

2025 RAPPORETEURS REPORT

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CEO 
CONNECT
FORUM

Accelerating Action for
Gender Equality

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“We can’t end what we won’t confront.”

This was the quiet, unspoken truth that echoed through the Johannesburg Stock Exchange auditorium on March 28th, 2025, as over 100 leaders and changemakers from across the corporate spectrum gathered for the CEO Connect Forum hosted by Shared Value Africa and KPMG. In a world increasingly shaped by the need for both purpose and performance, the forum was strategically timed to amplify the message of International Women's Month 2025 and themed “Accelerate Action: Urgency and Unity for Gender Equality.” It offered a clarion call to companies to shift from conversation to action by addressing gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) not as a peripheral Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) item but as a systemic issue embedded in the DNA of corporate culture and leadership. The event's central premise was clear and consistently emphasised: while awareness of GBVH has increased, a significant gap remains between dialogue and effective action.

Moderated by Joy Ruwodo, the forum aimed to bridge this gap by fostering candid conversations, challenging traditional paradigms, sharing practical solutions, and galvanising concrete commitments to systemic change within the private sector.

Opening Remarks

Joy Ruwodo, Head of the Gender Equality Unit at Shared Value Africa, initiated the forum with a powerful welcome address. She immediately set a tone of urgency, challenging attendees to move beyond simply acknowledging the problem of GBVH, emphasising the critical need for measurable change. She opened with a sobering reminder:

“The data is clear, the cost of inaction is too high, and we can no longer afford to treat gender equality as a side conversation.”

Ruwodo's opening remarks highlighted the forum's focus on actionable outcomes and accountability, urging participants to translate their concern into concrete strategies and interventions. She articulated the forum's objective as a platform to drive meaningful change by embedding gender equality into corporate strategy and tackling GBVH in the workplace.

Keynote: The Urgency of Action

Ignatius Sehoole, CEO of KPMG Southern Africa and Chair of KPMG Africa, delivered a powerful keynote, grounding the day in stark reality. He shared harrowing statistics: over 53,000 sexual offences and 42,500 rapes recorded in South Africa in 2024, and more than 900 women murdered in the same period. Ignatius expressed deep concern about what he perceived as society's growing desensitisation to these statistics, urging everyone to “imagine being in the shoes of that one woman” and to recognise the profound psychological and social impact of GBVH. He stressed that these numbers represent real lives irrevocably affected by violence and he drew on personal stories, including a tragic account from his own community, to illustrate the lifelong trauma survivors endure.

Ignatius highlighted findings from KPMG's pilot study: **78% of South African corporates lack GBV awareness training and 94% do not have effective workplace policies** - a critical gap in leadership accountability. He emphasised that while policies alone aren't enough, they are an essential starting point for driving meaningful change.

Ignatius called for proactive engagement, continuous learning, and, above all, **male leadership in the movement against GBVH**:

"Unless and until this movement is led by men, we will struggle to conquer this."

He urged men to become active allies who intervene when witnessing abuse, challenge harmful stereotypes, and actively contribute to cultivating a culture of respect and accountability - insisting that "a woman that's been abused is your business." He reiterated the importance of acknowledging the psychological wounds inflicted by GBVH, which are often invisible but deeply damaging.

Setting the Scene: Do We Need Gender Equality in the Workplace?

Professor Anita Bosch, Research Chair of Women at Work from Stellenbosch Business School, provided a crucial contextual framework by addressing the fundamental importance of gender equality in the workplace. Bosch's presentation expanded the conversation beyond a narrow focus on women, emphasising that genuine gender equality is not an isolated objective but an integral component of a broader social and economic ecosystem. Her message was clear:

"Gender equality is not just about women; it's about building a society where everyone can thrive."

She highlighted the interconnectedness of workplace equality with societal factors such as childcare, safety, and evolving gender roles. Bosch challenged the notion that gender equality has been achieved, particularly in societies grappling with deeply ingrained traditional norms, emphasising the ongoing need for systemic change and cultural transformation. She cautioned against complacency, stating that "the journey is not complete" and that a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics is crucial for progress which is already fragile and requiring collective effort.

Corporate Realities: The Readiness Gap

Thuthula Ndunge, KPMG's Transformation & Inclusion Lead, presented a sobering assessment of corporate readiness and offered a practical perspective on addressing GBVH within organisations. Drawing on the 2023 KPMG pilot study of 250,000 employees, she reiterated Ignatius' earlier point that 78% of South African companies surveyed lack GBV awareness training, and a staggering 94% do not have adequate or comprehensive workplace policies to address the issue.

