



NBI Quick Brief

The Connection Between Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and the Workplace

Reflecting on this year's Women's Month, it would be remiss to not address the reality of gender-based violence. The country has been devastated with revelations of domestic violence survival by prominent businesswoman, MK Veteran and pioneer, the late Dr Thandi Ndlovu, the murder of S.A boxing champion Leighandre "Baby Lee" Jegels at the hands of her estranged police officer boyfriend, and most recently the rape and murder of Uyinene Mrwetyana, a 19 year old first year UCT student, at the Clareinch Post Office in Cape Town.

GBV and workplace harassment in South Africa

August is recognised as National Women's Month to commemorate the historic march of 9 August 1956 as the day of national petition against pass laws. This historic moment saw women across all races resist one of apartheid's most restrictive and discriminatory legal requirements. Additionally, Women's Month also serves to bring attention to various issues facing women including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, unequal pay and access to land.

Gender-based violence as a socio-political issue manifests itself in different forms, one of which is workplace sexual harassment. Given that businesses operate within society, they are not immune from experiencing social issues that continue to plague the country. According to Statistics South Africa, it is reported that the murder rate of women

increased by 117% over the 2015 – 2016/17 period.^[1]

Recognising that GBV is a social crisis means encompassing the full extent to which it negatively impacts on other social structures, including the economy. This is not meant to trivialise the issue or oversimplify it with numbers, but rather to reflect the cost implications of inaction. A report released by KPMG found that GBV cost the economy an estimated R28.4 billion – R42.4 billion for the year 2012/13.^[2] These costs are based on a collation of loss of incomes, opportunities, taxes, health, justice and social service costs. In reflecting the cost burden, this research positioned GBV as a social and economic issue, providing a framework on the costing of policy-making and interventions as well as improving resource allocations.

Following the global prominence of the [#MeToo](#) movement, people have actively vocalised their experiences of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace. This movement has served as a powerful tool in helping survivors point out the power dynamics that exist in the workplace, whilst also engaging mechanisms and steps that can be taken in systematically addressing these issues. To have a better understanding of them, it is important to look at existing data on sexual harassment in the workplace:

- A survey conducted with 1 000 participants by Columinate^[3] found that 30% of women and 18% of men had reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Sexual harassment has a negative impact on employees' (especially women) abilities to fully participate in the work environment, and often results in negative psychological effects including constant fear, anxieties and variations of trauma. The workplace can become intolerable and may lead to a high staff turnover rate.^[4]
- A silencing culture is created in the work environment where the perpetrators are commonly known, but there is a fear of reporting them should this lead to further harassment, threats of job losses and other forms of ill-treatment.^[5]



Business interventions in addressing workplace sexual harassment

The Minister of Labour declared the Amendment to the Code of Good Practice on the Handling of Sexual Harassment Cases of 2005 as the core guideline in preventing and addressing workplace sexual harassment. This

amendment means that businesses now have extensive and inclusive definitions of harassment and violation in the workplace.

Currently, research on the extent and existing interventions in corporate South Africa on addressing and preventing sexual harassment is scarce. This lack of information ties in with the accounts from numerous research institutes who reflect that under reporting coupled with a lack of research does not give an accurate reflection of the problem. Nevertheless, if it is understood that the workplace mirrors an aspect of various social issues, then the need for business interventions remains essential.

Some of the strategies and interventions that business should consider in addressing sexual harassment in the workplace include^[6]:

- Developing clear policies which address its extent. These policies need to be widely shared on various platforms including company websites, trainings, orientation processes etc.
- Companies should be transparent on how cases are handled by stipulating the various measures that can be taken once an incident is reported.
- A provision of support services, such as legal assistance, health and social services, should be part of the organisational response. These support structures should prioritise care and sensitivity in dealing with cases.

At this critical time, it is important that corporates take a clear, public and deliberate stance of zero tolerance on GBV, both in the workplace and in society. By taking up this leadership role, businesses position themselves to positively use their power by engaging internal and multi-sectoral initiatives which seek to prevent and eliminate GBV. These can include:

- Providing infrastructural support and assistance to social institutions (such as health, women's shelters and other related organisations) in their provision of services for GBV survivors.
- Encouraging more rigorous data collection and research on the prevalence of the issue.
- Reviewing existing company structures to accommodate staff at various levels, i.e. transport provision for shift work.
- Taking a collective approach as a sector in combating GBV by engaging and supporting national strategic plans on it.

[1] <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/gender-based-violence-rise>

[2] <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/za/pdf/2017/01/za-Too-costly-to-ignore.pdf>

[3] <https://www.columinate.com/2018/09/04/too-much-metoo-sexual-harassment-in-the-south-african-workplace/>

[4] <https://iwpr.org/publications/sexual-harassment-work-cost/>

[5] <https://iwpr.org/publications/sexual-harassment-work-cost/>

[6] <https://www.nap.edu/resource/24994/Interventions%20for%20Preventing%20Sexual%20Harassment%20final.pdf>



Copyright © 2019 NBI, All rights reserved.

The National Business Initiative (NBI) is an independent and voluntary coalition of South African and multinational businesses launched in 1995 by the then President, Nelson Mandela

Our mailing address is:

NBI
61 Katherine Street
Dennehof
Sandton, GP 2196
South Africa

[Add us to your address book](#)

Want to change how you receive these emails?

You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#).