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INVISIBLE HARD HATS: THE MENTAL WEIGHT WOMEN BEAR AT WORK



August has been Women's Month since 1956, a time to celebrate the resilience, beauty and strength of South African women.

In our 2024 Women's month blog *Empowering women in the workplace: Health and Safety considerations*, we focused on empowering women in the workplace through policies, PPE, and how women can overcome workplace challenges.

This year, we shift the focus to something less visible but equally burdensome.

The emotional and psychological weight women carry as they navigate bias, expectations, and the constant balancing act between personal and professional responsibilities in environments not originally designed with them in mind.

If we are serious about achieving true workplace equality, we should start addressing the “hard hats” no one sees—the invisible mental armour women wear just to show up.

How do you know you are wearing your invisible hard hat?

If you have ever caught yourself doing the following, you have probably been wearing your invisible hard hat:

- Re-reading emails three times to make sure you don’t sound “too harsh”
- Smiling through discomfort just to keep the peace
- Holding back in meetings because you don’t want to be labelled “emotional”
- Feeling exhausted after every day of work.
- Mentoring or supporting others emotionally while no one’s checking on you
- Feeling guilty for setting boundaries or taking leave
- Being praised for being “strong” while feeling completely burnt out inside.

This hard hat becomes like a second skin. But just like real armour, it is heavy, and women carry it for years without being given a moment to breathe.

Why do women wear it?

Women often carry a dual burden—being caregivers at home and professionals at work. This can lead to the following:

- Increased risk of burnout
- Higher exposure to emotional labour
- Under-reporting of mental health struggles due to stigma.

Constantly overthinking, over-performing, and under-recognition of their own needs chip away at a woman’s self-worth. Women in workplaces, especially high-pressure or male-dominated fields like health and safety, are burning out not from the work, but from the mental toll of proving they belong.

And when women burn out or decide to leave, the team often loses more than just a good employee. It loses empathy, balance and emotional intelligence. Until we start treating the invisible strain with the same seriousness as physical strain, women will continue to put on their hard hats and carry more than their job description asks for.

What can be done to lighten the load?

Equality doesn't happen by accident. It's built, decision by decision, policy by policy, conversation by conversation. Inclusivity and equality in organisations are an ongoing struggle. Building a workplace that is inclusive and bias-free takes time and effort, but there are practical ways in which leaders, teams and organisations can improve, including the following:

- **Create a safe space for honest conversations:** Encourage conversations about burnout, boundaries and biases. Inclusion is a continuous practice. Listen and learn.
- **Make mental health a priority:** Offer mental health days. Promote counselling. Train managers to see signs of burnout. Hold monthly check-in meetings. Promoting mental health should become part of the organisation's culture, and not merely something that happens after a crisis.
- **Maintain a healthy work-life balance:** This is a necessity for both men and women. Organisations that are able to, should consider flexible working hours or remote working options. This can help employees balance their work and personal responsibilities better, making workplaces more inclusive for parents, especially mothers.
- **Apply objective criteria:** Establish clear and measurable criteria when evaluating employees for promotions or performance evaluations. Avoid relying on subjective judgements.
- **Use respectful language:** Ensure that all communications reflect a commitment to inclusivity. Promote the use of respectful terminology and stay away from discriminatory or exclusionary language. Inclusive language shows respect and value.
- **Increase representation in leadership:** When women see themselves reflected at decision-making levels, it reduces isolation and builds a culture of belonging. Equality isn't just about opportunity; it's also about visibility.

Practical tips that can easily be implemented

Similarly, women should also focus on lightening their own load and reducing their chances of burning out. In a previous article *Managing burnout during peak year-end demands* we covered burnout strategies such as movement, support-seeking, setting boundaries, and making time to rest. Other helpful strategies include staying hydrated, fuelling your brain with balanced snacks, and practising daily gratitude.

These small shifts can make a big difference. Most importantly, remember that not everything is in your control. It's okay not to be okay. You may not be able to change the stress, but you can change how you respond to it. You're not weak for feeling tired—you're strong for carrying so much and wise for knowing when to pause.

Conclusion

While significant progress has been made towards achieving workplace equality, many women continue to face unseen challenges that gradually wear them down. In navigating these environments, women often feel compelled to do an 'invisible hard hat'—a metaphorical shield of resilience. But this should never be a prerequisite for success. It is up to organisations to lead the way by fostering inclusive cultures that actively reduce bias and prioritise mental well-being. True equality is built on environments that make everyone feel seen, supported and safe.

For women, this also means embracing the right to set boundaries, to choose self-care without guilt, and to recognise that rest is not a sign of weakness—it is essential. Creating a more equitable and sustainable future will require collective effort across all levels of an organisation—from leadership to the ground floor. As Gloria Steinem said: ***“Equality isn’t a concept. It’s not something we should be striving for. It’s a necessity. Equality is like gravity; we need it to stand on this earth as men and women.”***

SERR Synergy offers businesses a comprehensive **Occupational Health and Safety Management Programme** that prioritises both workplace safety and employee well-being. Our programme goes beyond regulatory compliance by actively promoting a healthy, balanced work environment. By implementing and managing the OHS Management Programme, you can reduce workplace stress and prevent employee burnout, ensuring that your team remains energised and productive. Let our professional **OHS consultants** take care of the complexities of health and safety so that your employees can focus on thriving in their roles.

About the Author: Mariska Wiese joined SERR in October 2020. She is currently a Senior Occupational Health and Safety Practitioner at the Pretoria branch. She has a degree in Human Physiology, Genetics and Psychology which she completed at the University of Pretoria. She also has a certificate in Environmental Management which she obtained through NEBOSH. She contributes to the environmental and ergonomics side of OHS.