"We are leaving people behind - especially women - vulnerable, silenced, and unsupported," she said.

Thuthula highlighted the business case for action, noting the significant business and economic costs of inaction. Absenteeism, productivity loss, reputational damage, and the impact on employee well-

being are all hidden costs when silence prevails. She emphasised that creating safe and respectful workplaces is essential for attracting and retaining talent, fostering employee engagement, and driving overall business success. This was cemented by practical examples of what progressive action looks like, for instance, Woolworths' integration of "safe spaces" into their retail environments - showcasing that corporate policy can become personal protection when values align with action.

She emphasised that "addressing GBVH is not just a moral imperative but a business one," and called for leadership accountability, practical interventions, and a culture of zero tolerance for harassment and discrimination. Ndunge's practical guidance on developing effective workplace policies, with emphasis on the importance of clear reporting mechanisms, confidential support for victims, and accountability for perpetrators was well received.

Fireside Chat:

The forum incorporated a fireside chat format to facilitate deeper engagement with key speakers, including Professor Anita Bosch, Ignatius Sehoole, and Tiekie Barnard, CEO of Shared Value Africa. This session provided an opportunity for more nuanced discussions and allowed attendees to explore specific challenges and potential solutions in greater detail.

Ignatius Sehoole spoke with striking candour about the need for corporate leaders to move from passive awareness to deliberate, strategic inclusion. He underscored how tokenism has no place in boardrooms and shared KPMG's internal audit tools designed to measure diversity and hold leaders accountable.

"Leadership has to own this issue... We cannot outsource gender transformation to HR. It must be driven from the top."

Tiekie Barnard emphasised collective responsibility and cross-sector collaboration.

"The private sector can no longer work in isolation. If we want systemic change, we need to invest in partnerships that go beyond our balance sheets."

Prof. Anita Bosch zeroed in on the power dynamics that silence victims of GBVH. She advocated for building "psychologically safe" workplaces and implementing restorative approaches alongside zero-tolerance policies. Her recommendation to focus on "*building back trust through transparency and leadership modelling*" resonated deeply.

The room was abuzz with candid questions and lived experiences shared by participants.

Key topics explored during the fireside chat included:

- **Measuring Impact:** Participants discussed the complexities of effectively tracking progress in addressing GBVH beyond the implementation of written policies. The need for robust metrics, data collection, and evaluation frameworks was emphasised to ensure accountability and measure the effectiveness of interventions.

- **Unintended Consequences:** The discussion acknowledged the potential for unintended consequences of women's empowerment initiatives. One story stood out: a rural development programme that empowered women economically - but triggered backlash from men in their homes. The unintended consequence? Increased GBVH. Participants stressed the importance of holistic and integrated approaches that address the root causes of inequality and consider the interplay of various social factors. Without cultural inclusion and male engagement, empowerment initiatives can provoke, rather than prevent, harm.
- **Ethical Considerations:** The ethical implications of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) in GBVH cases were debated extensively, with a strong stance emerging against their use to silence victims and protect perpetrators. The importance of survivor-centric approaches, transparency, and prioritising the well-being of the affected individuals was highlighted.
- **Intersectionality:** The chat also touched on the importance of an intersectional approach, acknowledging that GBVH affects individuals differently based on their gender, race, sexual orientation, and other social identities. The need for tailored interventions that address the specific needs of diverse groups was emphasised.

Benefits of Respectful Workplaces:

Simphiwe Mabhele, Technical Advisor at the International Labour Organization (ILO), provided valuable insights on the benefits of respectful workplaces and pointed to ILO Convention 190 (C190) as a practical tool for organisations seeking to address GBVH and foster inclusive environments. Mabhele emphasised the importance of decent work principles, including the fundamental right to a workplace free from violence and harassment, as enshrined in ILO C190.

He highlighted the positive impacts of respectful workplaces on employee well-being, productivity, innovation and organisational performance. The session underscored that creating a culture of respect is not only a social responsibility but also a sound business strategy that contributes to a more engaged, motivated, and productive workforce. Mabhele stressed that decent work is about dignity, respect, and creating workplaces where every individual can thrive.

