Building a Fairer World, One Workplace at a Time: Combating Discrimination and Harassment for Social Justice in Sierra Leone

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Imagine a work environment where respect and opportunity reign supreme, where individual merit is the only currency that matters. Sadly, for many in Sierra Leone, this reality remains elusive. Workplace discrimination and harassment cast a long shadow, hindering not only individual progress but also the nation's development. It is disheartening to acknowledge that workplace discrimination and harassment continue to pose significant obstacles to individuals' rights and social progress, not only in Sierra Leone but also in many other regions around the globe. We must take steps towards creating a safer and more inclusive work environment for everyone.

I acknowledge that despite concerted efforts to address these issues, they endure due to entrenched cultural norms, societal prejudices, and inadequate enforcement of existing laws. The impact of these challenges is far-reaching, affecting the mental well-being and career advancement of individuals while fostering toxic work environments that are detrimental to productivity and social cohesion.

This article delves into this pervasive issue, highlighting its root causes, existing legal frameworks, and most importantly, practical solutions for employers to prevent and address these injustices effectively.

Despite Sierra Leone's commitment to international human rights treaties, societal norms and cultural biases continue to fuel discrimination. Age-old prejudices based on gender, ethnicity, and even disability create invisible barriers, denying individuals their rightful place at the table. The 2022 US Embassy report serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need to dismantle these insidious structures, particularly for vulnerable groups in rural areas and informal sectors. Although legislative frameworks exist, their implementation and enforcement remain inadequate.

THE STATUS OF DISCRIMINATION IN SIERRA LEONE

Despite some progress towards inclusivity, workplace discrimination and harassment remain prevalent in Sierra Leone. Cultural norms, underreporting, and weak enforcement mechanisms contribute to a climate of impunity, particularly affecting rural areas and informal sectors. Nevertheless, there are signs of hope, including civil society campaigns, government initiatives promoting gender equality, and empowerment programs aimed at vulnerable groups. To translate these hopeful signs into substantive change, Sierra Leone must enact comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, establish robust reporting mechanisms, and enhance public awareness. Legal aid, counselling services, and safe spaces for victims are essential components of a holistic approach to addressing workplace discrimination.
Furthermore, transparent workplace policies prioritising meritocracy over prejudice are vital for fostering a culture of inclusivity and fairness.

Sierra Leone's legal framework provides a foundation for combating workplace discrimination and harassment. The Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on various grounds, including race, tribe, gender, religion, and political opinion. However, certain provisions, such as the age limit for presidential candidacy, may warrant review to ensure alignment with principles of non-discrimination and equal opportunity. Additionally, legislative measures such as the Sexual Offences Act 2012, the Employment Act 2023, and the Persons with Disabilities Act 2011 offer protection against various forms of discrimination and harassment. Furthermore, recent legislation, such as the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act, though indirect in its approach, lays the groundwork for promoting broader equality and representation. Sierra Leone's commitment to international conventions, such as the ICCPR, CEDAW, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, further reinforces its dedication to upholding human rights standards in the workplace.

Despite legislative safeguards, Sierra Leone grapples with formidable challenges in effectively implementing and enforcing anti-discrimination measures within its workplaces. Discrimination, entrenched in various insidious forms ranging from overt biases to subtle microaggressions, permeates the fabric of the employment landscape. Its corrosive effects extend far beyond the individual victims who bear its brunt, casting a pervasive shadow over job satisfaction, productivity, and organisational reputation.

The impact of workplace discrimination reverberates like ripples in a pond, touching every corner of the professional sphere. Individuals subjected to discriminatory practices endure the indignity of unjust treatment and the erosion of their morale and sense of belonging within their work environment. Such experiences breed feelings of alienation and disenchantment, sowing seeds of discord that stifle creativity, collaboration, and productivity. Moreover, the reputational damage inflicted upon organisations tarnishes their standing in the eyes of employees, clients, and stakeholders, undermining trust and credibility.

To bridge the chasm between legislative intent and practical outcomes, Sierra Leone must embark on a concerted and proactive course of action. Prioritising comprehensive training and awareness-raising initiatives is paramount to instilling a collective consciousness that rejects discrimination in all its guises. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms and swift and decisive action against perpetrators is imperative to deter future transgressions and uphold the rule of law. Equally crucial is providing robust support services for victims, encompassing counselling, legal assistance, and avenues for redress, affirming their rights and facilitating their journey towards healing and justice.

