

## 8th UN Forum on Business and Human Rights

### Gender Guidance for the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: From Paper to Practice, 27 November 2019.

*Panel intervention by:* Dr. Meinrad Bürer, Head of Research, Responsible Mining Foundation

The Responsible Mining Foundation would like to focus on an issue of critical importance for the lives of working women – that is: How can companies make their workplaces safer for women workers and how can other stakeholders play a role in keeping women workers safe at work?

To look at this question, we will draw on some of the gender-related results of recent research by the Responsible Mining Foundation – results that are applicable to many different sectors.

So, what **can** companies do in practice to implement this key aspect of the Working Group's Gender Guidance?

Companies can certainly be expected to respect the rights of their women workers to a safe working environment: for example, by providing women workers with safety equipment that is fit for purpose. The safety of women working in mines is too often compromised by the fact that their working gear has been designed for men, not women. Having to contend with oversized, badly fitting goggles, gloves or masks for example, makes women's work more difficult and more dangerous. Despite this, only a handful of the 38 companies assessed in RMF's latest research show any evidence of addressing this issue.

Companies can also be expected to ensure their women workers are not subject to sexual harassment. As the Gender Guidance points out, sexual harassment is pervasive in workplaces, yet, we have seen that while many companies may have **policies** in place to prevent such harassment, less than one-third of the companies assessed show any signs of taking **practical measures** on this. Leading companies are, for instance, running awareness-raising programs and dedicated reporting, mediation and counselling services for victims of sexual harassment.

Governments have a major role to play in ensuring more gender-responsive action by companies. For example, South Africa has national guidelines for mining companies on gender-appropriate safety gear and Chile has a national standard on gender equality, requiring among other things, that companies effectively prevent sexual harassment of women workers.

It was no coincidence that in our assessments, companies operating in Chile and South Africa were among the stronger performing companies on this issue.

And labour unions too can drive change, for example by incorporating gender-related clauses into collective bargaining agreements they negotiate with companies.

Overall, there are numerous examples of leading practice that companies, governments and other stakeholders can follow to respect and protect the lives of working women. We sincerely hope to see real progress on this in coming years.

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