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Gender-Based Violence in the Workplace: Fostering a “See Something, Say Something” Culture

The United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed at the meeting to mark the 25th anniversary of The International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women said “Together, let us strive for a world where dignity and safety are guaranteed for all, not as a privilege, but as a fundamental right.” The International Labour Organization’s Violence and Harassment Convention No 190 of 2019 speaks to the critical role businesses pay in safeguarding the dignity and safety of their workforce. The Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago enshrines the right to personal safety, establishing a crucial framework for protecting individuals from gender-based violence (GBV). The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH) chapter 88:08 mandates that employers ensure workplaces are free from hazards, explicitly including harassment and violence. Workplaces, ideally are spaces of growth and collaboration, often become arenas where these injustices persist, leaving victims vulnerable and organizations grappling with reduced morale, decreased productivity, and eroded trust. Addressing GBV demands strategic and comprehensive response, with employers shouldering the responsibility to cultivate a culture of safety, inclusivity, and accountability. At the heart of this transformation lies the commitment to empowering employees to identify, report, and stand against harmful behaviours, ultimately fostering a “See something, Say Something” culture.

This approach is vital for employers, and ignoring GBV has far-reaching consequences, including legal and financial risks, as organizations face potential lawsuits, regulatory penalties, and reputational harm. Beyond compliance, employers have a moral obligation to protect their workforce, as unchecked GBV can lead to heightened stress, anxiety, and burnout among employees, contributing to absenteeism, low morale, and high turnover. Alternately, a workplace that prioritizes respect and accountability strengthens its organizational culture and would attract top talent and ultimately be more productively and economically efficient. Employers who champion the “See Some-

thing, Say Something” ethos not only mitigate risks, but also position themselves as leaders in cultivating environments where everyone feels valued, safe, and empowered to contribute their best.

Education and awareness play a foundational role in “breaking the silence” and changing the approach to eradicating GBV by being proactive. Organizations should implement regular training programs to educate employees about GBV, its forms, and the importance of intervention. Using real-life scenarios and case studies helps employees better understand the impact of GBV and equips them with practical tools to recognize and address harmful behaviours. Hosting workshops and open dialogues on topics like gender equality, bystander intervention, and respectful workplace behaviour further reinforces these values. Inviting experts to lead such sessions provides valuable perspectives and actionable strategies for combating GBV.

“See Something, Say Something” must be embedded in organisational education, clear policies and robust reporting mechanisms. Establishing a firm zero-tolerance policy against GBV ensures all employees understand unacceptable behaviours and the consequences for violating workplace standards. This policy must be communicated effectively to foster accountability and trust. Furthermore, organizations must provide anonymous and accessible reporting options, such as confidential hotlines or online platforms, to allow employees to report incidents without fear of retaliation. By taking these deliberate steps, organizations not only address GBV proactively but also cultivate a culture of accountability, inclusivity, and safety, ensuring employee well-being and strengthening organizational values.

“See Something, Say Something” cultural change must have the appropriate support resources. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and support initiatives play a crucial role in addressing the impact of GBV

in the workplace. Providing access to counselling and support services through EAPs ensures employees affected by GBV have the resources they need to process their experiences and begin their journey to recovery. Additionally, establishing peer support groups within the organization creates safe spaces for individuals to share their stories and connect with others who understand their challenges, fostering a sense of community and mutual support. Alongside these measures, organizations should actively celebrate positive actions taken against GBV. Recognizing employees who advocate for a safer workplace, whether by reporting incidents, supporting colleagues, or championing anti-GBV initiatives reinforces a culture of accountability and encouragement. By highlighting and rewarding these actions, employers not only inspire others to speak out but they also demonstrate their unwavering commitment to creating a respectful and supportive work environment.

Embracing a “See Something, Say Something” approach, employers can empower employees to actively identify and address harmful behaviors, promoting accountability at all levels. This calls for a committed leadership and comprehensive strategy that incorporates education, clear policies, effective reporting systems, and supportive resources such as EAPs and peer support groups. Recognizing and celebrating positive actions against GBV further strengthens a change culture, inspiring collective dedication to safer workplaces. Ultimately, eliminating GBV in the workplace goes beyond mere compliance; it ensures every individual feel valued, protected, and empowered to thrive, supported by organizational strategies, employer initiatives, aligned with T&T Constitution, the OSH Act, and international frameworks that champion safety and dignity for all.

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