



February 2022

Gender based violence, a symptom of gender inequality

This month saw the 244th violent death of a woman in Ireland since 1996 and it has sparked long overdue conversations about gender-based violence.

The issue of gender-based violence and women's safety is one that business has been conscious of for quite some time. Organisations have identified potential risks and implemented policies and procedures around lone workers, transport late at night, sexual harassment in the workplace, and dignity at work to provide a safe working environment for all. At this time, when many employees are already mentally fatigued and anxious because of the pandemic and its associated actions, the events of Ashling Murphy's recent murder and others like Urantsetseg Tserendorj last year as she returned from work, increased reports on gender-based violence, may add to that anxiety and lead to some employee's feeling vulnerable or traumatised. Many employers are re-sharing the details of employee assistance programmes (EAP) or supports that are available to employees who may wish to speak to someone. Others are looking at existing employee resource groups and planning to host open and frank discussions about the issue of gender-based violence with employees.

Unfortunately, gender-based violence is a symptom of a greater issue caused by gender inequality. While Ireland has made significant progress in addressing this issue, another horrific murder of a woman and the reactions and responses to it, remind us that under the surface, our hard-won gender equality progress is fragile and not as far progressed as we would have hoped. Tackling gender-based violence and preventing it from occurring will require a whole of society approach and a cultural change in how we discuss men, women and gender.

This systemic issue concerns gender norms and stereotypes, it is rooted in unconscious bias and attitudes towards the role of men and women in all aspects of our society, from the jobs and careers they hold, to their responsibility for child and elder care. In the workplace that can be portrayed by multiple forms of gender inequalities which can result in the gender representation issue that feeds the gender pay gap, and the lack of women in executive leadership and board positions.

Business has been working on tackling gender inequality in many ways, from the examination of language and bias in job advertisements and recruitment processes; training



HRlink
Inspiring workplace excellence

staff in unconscious bias; having zero tolerance for sexual harassment and ensuring that all voices are heard. CEO and senior leadership commitment to diverse, equal and respectful workplaces provide a necessary foundation for addressing gender inequality.

However, the workplace is only one arena in which this must be addressed. It will require education and awareness raising from early years onwards; school-age sex education regarding consent, respect and appropriate relationships; how we talk to and about women in Ireland; what is accepted language and behaviour across society, including in the workplace; and an understanding of how both joking along or staying silent where misogynistic or sexist comments are made ultimately communicates acceptance or tacit approval; if we are to get to the foundation of such issues.

The role of male allies and voices are part of the solution, both to support their female colleagues, and other women, while also reducing the spaces in which sexist and misogynistic men feel their language and behaviour is condoned or seen as normal. While individual acts of sexism may appear benign, they create a climate of intimidation, fear and insecurity and lead to acceptance of gender-based violence.

The solution is not to “fix” the women. It is about amending harmful attitudes and behaviours that are still seen as socially acceptable. It is about making our society and culture safer for women and that will require effort by both men and women, the family, the education system, the workplace and government, for real change to occur.

The gender equality conversation needs to change from a divisive zero-sum game where one gender has to “lose” for the other to “win”, to one that co-creates an equal, fair society where we all have a role to play and opportunities to fulfil. Failure to address the systemic issue of gender inequality which drives this problem will make any effort to raise awareness or address gender-based violence appear both tokenistic and lacking in legitimacy.

While business has been making significant progress around gender equality, it remains fragile and there is more work to be done. Ibec will continue to work with business and stakeholders to support their employees, address gender inequality and promote equality, diversity and inclusion throughout all workplace interactions.

Kara McGann
Head of Social Policy