



Myths about workplace violence, harassment and bullying

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to examine myths about various forms of violence which occurs in the workplace. Harassment, bullying or hounding at work, is a problem which has increased in magnitude and needs to be addressed. We therefore analyse the nature, perception, accusations and prevention of such myths with the objective of clarifying the tangible and intangible effects on the health of the victim, and the results such harassment provokes on the organisation of the workplace.
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Keywords: Myths; Workplace harassment; Bullying; Hounding physical violence; Physical harassment; Psychological abuse; Tangible effects; Intangible effects

1. Workplace violence

We use the definition of workplace violence adopted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2003), in the sense of “all actions, incidental or behaviour which is beyond reason, or acceptance; by which a person is hurt, threatened, humiliated or injured by another, as a direct result of carrying out their professional activity.”

This manifestation of violent behaviour in the labour context, implies an important personal health and security risk (Pérez Bilbao and Nogareda Cuixart, 1998; Advisory Committee on Safety, Hygiene and Health Protection At Work of the European Commission, 2001)

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The ILO averted in 2002 that “violence or harassment at work—being physical or psychological—is being converted into a worldwide problem which crosses work, and professional group, frontiers.”

Bullying or hounding, and psychological intimidation for example, are responsible of 18% of health problems associated with work, a quarter of these cause absences from work of 2 or more weeks.¹

Active, as well as passive intangible parts of an organisation suffer from the consequences of this harassment at work.

However, the organisational and managerial impact this harassment generates in the workplace, is plagued with myths and confusion which prevents or inhibits us from considering the real extent to which this exists, and consequently take necessary preventative measures.

In this article we present 10 of the most frequent myths which we consider necessary for the understanding of such a complex phenomenon as Workplace Violence and Abuse. We hope it will contribute to the clarification of the real impact this problem has generated.

2. Myths

2.1. *Myth one: physical violence or harassment at work is only carried out by colleagues within the organisation*

Reality reflects that violence or harassment is, and can be, carried out by people not belonging to the victim’s place of work.

We will show in Figs. 1 and 2 taken from the European Commission (2004), that the percentages of workers who have suffered violence at work—in this case—physical—by people outside the workplace, are in fact higher than harassment caused by their own work colleagues.

The rate is higher in sectors where contacts with people not working at the workplace are common: about 13% in health and social work, reflects the highest percentage of physical violence from people outside of the organisation; a huge difference compared to the rest of the sectors: 8% in the public administration, 7% in hotels and restaurants, and 5% in transportation and education.

But contrary to the inverse tendency which is reflected in some studies (Paoli and Merllié, 2001), our research supports the findings of the V National Survey on the Working Conditions in Spain (2003) That 1.93% of violence is caused by people outside the workplace as opposed to 0.5% caused by work colleagues within the organisation itself.

2.2. *Myth two: the level of physical violence at work has not changed*

As Fig. 3 shows, existing data covering the period from 1996 to 2000, demonstrates the contrary:

- (a) Physical violence and harassment at work has, on the whole, increased by up to one-third of its previous rate.

¹The Commission of European Communities (2002, p. 18) adds that “the frequency of these pathologies are twice as high in sectors such as education and health and social services.

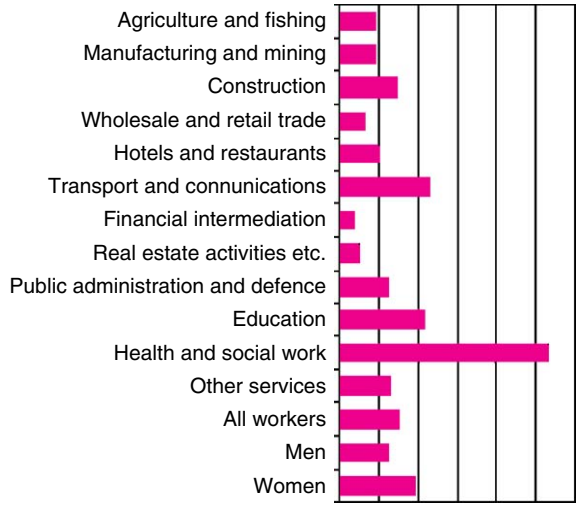


Fig. 1. Percentage of workers have been subjected at work to physical violence from people from workplace. EU-15, Source: European Commission (2004, p. 75).

