



Guidance Note 8: Zero Tolerance

Having a zero-tolerance policy in relation to gender based violence and harassment (GBVH), in principle, is a good idea. However, how that policy is expressed and put into operation can have different outcomes and potentially lead to unintended consequences for victims and survivors. This discussion has been had on similar issues such as child labour in the supply chain.

This note is provided to help companies in considering the application of a zero-tolerance approach to GBVH. The guidance should support all companies in deciding whether and what type of zero tolerance policy it should have.



What's in a Zero Tolerance policy?

The first step is to consider whether to have a zero-tolerance policy, and, if so, what is the focus of the policy. This guidance weighs up the approaches:

A zero tolerance policy that requires no GBVH in the workplace at a supplier level.

While this may sound good in theory, such a policy may be unrealistic. GBVH occurs in workplaces globally. While this is not acceptable, requirements for no cases is likely to result in perverse incentives, as employers will almost certainly find GBVH in the workplace. Zero tolerance policies can encourage workplaces to hide instances of GBVH meaning the issues cannot be dealt with and the situation improved. Workplaces may fire employees who make complaints (or are the subjects of complaints) contributing to further trauma to the individual who has been the target of workplace GBVH.

In addition to hiding the number of cases, workplaces become more focused on getting close to zero recorded complaints related to GBVH as opposed to strengthening the policies, processes, and systems around GBVH. Suppliers are less likely to be open and seek advice, guidance, and support from buyers and experts to make these improvements (particularly in cases where increased training and open reporting can lead to more cases being filed and reported due to more awareness and trust at the workplace).

A zero tolerance policy for GBVH in the workplace

A more appropriate place for a zero tolerance policy on the GBVH is within each individual company, with a focus on employees of that company. This sets a clear standard for all employees to follow. This must still be handled with caution, however. A zero tolerance policy that results in automatic dismissal can create the same reporting disincentive mentioned above. Individuals who may just want the behaviour to stop will not speak up as they fear that the perpetrator will be fired and the individual who reported will be targeted.

A zero tolerance policy on inaction on reports on GBVH

The best place to focus zero tolerance is on inaction. A policy such as this accepts that GBVH incidents are possible, and, meets this reality with the requirement that they are dealt with. Such a policy encourages open communication and dialogue between parties. It enables transparent tracking of response and results. Such a policy can reward resolution of complaints that is effective, rights based, and victim and survivor-centred while still working towards the eradication of GBVH in the world of work.