

## Gender-Based Violence and the Workplace

### Report of the Expert Group Meeting

Organized by United National Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women  
(UN Women)

12 & 13 December 2011

#### **Executive Summary**

“Violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

General Assembly Resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993, Article 1

The General Assembly has urged States to end impunity for violence against women, and to continue to develop national strategies and more systematic approaches to preventing gender-based violence and assisting victims.<sup>1</sup> Gender-based violence includes physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. The effects of such violence are sustained and remain with victims even as they enter the workplace. A comprehensive policy that addresses gender-based violence as it also affects the workplace therefore forms a core component of an effective national strategy to oppose gender-based violence.

Accordingly, in December 2010, UN Women convened an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the workplace effects of gender-based violence. The objective of the meeting was to assist the United Nations in exploring the most current and reliable research and analysis on this topic, to identify practiced and reliable strategies and policies for minimizing the workplace effects of gender-based violence and to determine effective guidelines assisting survivors coping with abuse.

Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual violence, stalking and other forms of family violence and abuse have long affected women’s lives. Whether violence occurs within the workplace or outside of it, the detrimental effects of gender-based violence on the workplace are substantial. Experts worldwide increasingly acknowledge the costs to victims and employers alike. Along with this awareness has come

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<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly, Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women (A/RES/63/155, of 18 December 2008).

recognition of the need for proactive strategies to facilitate employees' safety at work and to reduce employers' economic losses associated with employees' experience with gender-based violence.

### **a) Social and Economic Costs to the Workplace**

Violence can and often does follow victims and perpetrators into the workplace. Threats of violence or actual incidents of violence may occur at work, sometimes with tragic results for victims and their coworkers.

When gender-based violence occurs outside the workplace, it still detracts from workplace productivity by increasing absenteeism, employee turnover and resignations without adequate notice. For example, a perpetrator of violence may deliberately sabotage the victim's productivity and diminish her work performance through stalking her at work, by repeatedly phoning, e-mailing or texting the victim during business hours, or by deliberately impairing her ability to show up at work or to arrive on time. Perpetrators' tactics may include, for example, taking away a victim's car keys and refusing to provide her transportation, or thwarting her childcare arrangements.

Gender-based violence significantly increases health related costs as abuse may result in a survivor requiring more frequent and extensive medical care. Additionally, gender-based violence causes physical and mental harm that may incapacitate a victim and increase absenteeism or decrease workplace productivity. Even a minor physical injury or bruising may cause a victim to skip work in order to avoid the shame or embarrassment of inquiries from co-workers.

The economic costs of the workplace effects of gender-based violence in the United States alone, including medical care, mental health services, and lost productivity, are estimated to be in the billions of dollars. In addition to these tangible economic costs, gender-based violence also results in greater economic and social inequalities worldwide and perpetuates negative stereotypes about women's ability to fully participate in the workplace.

### **b) Proposed Workplace Solutions**

The policy and practices proposed here have been carefully designed to minimize the workplace effects of gender-based violence. They focus on assisting victims, holding responsible those employees who are perpetrators, and conducting training and awareness programs for all staff. Leading employers worldwide have implemented policies and practices similar to those discussed in this report and the accompanying proposed policy.

The report makes clear that successful policies to combat the workplace effects of gender-based violence contain the following components to assist victims:

- Elements to disallow retaliation against victims,
- Recommendations for flexibility with the provision of leave and benefits,
- Encouragement for employers to actively participate in safety planning for victims.

An effective policy strongly urges employers addressing gender-based violence in the workplace at all stages to:

- Respect the confidentiality of the situation,
- Defer to the survivors' assessments of safety wherever reasonably possible, and
- Actively promote prevention and awareness training.

When employees are actual or suspected perpetrators of gender-based violence, employers are encouraged to fully investigate the situation and to hold perpetrators accountable. Workers must never be allowed to use workplace resources – such as phones, e-mail or other workplace resources -- to perpetuate abuse. Employers addressing incidents of gender-based violence should take into consideration the wishes of the victim when possible, and gain the benefit of community resources where available.

These proactive strategies will facilitate the safety of all employees while at work, can assist employees who are coping with abuse in safely retaining employment, and should reduce the employers' economic losses associated with employees' experience with gender-based violence.

The UN, as an institution expected to lead by example, has a social responsibility to address the workplace effects of gender-based violence and to demonstrate how an effective, humane institutional policy on gender-based violence and the workplace can operate. In so doing, the UN, like any institution, would benefit from tangible business advantages, reduce the costs and consequences of gender-based violence, increase productivity, and advance its humanitarian mission in its sites and locations worldwide.

This report provides valuable information on the ways gender-based violence impacts the workplace. It discusses lessons learned from policies successfully implemented at other organizations. Together with the accompanying proposed policy, this report presents practices and procedures that will reduce the impact of gender-based violence in the workplace and can assist employees who are victims or survivors of abuse.