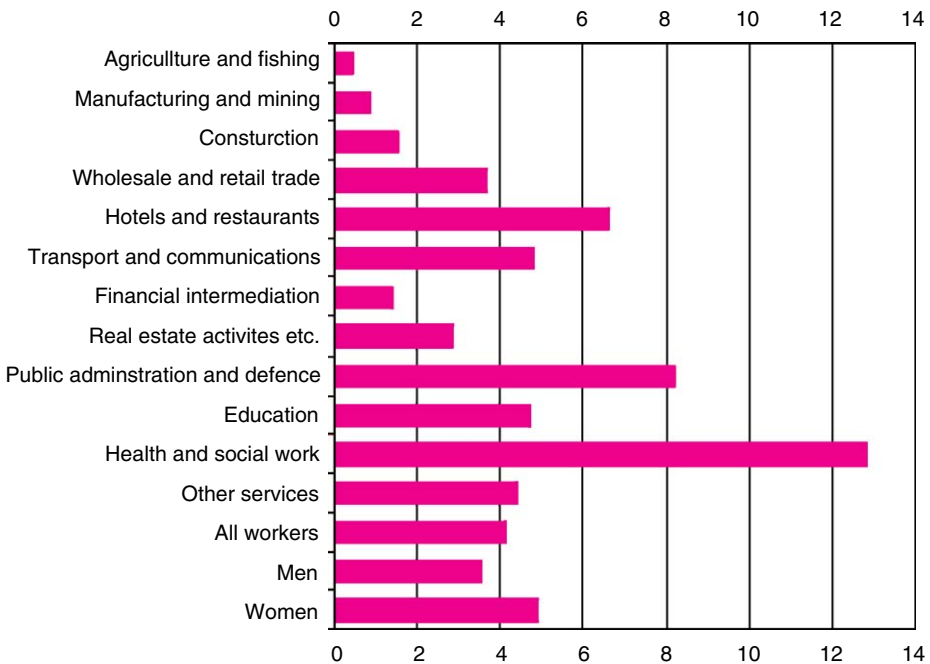


Fig. 2. Percentage of workers have been subjected at work to physical violence from other people. EU-15, 2000. Source: European Commission (2004, p. 75).

- (b) It has not diminished in any labour sector.
- (c) Hotel trade, public administration and health are the sectors which have the greatest increase incidence.

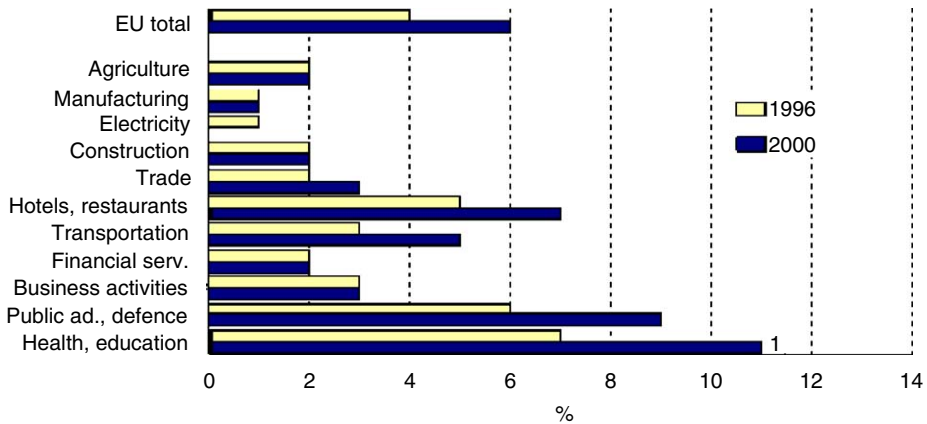


Fig. 3. Physical violence in the European Industry. Source: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2005).

