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Breaking the Silence: Prioritising Mental Health in African Workplaces for a Healthier, More Resilient Workforce.

On this World Mental Health Day, under the global theme "Prioritising Mental Health in the Workplace," the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa: <https://www.ituc-africa.org/>) reaffirms its commitment to the well-being and dignity of workers across the African continent.

In an era of increasing workplace pressures, job insecurity, and economic instability, mental health has emerged as a critical issue, especially for African workers, migrant workers, and those engaged in the informal economy.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines health at work as "not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, but also the promotion of physical, mental, and social well-being" (ILO Constitution, 1946). Yet, African workers continue to face significant challenges, including long working hours, inadequate social protection, and stressful environments, which aggravate mental health issues. Migrant workers, who often endure exploitative working conditions and discrimination, are particularly vulnerable to mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. This above underscores the urgent need to strengthen mental health interventions across all sectors, particularly within informal employment, which accounts for nearly 80% of the continent's workforce.

Impact of Mental Health on African Workers

We cannot overstate the toll of mental health issues on productivity, family life, and community development. The World Health Organization (WHO) has noted that poor mental health is one of the leading causes of disability, absenteeism, and presenteeism globally, affecting not only individual workers but also national economies. In Africa, where the mental health gap is the starkest, there is glaring and frequent neglect of workplace stress and mental health conditions in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) frameworks.

Protecting Workers' Mental Health: A Right, Not a Privilege

The rights of workers to safe and healthy workplaces are enshrined in ILO Conventions, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155), which mandates that all employers provide work environments that do not jeopardise workers' physical and mental well-being. Additionally, ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work broadens this protection by addressing the psychological violence many workers experience, highlighting that workplaces must be free from violence, including the harmful effects of stress and other mental health stressors.

For African workers, the most marginalised groups—migrant workers and those in the informal economy—bear a disproportionate burden. Migrant workers in sectors such as domestic work, agriculture, and mining face unique psychosocial stress, including isolation, lack of legal protection, and limited access to mental health care. Their plight reflects the broader gaps in mental health and social protection systems across the continent.

Toward a Mental Health-Inclusive Workplace Culture

There is an urgent need to prioritise mental health as part of a broader occupational safety and health agenda. ITUC-Africa calls on governments, employers, and trade unions to collaborate in developing actionable policies that place mental health at the core of workplace well-being initiatives. These initiatives should include creating inclusive work environments that promote open preventive and applicable solution conversations about mental health, violence and harassment, offering support through employee assistance programmes, and ensuring access to mental health care, particularly for those in vulnerable sectors.

We also call on our governments, especially those that still need to ratify ILO core conventions on Occupational Health and Safety, Conventions 155 (Occupational Safety and Health) and 187 (Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health). We also urge our governments to take time and measured steps to ensure the effective implementation, application, and enforcement of the provisions of these conventions in inclusive and collaborative approaches.

We echo the WHO's Global Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030, emphasising the need for universal mental health coverage and psychosocial interventions at work. As we continue to push for the ratification of relevant ILO conventions, national health strategies must incorporate priority areas, focusing on occupational health and informal workers.

In conclusion, ITUC-Africa reiterates that prioritising mental health is essential for achieving decent work, social justice, and a future of work that leaves no one behind. On this World Mental Health Day, we call on all stakeholders to act decisively in building resilient, mentally healthy workplaces that uphold the dignity and rights of every worker across sectors and borders.

Issued on behalf of African workers by:

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