Preventing violence and harassment in the workplace

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Introduction

The issues of violence and harassment in the workplace have aroused considerable interest across Europe in recent years. There remains, however, a great disparity between awareness and recognition of the problem in the different European countries. The real extent of the problem remains unknown, but findings from the Foundation’s European surveys on working conditions suggest that the problem affects a substantial part of the workforce in Member States.

Faced with the persistent lack of comparative qualitative data on these complex phenomena, the Foundation commissioned a project into violence and harassment in the workplace in 2002. This paper summaries the findings of the project which were published in a report. The report identified the different forms and patterns of violence and harassment in the workplace in the EU and described the recent upsurge in activity and initiatives with respect to violence and harassment within the legal arena, with new legislation addressing these problems recently enacted or in the pipeline in a number of countries. It also presented evidence of adverse effects on individuals, organisations and society, and assesses the potential financial costs. Finally, it analysed the factors that may contribute to and cause physical and psychological violence, and reviews a variety of good practices with respect to preventing and managing violence and harassment at work.

The many forms and aspects of violence and harassment make them difficult to define and describe. A main distinction can be made between the physical and psychological aspects of violence, although in real situations both forms of violence often overlap and interact with each other. While the report covers different aspects of physical as well as psychological violence, particular attention is paid to psychological violence, with a focus on violence as a sequence of abusive (and often minor) negative acts, such as in the case of mobbing/bullying.

Key findings

- Although aspects of psychological violence correspond to a plethora of various terms and labels in different EU countries, such as ‘bullying’, ‘mobbing’ and ‘moral harassment’, there is growing agreement that they share many characteristics and that the psychological processes involved and their respective outcomes are similar.

- Sexual and racial harassment are increasingly acknowledged as forms of violence and an affront to dignity in their own right. This is also the case in countries where violence of a sexual nature has often been considered a less serious offence.

- The impact of cultural and linguistic differences in the understanding of particular forms of violence is acknowledged, but if not properly addressed will mask or undermine the opportunity for genuine insight into these issues. However, a greater shared understanding of the concepts under investigation is emerging due to factors such as increasing awareness and public debate about the issues, international exchange of knowledge between academics and practitioners, activities of EU bodies, the introduction of new legislation and high-profile court cases, as well as greater conceptual clarity of the issues under consideration in general.

- Both men and women experience violence, although women appear to be more vulnerable than men. To a certain extent, this reflects a segregated labour market in which women are often concentrated in high-risk jobs and occupations with respect to violence and harassment – nursing, social work and teaching being prime examples.
A distinction needs to be made between the various forms of violence since women have been found to be over-represented among victims of intimidation and psychological violence (while men are more frequently exposed to physical violence and assault). Potential differences between men and women in their willingness to accept and label their experience as violence and harassment will impact on these findings.

Sexual offences at work, against women in particular, are commonplace in all European countries, although in many cases they go unreported due to factors such as fear of losing one’s job, being considered the guilty party or being socially ostracised among work colleagues.

The presence of racial harassment at work is common in many workplaces, although frequently denied. A general lack of awareness, combined with the presence of a number of assumptions and myths about people from ethnic minorities, often prevents insight into the problem. However, where the phenomenon has been properly studied, a very substantial problem has been revealed.

Harassment at work on the grounds of sexual orientation is still largely a taboo in most European countries, although recent studies reveal a real problem where humiliation and, more frequently, social isolation are commonplace. To some extent, such problems are acknowledged in a new European Directive aimed at ensuring equal treatment of gays and lesbians at work.

Despite considerable attention paid to the issue, no clear profile of either perpetrator/harasser or the harassed/victim has so far emerged. The report highlights that personal as well as behavioural characteristics may be the result of the experience of violence, as well as representing a predisposition to such behaviour.

Factors contributing to workplace violence

To account for the presence of violence, contributing factors of an individual, situational, organisational and societal nature have to be acknowledged. However, only a holistic perspective, integrating and considering all these factors and their dynamic interaction, would fully explain, and thus predict, the presence of violence and harassment in any given context. Still, it is acknowledged that it is unlikely that a single theoretical framework may fully account for all forms of violence.

Increased risk of violence is associated with particular situational factors, such as working alone or at night, working with the public, handling cash, working with people in distress or working in conditions of perceived, or real, vulnerability. However, no unambiguous profile of situational characteristics has so far been identified.

Limited, but growing evidence is emerging to establish links between the presence of violence and harassment, and such organisational factors as leadership, organisational change, organisational stress, quality of work environment and factors related to organisational culture. However, while it is vital to identify organisational factors that may predict violence, in most cases the present evidence and the methods by which it has been gathered do not allow for firm conclusions on the relationship between cause and effect.

It is acknowledged that the social and economic context (such as general levels of crime, economic and social change, the presence and, in some countries, growth of the informal economic sector) will impact upon types and levels of violence. However, as such factors differ considerably between countries, their relative impact and contribution to violence would vary between countries.
Empirical evidence

A number of factors regarding the definition, measurement and reliability of empirical evidence make any comparison of data and the establishment of patterns and trends with regard to exposure difficult. The majority of studies of workplace violence have tended to focus on one aspect of violence in particular, for example, physical violence or sexual harassment. Only a few provide a comparison of exposure to different forms of violence (see Figure 1). In general, levels of psychological violence were found to be substantially higher than physical violence. Among types of psychological violence, bullying and intimidation appear to be more prevalent than sexual harassment or other forms of harassment.