Therefore, in Europe, workplace violence is in fact a phenomenon in expansion, contrary to Myers (1996) findings.

2.3. *Myth three: workplace violence is only physical*

On the contrary, the International Labour Organisation since 1998, has shown the harmful effects produced by psychological violence or abuse “although this appears as a physical component” in its presentation.

Psychological violence was defined, by the Occupational Society and Health Administration (2002), as violence carried out in the workplace which can include aggressive acts or harassment with harmful intention.

In the third European Survey on Working Conditions, uncivil behaviour, lack of respect, verbal abuse, disparaging attitude or intimidation was found to be present on an incidence percentage of near 9% against 4% of physical violence.

2.4. *Myth four: research covers all types of workplace violence*

We coincide with Myers (1996, p. 32) in pointing out the need for considering other types of violent acts such as vandalism, assault, or any other type of act which implies a violation or destruction of work materials, and furthermore, which can also lead to the death of the employee who defends his/her job.

Through examples which permit the illustration of the various dimensions which reach this phenomenon, we found associated violence at work in many parts of the world (Di Martino, 2000):

- Homicide has become the second official cause of total occupational deaths in the US, and the first cause being that of female occupational deaths. An average of 20 workers are killed on a weekly basis, and some 18,000 assaulted.
- Domestic Service and Entertainment work for overseas Philippean women frequently assumes a disproportionate level of violence at work.

- The British Retail Consortium (1995) revealed that 350,000 workers suffered from threats and verbal abuse of which 11,000 having being subjected to physical workplace violence.
- In Japan, the “Bullying Hot-Line” received more than 1700 calls between June and October 1996. Stress, being the most frequent complaint from all calls with many seeking urgent mental health treatment.

Hence, as we have shown, the concept of workplace violence is a broad, multi-dimensional, and complex phenomenon, which includes distinctive types of violence, harassment, aggression or discrimination within different labour contexts and situations.

2.5. Myth five: all workplace violence are reported by the victims

Lets examine for example, the case of US (Myers, 1996): The Justice Department found that more than 50% of violence in the workplace go unreported.

Upon further investigation it was found that:

- 40% of victims do not report violence because they consider the events as “minor incidences” or “too personal.”
- 33% of victims do not reveal their reasons for not reporting such incidences.

The European Commission (2001), confirms the existence of a “great reticence” when it comes to informing and reporting workplace violence.

2.6. Myth six: victims of workplace violence believe in justice and its support

Surveys carried out in several different European countries, continuously reflect the contrary. For example, in France, the CSA Study (2006) revealed:

- 65% of the population confessed to “being afraid of justice, if they had to face it”.
- 54% of those surveyed considered that justice was “not impartial”.

In Spain, research carried out by Cyclops (2004), reflect 400 judicial sentences, for a total population state whereby 16% admit to having been subject to harassment in the workplace during the last 6 months, and on a frequency level, of a weekly basis (Piñuel Zabala, 2001).

2.7. Myth seven: that victims of workplace violence, have only themselves to blame

In general, “50% of all people blame themselves for their mishap” (Bulman and Wortman, 1977).

However, the work environment is a context of interaction whereby people carry out work, and on occasions in isolated conditions. Therefore, in such situations it is “most probable” that people go through internal powers when their behavioural

choices have negative consequences, “unless they were previously warned about the possible consequences” (Sogin and Palleck, 1976; Meliá, Chisvert, and Pardo, 2001).

These “warnings,” do not need to be very noticeable to include more meaning or strength when it comes to the possibility of occupying a job post at present-day. In fact if we look at the dynamics of workplace violence, it is evident that it is independent of the worker’s behaviour (Jacobson and Gottman, 2001).

In environments whereby violence occurs and forms part of the worker’s daily process and context in a chronic way, the “violence equation” (Lea, New Jersey, 1995) or situation process becomes unpredictable.

This converts violence in an ambiguous circumstance (Navarro Góngora, 2004), but moreover, present at every moment, independent of the victim’s reaction.

2.8. *Myth eight: violence is not destructive*

On the contrary, the health of workers who suffered from workplace violence, “is clearly affected” as recognised by the IWO (2004). Pain suffered by the assaulted victim, is not only physical, independently of its original cause.

