

Gender Safety: Exploring Gender Safety Issues Faced by Professionals in the EHS Field

“Being the only woman in the EHS Department, my male counterparts always expected me to handle the serving of teas and lunches for the department’s guest trainers and auditors. I wanted to sit, network and pick the guests’ brains.”

In this modern world that preaches equality for all and even has Gender Equality as one of its global goals under the UN Sustainable Development Goals, a close look into the topic within the EHS profession is paramount.

Though the words “gender” and “sex” are widely interchangeable with the difference often been overlooked, it is important to define what gender really is so as to give perspective to the topic. Gender is defined as the socially constructed roles and behaviours that a society typically associates with males and females. Gender can also refer to one’s identity as female or male or as neither entirely female nor entirely male. In contrast, sex is defined by either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions. Therefore, whereas we are broadly defined as either male or female in terms of sex, we can be a whole array of identities under gender.

In the African setup, it was socially expected that males carry out the tough jobs because they were supposed to be strong whereas females were socially expected to carry out lighter duties around home making and nurturing everything around them. The advancement of gender equality in the workplace has been met by a strong pushback which is the traditional gender socialization as well as socially acceptable sexual orientation amongst diverse persons.

The field of Environment, Occupational Health and Safety (EHS) is very diverse with different specializations within the profession. These specializations include but are not limited to: Occupational/ Industrial Hygiene, Fire Fighting, OSH Specialists, EHS Advisors, Compliance auditors/inspectors, EHS Trainers, Occupational nurses, Emergency Responders, Safety engineer, Security managers amongst others. While there are challenges that are unique in these different specializations in the profession, there are those that are experienced across the board by almost all professionals in the field.

Some of the common EHS issues faced by professionals in the field include veteran syndrome, acquisition of proper PPE especially for people on either extremes i.e. 10th and 90th percentile of body types/sizes, the working environment or the hazards present, physical violence as well as work-related stresses.

One of the most common challenge faced by males in the profession is physical violence. In recent years, there have been recorded incidences of physical violence meted against men in the profession; particularly EHS Officers in the construction industry. Another common challenge is the traumatic injuries that are common in the profession. While most workplaces identify psychological trauma as an effect of injuries/ accidents and provide for necessary support, it is still uncommon to find male EHS professionals

seeking help because of the societal conditioning that “men should not talk about their emotions”. Other challenges faced by men include normative expectations relating to masculinity/ hyper-masculinity, “moving presentations” and women bosses.

With EHS being more of a male dominated field, there are more perceived challenges for females. Acquiring fitting PPE tops the list of challenges faced by women in this field. Most manufactures tend not to focus on female's smaller fit for shoes. Furthermore, protective clothing tend to be made considering the male physique then made a size smaller for females. This does not put into consideration the wide array of curviness amongst women as well as pregnancy friendly PPE.

Lack of/insufficient mentorship and support programs for females is a major challenge too. There are not as many women in the field that are well advanced in their careers. There is poor retention of women as time goes by in this field. As such, young and upcoming women do not have enough women who can hold their hands. Of course this is improving as years go by. It is also common for women professionals in the field to be overlooked in support programs such as scholarships and professional trainings as most employers have the notion that the investment in the woman will be “lost” when they leave the organization and/or profession.

Cultural beliefs have also been a hindrance to the women in this field. In most African communities, it is considered a taboo or bad luck for a woman to go into a mine or the surrounding areas. This has negatively impacted the professional growth of female EHS professionals that find themselves in such industries.

Societal expectations of the role of women has also been a challenge. While there has been enormous efforts on pushing females to follow their dreams, the expectations that surround their lives outside work have been a big impeding factor. Women are expected to be fabric that holds together the family unit, support the spouse and take care of the children. This may be challenging to females whose work sites are

away from home such as in the mining industry. Additionally, some workplaces might have odd working hours such as night shifts and weekend work; all which require a representation from the EHS department. Women in the EHS roles might feel torn between their professional duties and their family duties.

Other challenges that females in the profession face include: sexual harassment and absence of/weakened reporting systems, skepticism and misconceptions on their abilities, gender bias, imposter syndrome, gender pay gap that often demoralizes females, female under-representation in leadership positions as well as different perception of risks.

In addition to the issues faced by either males or females, individuals in the profession who identify themselves as being in the LGBTQIA community face unique gender specific challenges. These challenges include discrimination e.g. for opportunities, violence, sexual harassment and even sexual assault.

While the issues discussed here are not complete and there might be many more gender-specific challenges faced by professionals in the field, there are some solutions suggested from some of the issues raised. These solutions include emboldened recruitment and retention efforts especially for women, manufacturing/sourcing for fitting PPE that adequately protects the user, formalized mentorship and sponsorship programs especially for women, diversity and inclusion in workplaces with more women in leadership, properly defined workplace violence, zero tolerance policies to prevent behaviours like sexual harassment and violence, building emotional intelligence (EI) capacity by all as well as provision of support systems/programs for traumatic experiences that might occur in the workplace.

When differences are taken into account so as to address challenges faced by different groups of people, everyone benefits. This is not about special treatment. If groups of people do not have a voice at the table, then their perspectives are lost; along with the opportunities to protect the workforce at large. Diverse perspectives are needed for diverse problems.