Evidence of physical violence from northern European countries suggests that 2% - 10% (and in some cases even higher) of the population have been exposed to physical violence, or the threat of it, within the last year. In some countries, incidents of workplace violence fall outside the scope of statutory reportable incidents and are, therefore, not registered at a national level. Men and women are exposed to physical violence at a similar rate, with younger people more at risk than older people. Across countries, physical violence is particularly concentrated in certain occupations, such as healthcare, police, social services, taxi drivers and drivers of public transport, hotel and catering employees, security personnel and teachers.

Fear of violence is widespread and is a problem in its own right, particularly in high-risk occupations. This indirect fear affects a much larger proportion of the population than those who are directly affected.

From a short-term perspective, levels of physical violence appear to be relatively stable, although levels have increased when a longer term perspective is taken. Repeated victimisation is a substantial problem and is seemingly on the increase. Changes in reporting habits may impact on such findings, with an increasing number of the population finding it unacceptable that exposure to violent acts should be considered ‘normal’ or ‘part of the job’. 

Recent empirical evidence on sexual harassment is relatively sparse. However, by combining new data with findings from the early to mid-1990s, it can be concluded that sexual harassment represents a substantial problem in most European countries, although a clear picture is difficult to obtain due to great discrepancies between available results. While there is evidence that men may also experience unwanted sexual attention and harassment, this is still a problem that particularly affects women.

An increase in surveys of bullying and harassment across Europe have confirmed a very real problem in most countries. Depending on the intensity of the experience, approximately 5% - 10% of the population perceive themselves to be victimised at any one time. A substantially higher number is regularly exposed to behaviour that may be construed as bullying and harassment without necessarily feeling victimised.

In most cases, bullying is a prolonged affair, often lasting several years. Women more than men and the young more than older workers are at higher risk of becoming bullied. This affects workers as well as managers (from the bottom to the top within the organisational hierarchy). In addition, there appears to be a higher risk of bullying and intimidation in the public sector compared to the private sector.

When levels of different forms of violence were compared, bullying and intimidation were found to affect a higher number of people than both physical violence and sexual harassment.

**Regulatory instruments**

The situation in Europe on the regulation of workplace violence is extremely varied and in a state of dynamic progress. Within this evolving situation, EU bodies are playing an increasingly significant role. New policy documents, recommendations and directives have addressed important aspects of workplace violence, sometimes anticipating, sometimes following national initiatives, but nevertheless setting the scene for further developments in this area.

At national level, certain countries have introduced specific new legislation to tackle the problem (notably Sweden, France, Belgium, Netherlands and Finland), while other countries consider it sufficient for the time being to use the existing legislation of criminal, civil, environmental and health and safety laws (including Ireland, UK and Germany). Other countries have tackled the problem with non-legislative measures, such as codes of practices, regulations and collective agreements (for example, Denmark and Luxembourg). Finally, some countries (including Italy and Spain) have given limited attention to date to the problem of regulating workplace violence, although awareness of the problem is growing fast.

When new regulatory instruments are introduced on a continuous basis, and are implemented to co-exist with previous regulations that are directly or indirectly related to the issue of workplace violence, problems of competence and loopholes may be created among different bodies and authorities with jurisdiction in areas such as labour, industrial relations, gender, discrimination and health. Harmonisation of different regulations and competencies in this area is a major challenge at stake.

**The costs of workplace violence**

The presence of any forms of violence and harassment at work is likely to have negative consequences for the individuals involved, for the organisation and for society in general. Violence also carries financial costs in terms of, for example, sickness absenteeism, premature ill health and retirement, higher rates of staff turnover,
Reduced job satisfaction and productivity, and increased insurance premiums. Thus, in order to better utilise society’s collective resources, it appears essential to minimise social and economic waste due to violence.

There is considerable evidence suggesting that both physical and psychological violence have serious implications for health and well-being, with post-traumatic stress disorders and suicidal thoughts relatively common in the most serious cases. Fear of violence in its own right may also have an adverse effect, involving a much larger proportion of the population than those who are directly affected by the violence.

Exposure to violence manifests itself behaviourally, with negative implications for job satisfaction, productivity and group dynamics. In this respect, an increase in the rates of sickness absence and staff turnover, with the resultant reduction in productivity, are common outcomes of all aspects of violence. Moreover, psychological violence may also influence the use of grievances and complaints procedures, as well as affecting industrial relations and litigation.

Violence also affects third parties, with witnesses and observers frequently leaving the organisation in response to their experiences. Similarly, all aspects of violence can have social implications, thus negatively affecting relationships with family and friends, and quality of service provision.

Cost estimates based on empirical evidence, although difficult to establish, suggest that there are considerable financial benefits to be gained in reducing levels of violence at work, with psychological violence alone possibly reducing productivity by 1% - 2%. In preventing all forms of violence and harassment, through a greater focus on diversity, organisations may increase their competitiveness by better utilising the talents and skills of their entire workforce.

**Recommendations**

The need for further research targeted at specific sectors, occupations and types of violence strongly emerges from the report as an indispensable pre-condition to policy-making and legislative initiatives, both at European and national levels.

European guidelines, training manuals and awareness-raising material would greatly help in facilitating a common understanding between EU Member States and in orientating action in this area.

Although not covered by this study, the phenomenon of violence at work is of dramatic significance in the EU candidate countries. Research and initiatives specifically directed to such countries appear to be an absolute priority.

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