



Perspective

How the Private sector can Address the Issue of Gender-based Violence

Corné Davis¹

Department of Strategic Communication, University of Johannesburg

ABSTRACT

This paper positions gender-based violence (GBV) as an issue that affects employees in the private sector, considering that global statistics show that at least 35% of women across the world experience some kind of GBV in their lifetime. GBV has presented many challenges to all stakeholders for decades. While multiple research reports and interventions have been published on the prevalence and scope of this issue, there is little evidence available on the progress being made towards its elimination. It has become clear that addressing this issue will necessitate multi-sectoral collaboration and participation, since government and non-government organisations on their own have not made significant progress in spite of their many focused efforts. Within the framework of the global sustainability objectives (GSOs) calls have increasingly been made on the private sector to address the inextricably linked issues of gender inequality and GBV, but it still seems unclear how organisations in the private sector can address it and why it is their responsibility. Most forms of GBV are not perpetrated by strangers and thus remain unreported. The social, physical, emotional and financial consequences for all stakeholders are exacerbated by the stigma associated with GBV, which makes it difficult for victims and perpetrators to seek help. By acknowledging that both victims and perpetrators are among their employees, private-sector organisations can make this topic far more communicable, can put support structures in place, and can allocate resources to address this issue. The discussion concludes with specific recommendations of how the private sector can participate and collaborate in eliminating GBV.

Keywords: gender-based violence, social responsibility, global sustainability, strategic communication

¹ Please direct all correspondence to: Dr C. Davis, Department of Strategic Communication, University of Johannesburg; Email: cdavis@uj.ac.za



INTRODUCTION

The National Strategic Plan for addressing gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, released by President Ramaphosa on 11 March 2020, directed a very specific call to the private sector to participate in addressing this issue. GBV has been a global crisis for many decades and, to date, research reports and statistics show little or no progress towards its elimination (Jewkes & Dartnall, 2017). Global reports over many years have indicated that GBV is prevalent across cultures, 'race', religions and socio-economic status. Initially, GBV was addressed mainly by international health organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN), predominantly as a public-health concern. However, it has become more apparent over recent years that GBV is a social issue that stems from culture, religion, gender inequality and patriarchy, among other things, and that it has been perpetuated through societal structures, such as organisations. There have been increasing calls to all sectors to intervene in addressing GBV. The cost of GBV to the global economy was estimated at \$1.5 trillion (UN Women, 2016), while the economic cost of GBV to South Africa has been estimated at between R28.4 and R42.4 billion (KPMG, 2014). Still, there has been little evidence of widespread successful GBV interventions (Abrahams, Mathews, Martin, Lombard, & Jewkes, 2013). It has also become clear, as Morrison and Orlando (2005) argue, that accounting-based measures of GBV are insufficient, suggesting that different perspectives are needed. While many private-sector organisations have GBV interventions through corporate philanthropy, they have not taken action to address the issue head-on. The purpose of this commentary is to show that just funding non-government organisations dealing with GBV issues is no longer sufficient. GBV is the responsibility of stakeholders across all sectors and the criticality of the private sector's participation and intervention, in particular, has to be clearly articulated.

THE PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF GBV

One of the greatest challenges pertaining to GBV is the silence that perpetuates the issue, because of the stigma associated with it. Therefore, the physical, emotional and social impact of GBV remains unpronounced, because it causes shame, discrimination and social exclusion, as shown by Seedat, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla and Ratele (2009) and Jewkes and Dartnall (2017). This stigma also means that both victims and perpetrators have remained invisible in spaces such as the workplace, where people have limited awareness of their colleagues' personal lives. The issue of sexual harassment and abuse in the work environment, as one of the many kinds of GBV, came under the spotlight in 2016, when the #MeToo movement was started by Tarana Burke. It spread virally as a hashtag on social media in 2017, following the charges against media producer Harvey Weinstein (BBC News, 2020). For the first time, women had a



large-scale platform for coming forward and speaking out against the sexual abuse they had experienced in work contexts, and for promoting solidarity and empathy among survivors and victims (Rodio-Colocino, 2018). Thousands of voices were heard and victims' narratives of the trauma they had experienced provided much-needed insight into the devastation caused by this kind of GBV and its prevalence.

However, sexual harassment and abuse is only one form of GBV. Its most prevalent forms are intimate-partner violence (IPV), domestic violence (DV) and violence against children (VAC) experienced, in most cases, in their homes. The stigma attached to these forms of GBV is even worse, which means that victims and their families are too ashamed and scared to come forward because they fear discrimination, judgement and not being believed. For these reasons, GBV has been viewed as a private matter that employers did not wish to get involved in. A shift in this perception occurred when specific calls on the private sector were made by sources such as Colford (2014, p. 1), who represented the World Bank when he stated the following:

If a sense of social responsibility isn't enough to get corporate leaders thinking pro-actively, they should at least consider their business' long-term enlightened self-interest. A workforce that's de-motivated or demoralized – or, worse, physically injured or emotionally abused – will suffer lower morale and higher absenteeism, will trigger higher health-care costs, will be distracted from seizing new business opportunities, and will fall short of fulfilling its full productive potential. That economic reality should spur the private sector to take constructive, preventive action.

