

Johannesburg

26 July 2010

SAFEGUARDING AGAINST WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

South Africa has become renowned worldwide for its high levels of crime; and the nature and outcome of the crime is notoriously violent. In past reports, South Africa has been compared to countries such as Columbia and Serbia, and our country has been classified as the world's second most violent country in the world which is not at war, but ironically at war with itself.

Statistics on crime are dubious, and the citizens of South Africa cannot rely on the reportedly *reducing levels of crime* which the authorities state is the case, through their attempts to provide assurance that the scourge is under control. The ruling party of government has not provided convincing evidence that it has managed to curb, what evidently appears to be a problem out of control - especially in light of the fact that certain elements of our society blatantly appear to receive favour over and above ordinary citizens when it comes to law and order. Of course, past utterances from senior police authorities stating that "people who do not like or agree with the government's actions in dealing with crime can leave the country", don't bode well for the many victim's, or future victims of crime in our country. Neither do such statements instill the necessary confidence in our country's local or foreign investors.

Whilst this article does not attempt to provide any in-depth reasons for South Africa's unacceptable high levels of crime -- which have undeniably increased since our democratic walk to freedom in 1994 -- it would appear that as long as the divide between the *have's* and *have-nots* continues to widen, that the crime dilemma will continue to increase at a greater rate than our ability to contain it. Moreover, the fact that so many South Africans have been exposed to the affects of crime -- including our bizarre acclimatisation thereof -- strongly suggests that it has become ingrained within the fabric of our society. Indeed, the affects of crime and our ability to try and circumvent its vicious impacts, has resulted in various countermeasures being taken by the citizens of South Africa to protect themselves in various shapes, forms or methods (irrespective of these being legal or illegal as the case may be.) Understandably, the degree to which such protective measures may be taken to protect oneself, depends almost entirely upon the social standing and financial means available to the individual. And while affluent people may improve their immediate surroundings, for example their personal residence or their motor vehicles, in essence they remain exposed to crime in the workplace. Arguably, this is where employees become their most vulnerable.

Increasingly, employers will need to become more vigilant to prevent workplace violence before it occurs -- and in particular be equipped to deal with it -- save for the employers being taken criminally to task by their employees who suffer these forms of abuse whilst they are in their employ. Because violent crime has become so instilled within our culture, the likelihood of an employee becoming a victim of workplace violence, notwithstanding the increased tensions across various ethnic groups and cultures, is very high. By its definition, workplace violence is violence or the threat of violence against employees and it can occur at or outside the workplace, usually ranging from threats and verbal abuse, to physical assaults or even homicide -- being one of the leading causes of job-related deaths.

Workplace violence can strike anywhere, anytime and no one is immune from it. Some employees however are at a greater risk, and these include attacks on female employees; younger age group or inexperienced employees; employees from different or minority ethnic groups; employees working in service delivery; those who exchange money with the public; those who deliver passengers, goods and services; those who work alone or in small groups or community settings; those who work in high crime areas, or those with unusual working hours or conditions, amongst other. Naturally this list is not exhaustive, and industry sectors most commonly associated with workplace violence includes; healthcare and social services, security services, community

workers, utility and service providers, retail and distribution centers, public transportation operators and of course, any environment associated with gambling or the drug trade.

As this manifestation of crime within the workplace rears its ugly head -- often spilling over into other people's lives -- employers have a statutory duty toward its employees to ensure that each employee is afforded the necessary protection against this crime. While various concrete steps to avoid this abuse must be taken by organisations through measures such as Employee Protection policies, simultaneously; companies are legally obliged to protect their employees through their implementation and compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Employment Equity Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, and the Constitution of South Africa (1996).

In conclusion, Dr. Susan Steinman, an internationally recognised social entrepreneur and specialist in workplace violence states that, "workplace violence is an infringement of human rights. Having dignity and respect adequately enhanced in labour laws and corporate cultures requires commitment, advocacy and the voice of the victims."

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