Violence at work - A major workplace problem

It is not often realized just how much of a problem violence at work really is. But the figures speak for themselves:

- An average of 1.7 million people were victims of violent crime while working or on duty in the *United States*, according to a report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), each year from 1993 through 1999.;

- a recent survey in *South Africa* showed that nearly 80 per cent of respondents had experienced hostile behaviour at the workplace during their working life;

- According to figures from 2005, in the *European Union* nine million individuals, or six per cent of all workers, were subject to physical violence at work. Four per cent of workers (six million individuals) suffered physical violence from people from outside their workplace. Another five percent of workers were subjected to bullying and harassment at work.

Violence is rapidly becoming an everyday reality for many workers, from bus drivers to teachers, bank security personnel, nurses and air crews faced with mounting cases of *air rage* among passengers. But shrouding it in silence and secrecy is counter-productive.

Many remedies exist, including security measures, surveillance, organizational solutions and the training of staff in how best to defuse potentially violent situations. In most cases, these remedies are extremely cost-effective in terms of reduced medical and personnel costs and improved performance. But they can only be applied effectively once the problem has been acknowledged and brought out into the open.

Experience in this and allied fields strongly suggests that the most effective solutions are obtained when the issue is addressed by an active partnership of all the actors concerned.

Governments, trade unions and employers are increasingly worried by what is emerging as a major workplace concern. The response at the national and international levels is taking shape. The European Commission is analysing the action to be taken for the prevention of workplace violence in the European Union as part of its current programme on safety, hygiene and health at work. All around the world, further surveys and studies are being carried out to identify the main problem areas. Innovative research is underway to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of different solutions to the problem. However, the new information resulting from these initiatives are only now starting to become available.

What forms does violence at work take?

The range of behaviour which may be included under the general heading of violence at work is very broad. But the borderline of what constitutes acceptable behaviour is often vague and cultural attitudes to what amounts to violence are so diverse that it is a very complex matter to define violence at work.

Many people may first think of physical attacks by customers on staff, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. Violence can take place between members of staff, and it may psychological as well as physical.

Violence may also consist of repeated actions which, by themselves may be relatively minor, but which can cumulatively come to constitute serious forms of violence such as *sexual harassment, bullying* or *mobbing.*

Although a single incident can suffice, *sexual harassment* often consists of repeated unwelcome, unreciprocated and imposed action which may have a very severe effect on the victim. Sexual harassment may include touching, remarks, looks, attitudes, jokes or the use of sexually oriented language, allusions to a person's private life, references to sexual orientation, innuendos with a sexual connotation, remarks about dress or figure, or the persistent leering at a person or a part of her/his body.

Workplace *bullying* constitutes offensive behaviour through vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or groups of employees. Such persistently negative attacks on their personal and professional performance are typically unpredictable, irrational and unfair.

In recent years, reports have been increasing of another form of systematic collective violence. This involves ganging-up on or *mobbing* an employee and subjecting her or him to psychological harassment, for example by means of continuous negative remarks or criticism, isolation, spreading gossip or ridiculing the person concerned. Although such practices might on the surface appear to be minor single actions, they can have a very serious effect. It has been estimated, for example, that about 10-15 per cent of suicides in Sweden each year have this type of background.

A new profile of violence at work is emerging which gives equal emphasis to physical and psychological behaviour as well as full recognition to the significance of minor acts of violence.

Which sectors and occupations are most affected by violence at work?

While no occupation is immune, violence at work tends to be more of a risk in certain occupations than in others. Health care is prominent among the

sectors which are at high risk. In particular, workers who perform certain types of task appear to be at special risk. These tasks include:

- *handling money or valuables* (cashiers, transport workers, bank and post office staff, shop assistants);

- *providing care, advice, education and training* (nurses, ambulance staff, social workers, teachers);

- *carrying out inspection or enforcement duties* (police and traffic wardens, ticket inspectors);

- *working with mentally disturbed, drunk or potentially violent people* (prison officers, bar staff, mental health workers);

- *working alone* (home visitors, taxi drivers, domestic repair workers).

Automation, subcontracting, teleworking, networking and self-employment are leading to a rise in the numbers of people working alone. Although working alone is not automatically more dangerous than other employment, in some situations it involves a higher than average risk of violence.