Even though this statement foregrounds the economic implications of GBV, it also alludes to the emotional and physical devastation GBV causes. More recently, a number of brutal killings of young women in South Africa drew sharp attention to IPV. These included the deaths of Karabo Mokoena, whose body was burned after she was brutally murdered by her intimate partner on 28 April 2017 (Daily Maverick, 2018); Uyinene Mrwetyana on 24 August 2019, Leighandré Jegels, who was shot by her boyfriend in September 2019; Janika Mallo, the 24-year-old who was raped and killed by two family acquaintances; 16-year-old Ayakha Jiyane and her three younger step-siblings, who were found hanged in September 2019; eight-months pregnant Tshogofatso Pule, who was found hanging from a tree in June 2020, and Naledi Phangindawo, who was allegedly hacked to death by her partner on 6 June 2020. The impact of the trauma associated with deaths such as these on families, friends, acquaintances and society was widely described and necessarily and unavoidably extends to the workplace. While femicide represents a worst-case scenario, the consequences for surviving victims of IPV and DV, identified by Day (1995), include the following:



- physical problems (e.g. stomach aches, headaches, asthma, insomnia);
- emotional problems (e.g. depression, anxiety, guilt, self-blame, post-traumatic stress disorder);
- behavioural problems (e.g. aggression, suicidal behaviours, alcohol and illicit drug use, truancy/early school-leaving);
- cognitive problems (e.g. distortions in attitudes and beliefs about violence and abusive behaviour);
- difficulty concentrating and learning; and
- social problems (e.g. isolation, difficulty trusting, and accepting and/or using violence in peer and dating relationships).

Other non-monetary social costs include those represented in disability-adjusted life years (DALY) (Dalal, & Svanström, 2015) or the longer-term consequences for children and adolescents exposed to DV and IPV that impact future functioning (Fakunmoju, & Rasool, 2018). It therefore makes sense from an employee-wellbeing perspective that private-sector organisations should reconceptualise their corporate and social responsibility in terms of the current global sustainability objectives (GSOs), which make specific reference to GBV and focus on gender equality. Private-sector organisations should also know that gender inequality was recognised as a key driver of GBV many decades ago. To date, no country has however achieved gender equality, nor is any country likely to do so by 2030 (UN Women, 2019). The shift that now needs to take place is the reconceptualisation of GBV as an issue that requires strategic intervention by the private sector.

Much work has been done by organisations such as the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) (2020), Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) and HERrespect (2017) to pave the way for private-sector organisations to address GBV as an issue that affects employees' wellbeing and their organisations' success, although it seems that these reports have not yet been considered or used by the private sector in South Africa. The following section considers some of the developments in business and industry that have been benchmarked in current literature on organisations and global sustainability.

WHAT THE PRIVATE SECTOR CAN DO TO ADDRESS GBV

Holmström (2006) showed how the concepts of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the relationship between organisations and society had evolved, placing an increasing emphasis on organisations' accountability for not addressing issues that affect society. Recent theoretical developments in the fields of organisation studies and strategic communication place great emphasis on human-centredness and on the



achievement of the GSOs, as shown by Galpin, Whittington and Bell (2015). The central tenet in these approaches is ‘that people are more important than profit’. From this perspective, there are specific guidelines or actions that private-sector organisations should follow.

Recognise GBV as an issue that affects employees

UN Women (2019) showed that, globally, one out of three women experience some kind of GBV in their lifetime. South Africa was dubbed the rape capital of the world as early as 1995 (Jewkes, & Abrahams, 2002) and as Jewkes and Dartnall (2017, p. 493) maintain, “in most settings women are more at risk of being forced into unwanted sexual acts by an intimate partner than any other type of perpetrator”. In fact, Jewkes and Abrahams (2002, p. 1240) state that “women's right to give or withhold sexual intercourse is one of the most commonly violated human rights in South Africa”. UN Women (2020) confirmed that 35 percent of women globally experience some kind of GBV in their lifetime, and it can reasonably be deduced that these figures include women in organisational settings. A study on the prevalence of GBV in the four provinces in South Africa conducted by the Medical Research Council showed that as many as 77 percent of women in Limpopo, 51 percent of women in Gauteng, 45 percent of women in the Western Cape and 36 percent of women in KwaZulu-Natal reported experiencing some kind of GBV in their lifetime (Gender Links, 2014). Considering these statements, it is likely that one out of three women in any organisational setting will experience some kind of GBV in their lifetime. It is therefore imperative for private-sector organisations to recognise these facts and to acknowledge the likelihood that there are most probably perpetrators and victims among their employees. The study by Davis and Meerkotter (2017) supported this and showed that many of the GBV distress calls recorded on the TEARS Foundation’s Help-at-your-fingertips hotline were made from affluent neighbourhoods in Gauteng and women working in private-sector organisations.

