

## The female workplace experience



Gender inequality in the workplace on a global scale is a well-documented reality. And homing in on the local context will reveal that in South Africa, gender discrimination in the world of business is particularly acute. While significant strides have been made to remedy the situation, there is still much work to be done. Understanding the gender nuanced dimensions of the working environment and the female employee experience is a critical step in working towards a sustainable solution.

South African employees are faced with the mammoth task of unravelling centuries of gender discrimination. It is a task however, that needs to be tackled head-on if we are to make serious progress towards becoming a more economically inclusive nation.

The inaugural State of Employee Wellbeing Barometer study conducted by Floatpays showed that the general state of employee wellbeing in South Africa is average at best. Further findings found that on average, South African men rate their working environment more positively than women.

A look at the nature of this financial stress revealed that women are more likely to suffer stress due to pressures relating to household expense management and caretaking.

According to the Barometer, women are 10% more likely than men to experience food expenses as a financial stress factor. They are also 8% more likely to experience stress related to household expenses when compared to men.

This data points to the fact that women, as the majority of primary caregivers, shoulder a larger part of the burden of running a household both in a domestic and financial sense. The plight of women in this

regard was brought into stark focus recently by several studies that measured the disproportionate impact of the COVID19 pandemic on women, and gave rise to the term 'shecession'.

The financial stress experienced by women as it relates to aspects such as remuneration, working conditions, opportunities for training and development, and culture, is compounded by the weight of their domestic responsibilities. There is therefore an undeniable need for employers to implement gender-informed wellbeing policies and initiatives that can address this issue and bring about meaningful and long-lasting change the female employee experience.

Gender inequality plays out in multiple scenarios, one of the most prominent of which includes the gender pay gap. The National Business Initiative's Gender Pay Gap Pilot Report for 2021 analysed the median hourly earnings of women and men employees across different firms. In 60% of the firms, the median wage for women was significantly lower, with a gap of almost 40% in earning difference.

Other dimensions of the gender pay gap include the fact that South African women experience the highest level of unemployment when compared to men. As a result, women-headed households face higher poverty rates. In a country where over 40% of households are headed by women, which subsequently have higher dependency levels, the knock-on effects of the pay disparity have the biggest impact on the most vulnerable members of society.

There are two major components that characterise the gender pay gap - the fact that women are paid less for the same jobs that men perform and the fact that women are vastly underrepresented in senior leadership roles.

Workplace policies are also found wanting with regards to gender-specific needs. According to Stats SA, the proportion of employees who are entitled to paid sick leave is higher among men. Furthermore, 89% of men are entitled to paternity leave, whereas only 76.8% of women are entitled to maternity leave. Considering that women are the physical bearers of children and are more likely to fulfil the role of maternal and financial caregivers for newborns and young children, this blatant disparity reveals much about the state of gender inequality at the most fundamental of levels. HR practitioners, therefore, have a key role to play in, acknowledging and rectifying workplace gender inequality not only as a social injustice but also as a very real stressor that has far-reaching effects on the wellbeing of female employees and their career trajectories. Financial stress is the opposite of financial wellbeing. Solutions therefore need to take the social makeup of South African society into account, where, as it stands, women are called upon to perform in unequal workplaces while also contending with the pressures of maintaining their households.