Harassment in the workplace, whether sexual, racial, or bullying, poses significant challenges to employee well-being and organisational culture. It can lead to stress, anxiety,
and diminished productivity, creating a toxic work environment detrimental to morale and teamwork. Effective prevention and response strategies, including clear reporting mechanisms, thorough investigations, and disciplinary measures against perpetrators, are essential for creating safe and inclusive workplaces.

Victims of workplace harassment in Sierra Leone have access to legal remedies and protections under existing laws. The Constitution guarantees the right to equality and freedom from discrimination, while legislation such as the Sexual Offences Act 2012 and the Employment Act 2023 provide specific provisions addressing harassment in the workplace. Victims can seek redress through internal reporting mechanisms or legal channels, with the law providing compensation, disciplinary action against perpetrators, and other remedies to protect their rights.

To effectively combat the insidious presence of workplace discrimination and harassment within Sierra Leone, a multifaceted strategy is imperative. This approach must encompass legal reforms and proactive measures aimed at raising awareness and providing robust support systems for victims. Here are eight essential best practices that Sierra Leone should adopt to combat these injustices:

The cornerstone of any effective anti-discrimination strategy lies in developing comprehensive policies explicitly prohibiting discrimination and harassment in all their forms. These policies should leave no room for ambiguity, clearly outlining acceptable and unacceptable behaviours while establishing the consequences for violations.

Education is critical to fostering a workplace culture that values inclusivity and respect. Regular training sessions should be conducted to equip employees with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognise, prevent, and address instances of discrimination and harassment effectively.

Victims of discrimination and harassment must feel empowered to come forward without fear of retaliation or stigma. Establishing secure and confidential reporting mechanisms, such as anonymous hotlines or dedicated email addresses, is crucial to creating a safe environment for individuals to voice their concerns.

Every complaint of discrimination or harassment must be treated with the utmost seriousness and impartiality. Thorough investigations should ensure that all parties involved are heard and appropriate actions are taken to address any wrongdoing.

Beyond mere compliance with policies, fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect is essential for eradicating discrimination and harassment in the workplace. This involves actively promoting diversity, encouraging open dialogue, and celebrating the unique contributions of every employee.
Leaders are pivotal in shaping organisational culture and setting the tone for acceptable behaviour. They must lead by example, championing diversity and inclusivity while holding themselves and others accountable for upholding these principles.

Workplace policies must be regularly reviewed and updated in a rapidly evolving landscape to reflect emerging best practices and legal requirements. This ensures that the organisation remains proactive in addressing new challenges and avoiding potential risks.

Recognising the significant impact that discrimination and harassment can have on individuals, organisations must provide comprehensive support services for victims. This includes access to counselling, legal assistance, and other resources to aid recovery and facilitate justice.

By implementing these best practices, Sierra Leone can take meaningful strides towards creating a workplace environment free from discrimination and harassment, where every individual is valued, respected, and empowered to thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government, civil society, the private sector, international partners, employers, employees, and organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) all have roles to play in combatting workplace discrimination and harassment. Key recommendations include enforcing existing laws, raising awareness, providing training and resources, establishing clear policies, and fostering stakeholder collaboration to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace environment.

In conclusion, combating workplace discrimination and harassment in Sierra Leone requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders. By addressing root causes, strengthening legal frameworks, and implementing best practices, Sierra Leone can foster a culture of social justice and equality in its workplaces, thereby promoting individual well-being and sustainable development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Sawaneh is a Lawyer, Human Rights and Environmental Justice Advocate, Corporate Trainer, and Speaker. He is recognized for his work in Peace and Leadership, Corporate governance, Youth Empowerment, Gender Equality, and Sustainable Development. He has received awards from the RISE ATHLETICS ACADEMY and the Global Peace and Leadership Academy separately. As a Lawyer, he specializes in Client care, Advocacy, Problem-solving, Attention to detail, and civil and criminal practice. As a Human Rights and Rule of Law Practitioner, he has expertise in International Human Rights Law, Advocacy, Project Management, Leadership, and Communication. He volunteers at the Corporate Leadership Academy, Sierra Leone Legal Information Institute (SierraLii) and the Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHRDI). Daniel holds two undergraduate degrees and
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