

GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND WORKPLACE

During the month of August, the National Women's Month, the South Africans always commemorate the historic march on 9th August 1956 when women delivered to the South African Parliament a national petition against pass laws. They won that struggle, however, the fight against gender based violence (GBV) seems an uphill battle as it is apparent that the situation is getting worse. It therefore requires men and women to work together in unison against any form of GBV.

GBV is a phenomenon deeply rooted in gender inequality, and is one of the notable human rights violations within all societies. Since GBV is violence directed against a person because of their gender, both women and men experience it (GBV); however, the majority of victims are women and girls (EIGE 08/29/22). GBV is a profound and widespread problem which impacts on almost every aspect of life. It can be attributed to normative roles and unequal power relationships between genders in a society (saferspaces).

GBV in relation to workplaces includes:

- Bullying, physical and verbal abuse from colleagues, supervisors or managers.
- Sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances.
- Sexual abuse and violence, including 'coercive' or transactional sex, rape and sexual assault.
- Abuse and harassment around pregnancy.
- Psychological abuse and intimidation.
- Threats and acts of physical and sexual violence.
- Abusive working conditions such as poor health and safety (including building and equipment safety).
- Inadequate excessive or inappropriate sanitary facilities and rules about their use.
- Involuntary excessive long working hours and unpredictable or late demands to work overtime. (http://gbv.itsilo.org/index.php/briefing/show_paragraph/id/63.html).

GBV is a scourge that has torn up the societal fabric, affecting individuals involved, their families, communities, and workplaces. The worse effects of GBV are not only felt by the victims or recipients of such horrible experience, but their kids and all around them. It results in broken homes and displaced families. The majority of children who always witnessed these horrors whilst growing up, usually become abusers themselves or inflictors of GBV on their partners. Since they have been exposed to situations where, for example, there is no respect for a female, they would tend to believe that a female should be treated with no respect. However, there are some who always hate being associated with GBV because they happen to have experienced it with its horrors first-hand in one way or another. These two contrasting scenarios constitute causal responsibility in relation to human normative roles.

As mentioned above, sexual harassment (an unwelcome and offensive conduct of a sexual nature) is the most common form of GBV in workplaces. It makes the recipient thereof feel humiliated, intimidated or uncomfortable. Sexual harassment creates a climate of fear and physical as well as mental ill health. It may lead to workers take sick leave, resign or even leave their jobs without giving notice. Sexual harassment in the workplace may take two forms: quid pro quo sexual harassment (demand for something in return for sexual favours) and hostile environment sexual harassment:

- Physical harassment: unwelcome touching, fondling, hugging or kissing.

- Verbal harassment: sexually suggestive, offensive comments or jokes, inappropriate invitations to go out on dates, intrusive question/s/remarks, offensive questions about private life, intrusive comments about a woman's physical appearance.
- Non-verbal harassment: inappropriate, intimidating staring or leering, receiving or being shown offensive, sexually explicit pictures, photos or gifts, indecent exposure, being made to watch or look at pornographic material against one's wishes.
- Cyber harassment: receiving unwanted, offensive, sexually explicit emails or SMS messages; in appropriate, offensive advances on social networking web-sites or in internet chat rooms
(https://gbv.itcilo.org/index.php/briefing/show_paragraph/id/63.html).

Normally, women and girls lack power in their workplaces and outside workplaces, as such, they remain more vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence, including rape. Domestic violence is an inherent element of GBV and the World Health Organization, as cited in https://gbv.itcilo.org/index.php/briefing/shoe_paragraph/id/63.html, estimates that one out of three women is a victim of violence leading to death among women aged 16 to 44 years. A research by BMC Public Health, published on 21 May 2022 surprisingly reveals that there were increased incidents of GBV during COVID-19 and lockdown. Some women reported experiences of emotional violence against them whereas physical violence incidents were reported mostly against children. The risk factors included the resultant confinement, job losses, and reduction in earnings which led to food insecurity mostly among low socio-economic status (SES) families.

Similarly, according to the MSF Medical Humanitarian Aid published on 7 April 2020; the Minister of Police (during the lockdown period) announced that during the first week of the national lockdown, 30% more GBV cases were reported over the same period in 2019. The economic cost of GBV on employers is severe. According to the United Nations, as cited in https://gbv.itcilo.org/index.php/briefing/show_paragraph/id/63.html, GBV impact negatively in the workplace through decreased productivity. The negative impact of GBV on our economy is enormous since women constitute an important stakeholder in the country's economy.

Women in general and particularly young women are vulnerable to coerced sex and infection with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Therefore, there is a need for a concerted effort by all to fight and defeat the scourge of GBV in the advancement of human rights. The Department: KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Treasury, in its fight against the GBV scourge, has a dedicated email address: NO-MEANS-NO@KZNTREASURY.GOV.ZA on which such incidents can be reported and dealt with accordingly. Furthermore, the Department continuously empowers and sensitizes officials through articles and presentations on GBV issues. Come on! stand up! let's fight GBV in all its manifestations.

*(An opinion from the labour desk.
2nd Quarter employee relations article for 2022/23 Financial Year).
MH Ngcobo*