



**WOMEN'S
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CENTRE**

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Fuelling Justice: Your support can change the course of sexual harassment in the workplace.

Introduction

The Women's Legal Centre (WLC) is committed to advancing women's rights and ensuring economic justice for women. This requires that the world of work is free from discrimination, harassment, and abuse. Collectively we can break cycles of poverty by ensuring that women have access to a world of work that is substantively equal.

In 2023 we started our representation of Andiswa Mengo a Judge's secretary in the Eastern Cape in South Africa. She had experienced persistent sexual harassment from the Judge President of the High Court in the Eastern Cape. Through our legal representation and support she has now finally been afforded the opportunity to access justice through the first-ever Judicial Conduct Tribunal in South Africa where a member of the judiciary is charged with abusing the power of his position to sexually harass a secretary. This is a pivotal moment for judicial accountability, transparency and economic justice in a country where women bare the brunt of violence and harassment.

Initially scheduled for only two weeks, this Tribunal has now been extended. Our client has bravely taken the stand, relived her traumatic experiences and speaking truth to power. Her evidence reflecting the experiences of countless women who experience sexual violence in their places of work. Despite immense challenges, she stood firm, shedding light on the power imbalances and systemic issues that make sexual harassment in the workplace so pervasive. The Tribunal will resume in May 2025, when the respondent will begin his evidence followed by several other witnesses.

As a single mother our client has been reliant on the legal services being provided by the WLC and as a non-profit organisation, we rely on donations from philanthropy and individuals to continue this crucial work. The prolonged nature of the case means we need financial support to sustain our legal efforts, advocacy, and resources required to see this case through to the end.

Why This Case Matters

This Tribunal has exposed the discrimination surrounding sexual harassment in the workplace and why so many women are forced into silence. It has shown that:

- **The "perfect victim" does not exist:** This case shows that there are still stereotypes that dictate how society expect women to behave in order to illicit empathy and deserving of justice. Even during hearings of this nature there is the expectation that a woman must behave in a certain manner. It also highlights how society and the legal system have built in bias in respect of women's behaviour and response to sexual violence and harassment. Society and our legal system tends to impose rigid expectations on how a victim should look, behave, or react to harassment and violence in order to be seen as credible. When a survivor's experience deviates from these expectations, their truth is questioned, and their suffering is invalidated. This case challenges that harmful perception by demonstrating that

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there is no single way to experience or respond to sexual harassment and that each woman's reality is shaped by power imbalances, professional vulnerabilities, and personal agency. By shedding light on these complexities, this Tribunal has the potential to shift societal attitudes, ensuring that survivors are believed and supported, regardless of how their experience unfolds.

- **The Nature of Sexual Harassment and the Power Imbalance:** Sexual harassment often begins subtly, disguised as an innocent compliment or seemingly harmless interaction, before escalating into explicit messages, unwanted advances, or coercive behaviour. This gradual progression is a calculated pattern of control, making it difficult for victims to immediately recognise or respond to the misconduct.
- **At its core, sexual harassment is not about attraction:** Sexual harassment is about power. It thrives in workplaces where perpetrators, often in positions of authority, exploit the vulnerability of those with less power. Women in junior roles are particularly at risk, as they rely on their jobs for financial security and fear the professional and personal consequences of rejecting or reporting the harassment.
- **This case exemplifies how power imbalances often silence victims,** forcing them into impossible choices: endure the harassment or risk retaliation, disbelief, and career jeopardy. Recognising these dynamics is crucial to shifting the responsibility away from victims and holding perpetrators accountable.

By ensuring that this Tribunal is transparent and open to the public, we have brought these crucial conversations to the forefront, challenging outdated societal perceptions of sexual harassment and fighting for systemic change.

Unprecedented Media and Public Engagement

This case has received daily media coverage across print, television, radio, and online platforms, sparking national discussions on sexual harassment in the workplace.

- Live-streamed proceedings provided transparency and allowed the public to witness firsthand the challenges victims face in seeking justice.
- Extensive news coverage has driven national conversations on power dynamics, victim-blaming, and the need for stronger protections against workplace harassment.
- Social media discussions have reinforced how deeply divided society remains on issues of consent, credibility, and power in the workplace.

While some have continued to question and discredit our client, many have expressed unwavering support, sending messages of solidarity that encourage us to keep pushing forward.

The Financial Need: How You Can Help

With the Tribunal set to continue, our organisation requires **R350,000** to cover essential costs, including:

- Legal representation – Our team is made up of two lawyers and external senior counsel. The state is not providing any financial support to our client to cover her legal costs, despite us playing a critically important role in the proceedings thus far.
- Travel, accommodation, and food – The WLC is based in the Western Cape and our client in the Eastern Cape while the Tribunal is taking place in Gauteng. We therefore have travel and accommodation costs for the upcoming sessions.

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- Ongoing advocacy – To ensure that we are able to advocate and raise attention to not only our clients case but to ensure that other women who are experiencing similar discrimination have access to rights based information.

We have already taken steps to minimise costs, but the extension of the Tribunal makes additional funding critical.

The Impact of Your Support

By contributing to this case, you are not only supporting our client—you are helping to:

- Hold powerful perpetrators accountable – Ensuring that sexual harassment in the workplace is recognised as misconduct that cannot be ignored.
- Encourage more women to speak out – Breaking the cycle of silence that prevents survivors from coming forward.
- Set a legal precedent for future cases – Strengthening protections for women in South Africa’s workplaces.
- Ensure an accountable judiciary where the law is applied equally and women in the halls of justice are safe.

This case is about more than one woman, it is about ensuring all women can work in an environment that is safe, dignified, and free from harassment.

Join Us in This Fight

The Women’s Legal Centre remains committed to seeing this case through to the end and fighting for a future where women are protected in the workplace.

But we cannot do it alone.

We appeal to you, our partners, supporters, and allies to stand with us in solidarity. Your support can help us continue this battle and push for systemic change.

Donate today and be part of history: <https://wlce.co.za/donate-wlc/>

Thank you for standing with us.

Sincerely,
Charlene May
Acting Director
Women’s Legal Centre

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