Panel Discussion: Corporate Leadership in Action:

The forum's panel discussion featured prominent leaders from Standard Bank, ENS Africa, and Avon, who showcased concrete examples of corporate initiatives to address GBVH.

- **Ndumiso Mngomezulu**, Strategic Brand Marketing & Corporate Affairs Leader at AVON explained how they are leveraging their extensive networks to raise awareness about GBVH and provide support to employees and communities. He elaborated on AVON's strategy in working with traditional leaders in KwaZulu Natal - an initiative aimed at dismantling harmful social norms through community engagement. Ndumiso reminded the audience that fighting GBVH requires "trust capital" in communities often overlooked by formal institutions and he

emphasised the role of businesses in promoting gender equality through their communication and outreach efforts.

- **Natasha Wagiet**, Pro Bono Manager at ENS Africa highlighted their provision of pro bono legal assistance to survivors, ensuring access to justice and legal protection. She spoke to the legal fraternity's responsibility in ensuring access to justice and safety for survivors, spotlighting the current work of ENS in pro bono litigation and legal literacy workshops. She emphasised the importance of equipping women with legal knowledge and protection, not only within companies but within communities. Lastly, she stressed the importance of advocating for legal reforms that strengthen protections for victims and hold perpetrators accountable.
- **Pearl Phoolo**, Head of Corporate Social Investment (CSI) at Standard Bank South Africa spoke about their apex funding model's commitment to investing in grassroots organisations and healthcare programs that provide essential support to survivors of intimate partner violence. A blueprint for equitable resource allocation, these insights clarified the link between financial strategy and social equity - showing that how companies fund GBVH initiatives reflects their commitment. Phoolo further emphasised the importance of providing comprehensive support services that address the immediate needs of victims and empower them to rebuild their lives.

The panel discussion demonstrated that meaningful action is possible when corporate leaders prioritise GBVH prevention and support. It also highlighted the importance of cross-sector collaboration and partnerships between businesses, government, and civil society organisations to achieve systemic change.

Audience Interactive Session:

The forum included another interactive session that encouraged active participation from the audience, fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas and perspectives. Attendees engaged in lively discussions, sharing their experiences, asking challenging questions, and contributing to the development of actionable solutions.

A key theme that emerged from the audience interaction was the need for a "GBVH universe," a centralised hub for data-driven insights, resources, and best practices to guide effective interventions across the private sector. Participants also emphasised the crucial role of engaging traditional leaders, community members, and faith-based organisations to address the root causes of GBVH, including historical injustices and harmful cultural norms. The discussions underscored the importance of culturally sensitive and community-informed approaches to prevention and intervention.

Closing Remarks and Call to Action:

Makgotso Letsitsi, Head of Citizenship, Public Interest, and Transformation at KPMG South Africa, provided the closing remarks, reinforcing the urgency for action and issuing a powerful call to corporate leaders. She urged them to move beyond performative gestures and commit to long-term,

sustainable solutions to GBVH. The CEO Connect Forum served as an undeniable turning point for many attendees. By moving beyond the familiar rhetoric, it ignited a renewed sense of urgency and a commitment to tangible action. The commitment to forming the GBV Alliance, a powerful coalition of corporate leaders focused on providing treatment and support to survivors, signals a promising step forward.

Key recommendations and calls to action included:

- Reassessing internal workplace policies through a survivor-centred lens, prioritising the needs and safety of those affected by GBVH.
- Embedding GBVH interventions into core business strategies rather than limiting them to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts, recognising GBVH as a business imperative.
- Participating in cross-sector collaboration, beginning with initiatives such as the Leadership Alliance to End GBVF, to maximise collective impact.
- Committing to ongoing dialogue, learning, and sharing of best practices to continuously improve responses to GBVH.

Noting that the private sector has both the power and responsibility to drive change, Letsitsi emphasised that every organisation has a crucial role to play in addressing GBVH, starting within the spaces they influence daily. She closed with a challenge:

“Ending GBVH requires intentional strategies, robust policies, courageous leadership, and authentic engagement with employees and communities. Learnings from this forum should serve as a catalyst for transformative action.”

Join the Movement

The CEO Connect Forum 2025 was a powerful reminder that change is possible when leaders unite with urgency and purpose. As we look ahead, the message is clear:

Will we be bystanders, or will we lead the charge for a gender-equal, violence-free future?

Acknowledgment

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