The emotional wound, the hurt and the pain, both perceived and suffered, increases its potential of traumatisation by the value given by those who carry it out, and in relation to the context and situation in which it is produced (criterias A in TEPT .. DSM for example Araña Suarez, 2006a–d).

Spain and France were pioneers in 2001, issuing two judicial sentences and recognising suicide at work as a “labour accident” (López Díez, 2002).

A judicial classification which establishes a “direct and essential vehicle,” for harassment received in the workplace was confirmed by the Superior Tribunal of Justice of Catalunya, Social Room 2001. This was also the case in the Prison Centre of Valladolid, 2001 and more recently, in a local police of Saint. Nicholas of Tolentino, Gran Canarias, 2006.

2.9. *Myth nine: workplace violence is inevitable*

There is a growing assumption that there is at least a certain degree of violence which is inevitable and inherent in all posts of work, due to the work demands involved in any job (NTP 489).

There is an implicit belief in a “Psychological Contract” between the worker and the organisation (Rousseau and McLean Parks, 1993; Rousseau, 1995, Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Jonson and O’Leary-Kelly, 2003). Such a contract implies “levels of obligations and ‘foreseeable’ expectations in a ‘cynical organisational’ context (Dean et al., 1998) which alludes, above all else, to the integrity of the firm (Jonson and O’Leary-Kelly, 2003).

Such implicit contractual conditions which assumes violence as an inevitable element within the workplace, influences the behaviour of the worker, and can lead to determining his/her attitudes of interaction in a bi-directional manner: the commitment of the workers, such as the level of satisfaction and the coherence of the work environment in a reciprocal contractual context, which have direct effect on their acts, and the repercussions on the firm’s results, which incidentally are forgotten to be considered inspite of its profitability

and savings power, in terms of derived circumstances, on the organisation, people, clients and services.

2.10. Myth 10: prevention is more expensive than repairing the damage

Managers consider prevention as a principal cost factor (Narocki Flaminman).

However, few organisations have a record of costs incurred by violent acts or the process itself within the workplace, available. Such deficiencies come from an organisational deficiency in the comprehension of what in fact a violent act consists of, as well as a lack in understanding its real effects, and how, and with what, indicators to use in measuring such acts.

Salary costs, damaged materials, obstructed processes, administration time, loss of production, work environment, social and commercial repercussions, are however the short- and medium-term results. The following consequences are:

- Decrease in productivity, in work absenteeism as well as in the quantity and quality of work of the affected person, not to mention the likelihood of the work environment being affected.
- Loss in efficiency, productivdad, loss in the quality of the product which in return, affects the profitability of the organisation.
- Earnings that the organisation will no longer receive, and the passive tangible and intangible effects which this could have on the Managers.
- Loss of Reputation for the company, a reduction in the number of clients and a decrease in market value.
- Workplace violence causes a negative affect in the formation of intellectual capital, upon facing a reduced commitment level from the victim within the institution for which he/she represents. This is true, although at first, a provisional increase of commitment level is detected (Porto Serantes, 2001).

3. Conclusions

1. Violence at work is an action, incident or behaviour by which a worker is attacked. It can be committed by both people both inside and outside of the workplace.
2. It is a phenomenon on the increase, one which covers physical, as well as psychological abuse. We believe, from our research, that homicides and other acts such as vandalism and assault of any other abusive type which endangers or the health risk of the worker, should be included.
3. Victims are reluctant to report violence in the workplace and do not usually seek legal advice in the belief that they will not be of help.
4. Victims of workplace violence tend to suffer from a process of “victimisation” in spite of not being responsible for what has happened. However, the majority of victims blame themselves for their situation.
5. Workplace violence can cause health risks for the victims as well as for the tangible and intangible assets.
6. Workplace can be prevented. Of course, this supposes a price for the organisation but if we look at the possible outcome which can be gained in both the tangible profits, such as the economic ones, and the intangible such as human capital, intellectual capital and reputation, it is indeed a small price to pay.

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