Create platforms for employees to engage on GBV issues

Platforms that acknowledge the issue of GBV in its various forms can facilitate dialogue and can encourage support-seeking among both victims and perpetrators, who may often feel isolated because others’ experiences of GBV are not disclosed (Reference). The availability of this kind of service does not suggest that employees will immediately start engaging openly about these sensitive and stigmatised topics, but the communication needs to start in the workplace, where access to information and support can be put into place. Employee wellbeing programmes can raise awareness of GBV issues and provide information on where to go or what to do if it happens.



Address gender inequality more rigorously

Private-sector organisations need to reflect on their communication with all stakeholders, including employees, to ensure that no gender-stereotyping or perceptions that influence societal values, norms and attitudes by condoning GBV can be communicated in its content (BSR, 2017). They also need to determine how they can develop platforms and channels for communication about GBV, its prevalence and its consequences for all stakeholders. As suggested by the Women Empowerment Principles (2020), the private sector should demonstrate its commitment to achieving gender equality and women empowerment by including it in its business strategies. The latest gender-gap report released by the UN in 2020 shows to what extent gender inequality makes women and girls more vulnerable to GBV and other human rights violations, compared to men and boys.

Publicly express disapproval of any kind of GBV

This should include any kind of GBV, such as sexual harassment in the workplace as well as in the private lives of individuals. Programmes and partnerships with other stakeholders should be communicated in CSR reports to demonstrate how they serve the best interests of all stakeholders (creating shared value) in finding solutions to address GBV in South Africa.

Participate in GBV policy development

BSR (2017) further proposes HR-led policy development relating to the support of GBV intervention and prevention. It is also important for the private sector to engage in dialogue with other stakeholders and to establish multi-sectoral platforms on which to collaborate to find solutions for GBV intervention. Even though such actions will, admittedly, require resources, the cost of no action for South Africa has been made abundantly clear in the National Strategic Plan for South Africa (2020).

Provide the necessary resources to address GBV

UN Women (2019) proposes that private-sector organisations dedicate appropriate financial and human resources to design and implement a holistic workplace response to IPV in particular, and that they build understanding and a supportive environment. The Women Empowerment Principles (2020) further suggest



that private-sector organisations should create strategic executive committees on gender equality as a way of demonstrating commitment from the very top.

As indicated, achieving these objectives will require multi-sectoral collaboration. Until now, GBV activism and interventions have been driven predominantly by government organisations, as well as global and local non-government organisations. The statistics show that these sectors have been unsuccessful and arguably make it clear that all stakeholders need to be involved to achieve results. Sharokh and Edström (2015) reiterate the need for multi-sectoral and multidimensional responses to GBV that incorporate a life-cycle perspective to inform understandings of GBV, participatory education and community mobilisation, as well as a specific focus on the structural violence and institutional inequalities that fundamentally shape GBV. They show that effective interventions should address harmful masculinities, rather than focus on single and specific behaviours and attitudes. They further show how employee engagement should challenge deeply held beliefs at a personal level, so that employees can connect them with the processes of wider societal change.

Given that no successful GBV intervention programmes in the private sector in South Africa have been publicised, it is important for private-sector organisations to share the insights that they gain from their programmes, so that they can accelerate further interventions across all sectors. Information and support are readily available from organisations such as Safer Spaces, Sonke Gender Justice, Safer Homes and Respect for Everyone (SHARE), SVRI, and Gender Links, among many others, some of whom report successful interventions. Creating multi-sectoral stakeholder networks can further foster GBV activism and collaboration among stakeholders such as community forums, schools, police stations and other businesses. Such participation and collaboration to support the National Strategic Plan for GBV intervention in South Africa require leadership and commitment from industry leaders.

CONCLUSION

This commentary discussed how the private sector needs to recognise that corporate philanthropy will no longer suffice when addressing issues such as GBV (Vilkè, Raišienė, & Simanavičienė, 2014). Private-sector organisations can be key influencers and change agents. They are often represented by opinion leaders and influencers on social media and other platforms, where they can set the agenda for GBV interventions. The stigma surrounding all kinds of GBV will not dissipate if these topics are avoided and remain incommunicable. It is a human right for all people to feel safe, protected and free from any kind of discrimination and social exclusion, and it is the responsibility of private-sector organisations as definitive



stakeholders to enable the achievement of this GSO. Although significant progress has been made in recognising that these objectives should form part of organisational strategy, much work remains to be done before a change in GBV occurrence will be seen. Considering what is known about GBV and its prevalence in all societies, there is no justification for any objections to or ignorance about the responsibilities of the private sector to develop a strategic approach towards GBV intervention in terms of the GSOs (Galpin et al., 2015). UN Women (2019, p. 6) concludes:

In the workplace, women can find protection, emotional support and respite from the violence they are experiencing at home, through information and referral to services, such as counselling. The support provided by an employer can be the difference between an employee staying in an abusive relationship or taking action to address it. When workplaces understand, recognize and respond to violence against women, women can continue to work and access the support they need.

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