For example, lone workers in small shops, gas stations and kiosks are often seen as *easy* targets by aggressors. In the United States, gas station workers rank fourth among the occupations most exposed to homicide. Cleaners, maintenance or repair staff and others who work alone outside normal hours are at special risk of suffering physical and sexual attacks. Of lone workers, taxi drivers are at the greatest risk of violence in many countries. Night-time is the highest risk period, and as in other occupations, customer intoxication appears to play a role in precipitating violence. A 1990 Australian study of taxi drivers found that they run a 28 times greater risk than workers at large of non-sexual assault and an almost 67 times greater risk of robbery

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Sex, age and precarious employment as risk factors

Several factors appear to increase a workers' risk of suffering violent treatment at the workplace. Chief among these are sex, age and precarious employment.

In the United Kingdom, for example, staff aged 18 to 30 working on the London Underground have a higher probability of becoming victims of assault than older staff.

Several surveys appear to confirm the vulnerability of *younger workers* to violent victimization at the workplace. This finding would appear to emphasize the importance of experience in dealing with violent situations. Previous experience enables employees to react more wisely and behave with more

self-confidence than inexperienced staff. This may in turn reduce the likelihood of violence occurring.

Women at special risk

Many studies show that women are at particular risk of violence, both inside and outside the workplace. A 2002 survey carried out in Italy showed that more women were sexually harassed at work than on public transport or in the street. Over 27% of the sexual violence covered in the survey was carried out by somebody at work or took place near work. 12.1% of physical sexual harassment happened at work. Data from Sweden also shows women to be more at risk of workplace injuries caused by violence than their male colleagues.

Why are women at high risk of violent behaviour in the workplace? In the first place, women are concentrated in many of the high-risk occupations, particularly as teachers, social workers, nurses and other health-care workers, as well as in banks and shops. The continued segregation of women in low-paid and low status jobs, while men predominate in better-paid, higher status jobs and supervisory positions, also contributes to the problem. Nevertheless, men tend to be at greater risk of physical assault, while women are particularly vulnerable to incidents of a sexual nature.

Many national surveys have found that anything between 40 and over 90 per cent of the women questioned have suffered some form of *sexual harassment* during the course of their working lives. Many governments, employers and workers started to realise the scope of sexual harassment as a workplace problem some time before becoming aware of the issue of violence at work. More studies have therefore been undertaken on sexual harassment and have documented more fully its incidence and the manner in which it can affect the work performance, career opportunities and mental and physical state of women workers.

In many cases, action has also been taken against sexual harassment at the national and enterprise levels. This ranges from undertaking studies to increasing awareness and, in a number of cases, adopting specific legislation.

The cost of violence at work

Like a stone thrown into water, violence at work not only has an immediate effect on the victim, but also expands in progressively larger ripples, affecting other people directly or indirectly, as well as the enterprise and the community.

However, it is only recently that experts have started to try and quantify the multiple and massive costs of workplace violence. In the United States, crime victimization occurring at the workplace has been estimated to cost approximately 1.8 million lost working days each year. A university study

published in 2003 estimated the average financial cost to employers of a serious violent incident in the workplace to be US$250,000, while more frequent, less severe incidents cost US$25,00 per incident. The total cost to American employers per year for workplace violence was estimated to be US$4.2 billion.

The impact and cost of violence at work needs to be considered at a number of different levels:

- at the *individual level*, where the suffering and humiliation resulting from violence usually lead to lack of motivation, loss of confidence and reduced self-esteem, depression and anger, anxiety and irritability. In the same way as with stress, if the causes of violence are not eliminated, or its effects contained by adequate intervention, these symptoms are likely to develop into physical illness, psychological disorders, tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse. They may even culminate in occupational accidents, invalidity and even suicide.

- at the *workplace*, violence causes immediate, and often long-term disruption to interpersonal relationships, the organization of work and the overall working environment. Employers bear the direct cost of lost work and improved security measures. They are also likely to bear the indirect costs of reduced efficiency and productivity, the deterioration of product quality, loss in company image and a reduction in the number of clients.

- at the *community level*, the costs of violence include health care and long-term rehabilitation costs for the reintegration of victims, unemployment and retraining costs for victims who lose their jobs as a result of such violence, and disability and invalidity costs where the working capacities of the victims are impaired by violence at work.

Causes of violence at work

There is a tendency to seek the causes of workplace violence in the individual, particularly in the high-profile cases of *disgruntled employees, angry spouses* or *unhappy, desperate, often psychiatrically impaired people* venting their anger on colleagues at the workplace. However, the phenomenon is much more complex, particularly given today's wider definition which includes everyday psychological violence like bullying.

Recognition and understanding of the variety and complexity of the factors that contribute to violence at work is a vital precursor to any effective prevention and control programmes. The following diagram proposes a model of the complex interactions which generate violence at work:

Understanding violence

Perpetrator

Victim(s)

Individual risk factors

Work environment

Situations at risk

Physical & psycho-logical impact

Cost for the individual

Cost for the enterprise

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