

16 365 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence the Abuse of Females (Women and Girls) by Males (Men and Boys)- a pandemic by any other name.

In his speech on 11th January 2020, on progress in South Africa's effort to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, President Cyril Ramaphosa reminded the nation that we are facing a second pandemic, that of gender-based violence and femicide. More specifically, he referred to the country's efforts to end harassment at work, stating that '*South Africa is in the process of ratifying ILO Convention 190, which establishes a global standard for the protection of women and other vulnerable groups in the world of work*'. It provides for specific measures to address gender-based violence and harassment and acknowledges that gender-based violence and harassment disproportionately affects women and girls.



Until we name it more accurately and face it head-on with the honesty, intensity, and courage that it requires, the worldwide scourge of the abuse of females by males will not subside. Nothing will change. The more we skirt around the issue in our choice of words and actions as we seem to be doing, the worse it will become. Evidence of the situation becoming increasingly dire is all around us – in our homes, our workplaces, communities, schools, churches, and social spaces. We cannot

deny that we are facing one of the worst ills of humanity that is eating away at our core every single day of our lives, and one that we are doing not nearly enough to address.

Let us take a closer look at this challenge from a workplace perspective by engaging the case below based on a real-life experience.

A young woman completing an internship programme in the final year of her graduate studies is sexually harassed on numerous occasions by an older male employee. Each time, she responds immediately, directly, and assertively, telling the man to stop his abusive behaviour, and making it very clear that it is unwelcome and unacceptable. But he does not stop. She starts looking for help from the people around her. In the process, she learns about the Human Resource Management function, and that it is responsible for the maintenance of a conducive work climate and the resolution of employee relations challenges. This being her first exposure to a formal workplace environment, and with no induction programme in place, she did not know that she could appeal to the company's HR policies and procedures for this problem to be resolved.

With much anticipation, she approaches the HR Department to submit her complaint. Sadly, the manager – herself a woman – seems unconcerned by the matter and does nothing about it, despite follow-ups. The abusive behaviour continues, and, knowing that his actions had been reported and left unchallenged by the company, the harasser becomes more confident in his aggression towards the woman. Left to fend for herself, she decides that the only way to put a stop to the harassment is to become aggressive in return. She reaches out to a male friend outside the workplace, who confronts and threatens the male employee, a drastic measure that eventually ends the harassment. Not her preferred way of solving the problem, but with no support from the organisation, the young woman felt she had no other option.



190 ILO-CONVENTION

AGAINST VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT IN THE WORLD OF WORK

This case represents the unfortunate reality of countless women in workplaces across South Africa and the world. While a few are able to challenge their harassers, nipping in the bud behaviours by men that strip women of their dignity and rob them of healthy work-life experiences, many are not that courageous, because they run the risk of kindling even more potent degrees of hostility and violence from the harassers. Many cases, therefore, go unreported, meaning that the true extent of workplace incidents is even higher than the commonly reported 30%. Reporting a case is also not an encouraging option for women as they typically receive lukewarm reactions from the very people who are charged with protecting their rights and interests.

Whether they are entry-level employees on the shop floor or senior executives in the boardroom, quiet and reserved or vocal and outspoken, young, and naïve, or old and wise, no woman is safe from this dehumanising societal affliction. It knows no race, culture, religion, background, socio-economic group, education, marital status, gender, or sexual orientation. And it most certainly knows no time of day or date in the calendar. It is a **24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week, 365-days-a-year** occurrence that cannot be put under the spotlight for only 16 days in a year. If we continue to do so, we will not see much significant change over time. Coupled with our use of the misnomer 'Gender-Based Violence', the on-going abuse of Females/Women by Males/Men in the workplace and otherwise stands a much-reduced chance of being eliminated.

This article was written by Litha-Lethu Member and Learning Development Lead, Sharon Shakung. Contact us on 011 484 7739, or info@litha-lethu.com to find out more on how your organisation can ensure compliance with *ILO Convention 190* and institutionalise a culture that values diversity, respects and actively protects the rights of all vulnerable workers.