to other countries in the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), such as Mozambique and Portugal. Despite having ratified several ILO conventions (Conventions No. 155, 158, and 102), the new Labor Code was the first law to transpose such international standards into national legislation.

Although the new Labor Code is a landmark for São Tomé and Príncipe, its implementation and effectiveness still must be ensured over time. Nevertheless, it is an important first step to enable women in São Tomé and Príncipe to fully participate in economic life.

## Challenges to women's livelihoods remain

Despite efforts to advance women's autonomy and safety at home and at work over the years, women in São Tomé and Príncipe still face challenges to their participation in the labor force and representation in politics and decision-making positions. The participation of women in politics and in decision-making processes has been recognized as a key element to advance legal reforms and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (UN Women 2020). Despite making up a little over 50 percent of the population in São Tomé and Príncipe (São Tomé and Príncipe, INE 2012) and representing about half of the national electorate, women remain underrepresented. Women hold about 24 percent of seats in the Santomean National Assembly (IPU Parline 2020), while the law establishes a threshold of at least 30 percent of female candidates in election lists (Resolution No 74/VIII/2009; Oliveira et al. 2016).

Throughout their lives, women and girls experience different types of gender-based violence, including recurring incidents of domestic and sexual violence, and sexual harassment at school and at work. More than one-quarter (26.3 percent) of women aged 15 to 49 in São Tomé and Príncipe reported being subject to physical

and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months as of 2009 (World Development Indicators 2021).

The archipelago's economy has been driven by agriculture, tourism, and foreign direct investment in the oil industry over the past few decades (World Development Indicators 2021). Although women's labor force participation has risen considerably since the early 1990s, it stagnated by the early 2000s. Female labor force participation in the country was 37 percent in 2021, virtually the same as in 2003 (World Development Indicators 2021). According to the latest General Population and Housing Census (2012), Santomean women's work is highly concentrated in the informal sector, which tends to be predominated by services activities, including street vendors and workers with no formal training. Women face extensive challenges to participation in the formal sector, including difficulties reconciling family and professional life, the demands of household work, and caring for children and elderly people (São Tomé and Príncipe, INE 2012). Despite such challenges, Santomean women's participation in the formal labor market has been driven by the need to improve their families' financial well-being and is symbolic of women's independence and self-actualization (Almeida 2010).

## Looking ahead: Strengthening women's rights in São Tomé and Príncipe

São Tomé and Príncipe has made considerable progress toward closing the legal gender gap in the past 52 years. Different factors have enabled the introduction of such reforms, including the sociopolitical momentum after independence in the mid-1970s and democratization in 1990s, and the active participation of women in the country's public life. The continued collaboration between the government, CSOs and NGOs, and the international community has also been key to advance the reform agenda and design awareness-raising campaigns aimed at implementing such laws. However, work remains to be done to address persistent challenges to women's health, safety, and economic opportunities in the country.

The reform experience in São Tomé and Príncipe offers useful potential lessons for reformers and advocates in other countries. The active participation of women in public life since before the country's independence from Portugal was essential to put women's rights front and center. Women's representation within the government and Parliament ensured the necessary support and mobilization to bring gender equality and women's rights to the top of the reform agenda. A strong multistakeholder partnership, comprising civil society, nongovernmental organizations, and the international community, proved essential to strategically mobilize advocacy efforts, not only to enact new legislation but to push for its effective implementation.

The path toward gender equality is still a bumpy road for most women around the world. Successful reform stories may encourage other countries to take an important first step in assessing their legal frameworks, identifying gaps, and working with key stakeholders to improve women's lives. A concerted effort from concerned stakeholders will be key to advance the gender reform agenda. While we reflect on São Tomé and Príncipe's achievements over the past 52 years, we must also think of the work ahead to strategically design future legal reforms. For example, with the support of the World Bank, the country has been making efforts toward strengthening the legal framework to protect girls against sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment in education. In terms of women's representation, the country is currently discussing the adoption of a Parity Law that requires a 40 percent quota for women in electoral lists, among other provisions to

ensure women's equality of opportunity. This discussion provides a good opportunity for the inclusion of meaningful provisions to effectively increase women's representation in public life, boost female labor force participation, and protect women from violence.

