

How businesses can take the lead in tackling GBV

By [Malusi Zondi](#)

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Gender-based violence (GBV) is not an easy issue to tackle. However, that is not an excuse for inaction. With the constant increase in gender-based violence cases in South Africa, we all must take action against GBV - companies included, regardless of their size.



Black Business Federation president Malusi Zondi. | Source: Supplied

We are all familiar with the gruesome realities of domestic violence - thanks to the headlines and hashtags. However, homes are not the only theatres of GBV - a [2018 study](#) in South Africa estimated that nearly a third of women were victims of unwanted sexual advances in their workplaces. And this is not inconsequential.

The impact of GBV in the workplace

For 2012/13, a [report released by KPMG](#) found that GBV cost the economy an estimated R28.4bn to R42.4bn. That is enough money to pay for the salaries of 200,000 new primary school teachers for a year or to provide National Health Insurance to a quarter of the South African population.

GBV interferes with affected employees' full and equal participation in the workforce. It impairs employees' physical and mental health and well-being, leading to stress, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, motivation and even job loss. In addition, GBV contributes to the gender pay gap and affects women's advancement and career progression opportunities.



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Furthermore, GBV and domestic violence also affect the future workforce. Children that grow in violent homes experience reduced learning opportunities, increased risks of trauma, poor mental health and a higher risk of experiencing abuse or perpetrating abuse later on.

Admittedly, everyone agrees that addressing GBV is a daunting task. But there are small steps that we can take in the right direction. For example, businesses could perform risk analysis and update their anti-GBV to ensure that their employees can report cases of abuse.

We are all victims of GBV in the end. But, as acknowledged in the National Gender-Based Violence and Strategic Plan, the private sector plays an important part. Here are some steps that businesses and companies can take in fighting against GBV internally:

1. Prevent violence and harassment by identifying potential risks

Gender-based violence affects all businesses. It is therefore vital to understand where problems are occurring and what the causes are. Large companies with complex value chains can use tools like the Business for Social Responsibility Diagnostic to help identify the issues and tackle them.

The tool enables a company to self-assess how effectively their existing policies, programs, culture, leadership and strategy tackle violence and harassment. Under each focus area, there is a set of guiding questions for companies to develop a score. The scores help a company identify where it is doing well (high scores suggest it is 'leading') and where it needs to do better (low scores indicate it is a 'beginner').



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2. Commit to gender equality and diversity across the workplace

CEOs and senior leadership commitments to diverse, equal and respectful workplaces, backed by adequate resources and action, form a necessary foundation for addressing gender-based violence.

It tackles the root of the problem (gender inequality) and creates trust amongst staff. Without this foundation, efforts to 'raise awareness' about gender-based violence can appear tokenistic and lack legitimacy.

3. Protect employees with supportive policies and procedures

Clear policies and procedures, including reporting and grievance mechanisms, empower staff to take appropriate action when needed and reassure survivors, bystanders, accused perpetrators and whistle-blowers that the company will handle cases effectively.

4. Collaborate and campaign beyond the immediate workplace

Sector-wide approaches to reducing gender-based violence can help raise standards with suppliers and build a more robust overall ecosystem to tackle deeply ingrained issues.

Companies also can influence societal norms and behaviours on gender-based violence through advertising and campaigning, particularly when the problems align with core business aims and include culturally relevant reference points or actors.



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5. Be accountable and monitor action

Companies taking action to tackle gender-based violence want to know whether those actions are benefitting employees. They also want to know how to comply with legal changes most effectively.

Currently, the best approach is to adopt the standards set out in the [new ILO treaty](#) or use the Business for Social Responsibility Diagnostic tool. Then, set up feedback mechanisms to assess employees' uptake of new policies and programs, conduct regular employee surveys and invite staff to share views on prioritising resources to tackle the issue.

Although women usually bear the brunt of gender-based violence, other groups at risk include men and members of the LGBTQI community. In playing their part to shift social norms, businesses should also engage with all their employees to provide an online platform on prevention and protection for both men and women, which will explain how GBV affects everyone.

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