



Violence against women in the work place...Let's talk about it! BACKGROUND PAPER

Gender based violence

It is estimated that one in three women worldwide will suffer some form of gender-based violence during the course of her lifetime. Despite efforts from the international community and the commitment of the EU countries, notably through the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), women still remain victims of violence and discrimination in all regions of the world.

Women are more than half of the world population, but two thirds of them are illiterate and represent 70% of the poorest in the world.

Violence against women is multifaceted and includes domestic violence, mobbing, rape, forced prostitution and trafficking.

Being a victim of violence is widely recognized as a cause of mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and panic attacks. Violence also plays a strong role in developing or worsening substance abuse problems.

Mental health effects of bullying and harassment

Exposure to workplace bullying and/or sexual harassment has been found to be associated with the following symptoms:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Aggression
- Insomnia
- Melancholy and apathy
- Cognitive effects such as concentration problems
- Insecurity and lack of initiative
- Reduction in job-satisfaction and commitment to the organisation
- Unsafe behaviour and increased propensity for accidents
- Poor lifestyle habits e.g. increased smoking and alcohol consumption
- Poor diet
- Poor concentration and diminishing self-confidence
- Personal withdrawal, often leading to social isolation
- Negative effect on home and private life
- Intolerable strain on relationships

Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

In cases of the most severe incidents of bullying, victims have frequently been diagnosed with PTSD. In a Norwegian study¹, which compared victims of severe bullying with individuals who had been involved in traumatic disasters, a large proportion of the victims of bullying were found to suffer from symptoms of PTSD at a higher level than those involved in disasters. According to the authors of the report, the extreme levels of stress experienced by many of the victims of bullying could be explained by a breakdown of their previous assumptions about themselves and the world. An increasingly common outcome of bullying is lengthy litigation procedures accompanied by complex legal wrangling, suggesting that the situation is not clear for the legal profession or employers.

¹ Einarsen, S. (1996) "Bullying and Harassment at Work: Epidemiological and Psychological Aspects", PhD thesis, Department of Psychological Science, University of Bergen

As with bullying, sexual harassment has recently been linked to PTSD². The consequences of violence and harassment can prevent women from returning to work.

Evidence shows that frequently, mobbing spelled the end of the target's career, marriage, health, and livelihood. Mobbing denotes a "ganging up" by co-workers, subordinates or superiors, to force someone out of the workplace through rumour, innuendo, intimidation, discrediting, isolation, and particularly, humiliation.

Violence against women at the workplace is highly likely to have long-term detrimental effects on their mental health, leading to possible long-term unemployment and, ultimately, to poverty and social exclusion.

Violence against women in the workplace - The current state of play

Between 40 and 50 per cent of women in the European Union report some form of sexual harassment in the workplace³. Violence against women is prevalent in all EU Member States; in all countries, it is a fundamental barrier to the achievement of gender equality and a clear manifestation of the current unequal power relations between women and men.

However, violence and harassment are problematic concepts. According to the World Health Organization, data collection efforts that measure the scope and magnitude of the experience of violence and harassment against women are hampered by a number of factors, including a) the influence of social and cultural norms in determining what constitutes violence, impeding universal consensus on a definition of violence against women; and, b) changes in reported rates of abuse according to the definition of violence used, the way questions are asked, the type of target population, and the setting of the interview (privacy, familiarity of environment, etc) ⁴.

² Hoel, H. & Cooper, C.L. (2000a) "Destructive Conflict and Bullying at Work", Unpublished Report, UMIST, UK

³ European Commission, 1998

⁴ World Health Organization (2000) "Violence Against Women", <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/index.html>

In today's increasingly global and competitive marketplace, factors associated with violence in the workplace are becoming more and more common. Marketplace philosophies have changed the power relationships and deeply damaged the manager/managed relationships. Thus public sector and private sector organisations operating in a dynamic external environment have responded with rapid and large changes in production, and concomitantly, major internal structural changes. In turn, such changes have destabilised forms of management and work organisation.

In recent years, national working conditions surveys have shown that there is an increasing incidence of work-related health problems which develop as a result of psychological rather than physical causes⁵. Psychological violence can include different forms of violence such as sexual harassment, bullying or mobbing.

In the case of sexual harassment female employees report cases of abuse more than three times as often as males. There are various reasons for this difference. Firstly, women are represented in many of the "high-risk" occupations, such as teaching, social work, nursing, health-care work and domestic work. Secondly, the continued segregation of women in low-paid and low status jobs (while men predominate in better-paid, higher status jobs and supervisory positions) contributes to the problem. Finally, various work-related factors are often associated with incidents of violence and harassment: difficult working conditions (work overload, high work pace, etc.) together with internal rules and forms of management that encourage competition between employees.

2010 represents a perfect moment for an EU action on preventing and combating all forms of violence against women at the workplace.

The Spanish Presidency of the European Union has put the eradication of violence against women at the top of its priorities and the European Parliament recently called on the European Commission and the European Council to work on a directive on this issue. In its Action Plan Implementing the Stockholm Programme (April 2010), the European Commission states that "all policy instruments available will be deployed to provide a robust European response to violence against women and children". Moreover, on International Women's Day (8th March), the European Commission delivered the Women's Charter, calling for equality between women and men and for 'an end to gender-based violence'.

⁵ European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2007) "Women and Violence at Work", <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2007/110/en/1/ef07110en.pdf>

Mental Health Europe recognizes the steps already taken at European and international level towards the elimination of violence against women, and believes that there is still much work to do to ensure that the fight against gender based violence and discrimination is kept high on the political agenda.