## References

- Almeida, Victória Cecília. 2010. "A Situação Das Mulheres Na Sociedade Santomense, Discriminações De Gênero E a Participação Femenina Na Esfera Productiva" [The Situation of Women in Santomean Society, Gender Discrimination and Female Participation in the Productive Sphere]. Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences, Porto Alegre, Brazil.
- APAV (Association to Support Victims). 2018. "APAV Apresenta Uma Campanha De Sensibilização Sobre Violência Doméstica Em São Tomé E Príncipe" [APAV Presents an Awareness Campaign on Domestic Violence in São Tome and Príncipe]. March 1, 2018, [https://apav.pt/apav\\_v3/index.php/pt/1693-apav-apresenta-campanha-de-sensibilizacao-em-sao-tome-e-principe](https://apav.pt/apav_v3/index.php/pt/1693-apav-apresenta-campanha-de-sensibilizacao-em-sao-tome-e-principe).
- Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. 2006. "General Comment 18, 2006 United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—The Right to Work, General Comment No. 18, Adopted on 24 November 2005, Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights."
- Deloitte. 2019. *The Economic Costs of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace*. Canberra, Australia: Deloitte Access Economics.
- ILO (International Labour Organization). 2017. *Decent Work and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. ILO: Geneva.
- IPU Parline. 2020. Global Data on National Parliaments. Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva. <https://data.ipu.org/>.
- Lancaster, Debra, and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers. 2020. "Economic Impacts of Sexual Harassment: Combating Sexual Harassment Can Further Gender Equality." CWW Issue Brief, Center for Women and Work, Piscataway, NJ.
- Lopes, Sónia. 2012. "Campanha De Sensibilização Contra a Violência Doméstica" [Campaign for Awareness of Domestic Violence]. Téla Nón. November 28, 2012. <https://www.telanon.info/sociedade/2012/11/28/11831/campanha-de-sensibilizacao-contra-a-violencia-domestica/>.
- Marinho, Rosario Maria, and Vanda Lopen Camblé. 2020. "‘Ome Sa Ome’ and ‘Mwala Sa Mwala’ 1: Gender Violence in the Experiences of Santomese." *Brazilian Journal* 5 (10): 233–54.
- McLaughlin, Heather, Christopher Uggen, and Amy Blackstone. 2017. "The Economic and Career Effects of Sexual Harassment on Working Women." *Gender & Society* 31 (3): 333–58.
- Mén Non-Associação de Mulheres de São Tomé e Príncipe. 2018. "Lideranças Femininas De São Tomé and Príncipe" [Female Leadership in São Tomé and Príncipe]. [https://plataformamulheres.org.pt/site/wp-content/ficheiros/2019/01/Brochura\\_Men\\_Non\\_LiderancasFemininas.pdf](https://plataformamulheres.org.pt/site/wp-content/ficheiros/2019/01/Brochura_Men_Non_LiderancasFemininas.pdf).
- Oliveira, Ana Filipa, Liliana Azevedo, Eduardo Elba, Célia Posser, Trovoada Domitília, and Carla Vera-Cruz. 2016. "Direitos Das Mulheres Em São Tomé E Príncipe—Conhecer Para Capacitar E Sensibilizar" [Women's Rights in São Tomé and Príncipe—Training to Raise Awareness]. Comissão Para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Gênero. December, 2016. São Tomé e Príncipe.
- Ribeiro, Neidy. 2021. "É Preciso Criar Condições Para São Tomé Reduzir a Dependência Com O Exterior" [It is Necessary to Create Conditions for São Tomé to Reduce Dependence on the Outside World]. rfi, July 9, 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/pt/programas/convidado/20210709-%C3%A9-preciso-criar-condi%C3%A7%C3%B5es-para-s%C3%A3o-tom%C3%A9-reduzir-a-depend%C3%Aancia-com-o-exterior>.
- Sá, Ana Lúcia, and Josep Maria Perlasia. 2008. "Entrevista a Alda Do Espírito Santo." *Oráfrica: Revista de Oralidad Africana*, April 4, 2008. <https://raco.cat/index.php/Orafrica/article/view/136799/186988>.
- Santos, Lurdes Maria Lima Viegas Pires dos. 2015. "A igualdade de gênero em São Tomé e Príncipe: entre a realidade e a utopia" [Gender equality in São Tomé and Príncipe: between reality and utopia]. Universidade Aberta de Portugal, Lisbon.
- São Tomé and Príncipe, CACVD (Centro de Aconselhamento contra a Violência Doméstica) [Domestic Violence Counseling Center]. 2020. *Estratégia Nacional De Luta Contra a Violência Baseada No Gênero 2019–2023* [National Strategy to Fight Gender-Based Violence 2019–2023]. [https://saotomeandprincipe.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/estrategia\\_vbg\\_2019\\_2023.pdf](https://saotomeandprincipe.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/estrategia_vbg_2019_2023.pdf).
- São Tomé and Príncipe. 2003. Constitution of the Democratic Republic São Tomé and Príncipe, January 23, 2003. <https://www2.camara.leg.br/saotomeeprincipe/constituicao/constituicao-da-republica-democratica-de-s.tome-e> (accessed January 18, 2022).
- São Tomé and Príncipe, National Institute of Statistics (INE). 2012. *IV Recenseamento Geral da População E Habitação–2012* [IV General Census of Population and Housing–2012]. <https://www.ine.st/index.php/publicacao/documentos/file/337-6-mulheres-recenseamento-2012>.
- São Tomé and Príncipe, National Police. 2020. "Não Se Esconda, Denuncie" [Do Not Hide, Report]. Facebook Watch, February 5, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=168395801124976>.
- Tomás, António. 2016. "Introduction: Decolonising the ‘Undecolonisable’? Portugal and the Independence of Lusophone Africa, Social Dynamics." *Journal of African Studies* 42 (1): 1–11, doi: 10.1080/02533952.2016.1164956.
- UN (United Nations). 1995. *Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women*. New York: UN.
- UN (United Nations). 2016. *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review—São Tomé and Príncipe*. New York: UN.
- UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund). 2019. "Campanha ‘Laço Verde’" [Campaign ‘Green Bow’]. July 24, 2019. <https://saotomeandprincipe.unfpa.org/pt/news/campanha-%E2%80%99Laço-Verde-%E2%80%99D>.
- UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund). 2021. "Hora de Mudar" [Time to Change]. March 12, 2021. <https://saotomeandprincipe.unfpa.org/pt/news/dia-internacional-da-mulher-marca-o-lan%C3%A7amento-da-campanha-pela-paridade-em-stp>
- UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2020. "Facts and Figures: Women's Leadership and Political Participation." <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>.
- World Bank. "O Banco Mundial em São Tomé e Príncipe" [The World Bank in São Tomé and Príncipe]. <https://www.worldbank.org/pt/country/saotome/overview#1>. Accessed on October 23, 2021.
- World Development Indicators. 2021. "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+)(modeled ILO estimate) – Sao Tome and Principe." <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=ST>. Accessed on August 14, 2022.
- World Development Indicators. 2021. "Proportion of women subjected to physical and/or sexual violence in the last 12 months (% of ever-partnered women ages 15-49) - Sao Tome and Principe." <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.VAW.1549.ZS?locations=ST>. Accessed on October 30, 2021.