Violence at work is a growing problem confronting management and unions. However, it is an issue that cannot be addressed in isolation. Violence at work can be both physical and psychological. It may involve repeated actions that alone may be relatively minor but cumulatively may cause serious harm. Violence ranges from homicide and physical attack to bullying, mobbing, victimisation, sexual and racial harassment.

There are other psychosocial factors that influence safety and health that need to be examined together with violence. These issues include but are not limited to stress, alcohol and drugs, HIV/AIDS and tobacco. Furthermore, the whole notion of violence and the complex interactions with working, social and family life dictates a fresh look at the phenomenon. While violence may have its roots at work, it may manifest itself outside work, or vice versa.

Any one of the above-mentioned psychosocial problems may be a causal factor for the others or may be an end result or find its roots among them. For example, if a worker has an inadequate knowledge of HIV-AIDS, he or she may fear being infected by casual contact. This fear may lead to stress, lead to psychological or physical violence (such as bullying or mobbing), drive either worker towards drugs, alcohol or tobacco. It may also lead to stigmatization and discrimination against the HIV-positive individual and subsequently trigger aggression or actual violent behaviour.

Thus psychosocial problems can initiate or exacerbate an increasingly damaging cycle that will lead to negative consequences for the individual, the organization or enterprise and society as a whole. These factors tend to build on each other manifesting and intensifying as the interrelationships among the problems increase. For the individual, the results can be isolation, stigmatization, injury, illness and even death. For the organization or enterprise, these factors can result in increased absenteeism and accidents, reduced productivity, increased recruitment, training and insurance costs and decreased profits. The family invariably suffers the full brunt of the loss of income, reduced welfare, missed opportunities for children, psy-

Managing psychosocial issues at work, an ILO SafeWork activity

D. Gold, ILO

Vittorio Di Martino
International Consultant
Co-author of “Violence at Work”, ILO, 2000
Co-Author of the SOLVE methodology, ILO, 2002
5 Clos pre Brenoud
01170 Echenevex
France
E-mail: v.dimartino@worldonline.fr

Figure 1. A simulation exercise in a SOLVE course in Namibia

“The ILO SOLVE workshop has exposed me to what I can only describe as an effective and innovative way of dealing with what are now commonly referred to as emerging health related problems in the workplace.

SOLVE which clearly departs from the traditionally held view that workplace problems of stress, tobacco, alcohol and drugs, HIV/AIDS and violence are un-related problems needing individual interventions, undoubtedly provides a more practical and realistic approach to the effective management of these problems.

In my view, SOLVE’s emphasis on the need for a comprehensive workplace policy incorporating strategies dealing with interlinked health related problems of stress, tobacco, alcohol and drugs, HIV/AIDS and violence provides hope to employers and employees alike in their quest to make the workplace a much safer place”.

Dennis Zulu
Zambia Federation of Employers

...chological trauma, self-respect, and injuries which may result in divorce and its negative consequences. For society, the impact may be seen in terms of increased social costs, decreased consumer spending, increased criminality and adverse economic development.

The traditional approach in dealing with psychosocial problems has been a reactive one focusing on the problem and treating its symptoms. But the problems are increasing and becoming more widespread. Therefore a major paradigm shift towards a proactive and prevention-oriented approach is essential. The ILO is promoting this.

Organizations or enterprises often develop, publish or disseminate one or more strategy documents addressing, in isolation, a psychosocial problem. These documents (often called an organizational policy on a specific subject area) are designed to provide a means to address a specific problem. Unfortunately, as they are written in isolation, without taking into account the negative synergy of multiple psychosocial factors, their effect is diminished. For any of these strategy papers there needs to be an underlying principle that addresses, at the top-management level, what is common to the psychosocial problems at work.

Therefore if adverse effects of psychosocial problems are to be prevented, there is a need for a common, comprehensive policy that would enable the development and implementation of mutually reinforcing strategies. This statement must go beyond the psychosocial problems and include everyday matters effecting work. The policy statement should address such issues as prevention, empowerment, worker involvement, treatment, confidentiality, provision of information, training and education, and non-discrimination.

Support from top management to signal ongoing concern and commitment is essential. Thus when the managing director, president, or chairperson supports and signs such a policy document, the strategy acquires status and becomes stronger and more firmly rooted in the organizational structure.

How does an organization or enterprise develop the knowledge and capacity to develop such a comprehensive policy document? The SafeWork Programme of the ILO has developed an educational methodology addressing the management of psychosocial problems at work. Known as SOLVE the initial 40-hour (five-day) course is designed to provide participants with the necessary knowledge and skills to address an organization-wide policy. The basic SOLVE course covers managing psychosocial problems, stress, alcohol and drugs, violence, HIV/AIDS and tobacco. Each topic is covered in a four-hour time-frame with one hour dedicated to developing an open attitude towards the subject, one hour to acquire adequate information for decision-making and a two-hour simulation exercise which is linked to similar exercises for the other subject areas.

Because of its tripartite structure the ILO has been in a unique position to select the MicroSolve modules it needs. A number of the MicroSolve modules are being developed focusing on all these psychosocial problems, stress, alcohol and drugs, violence, HIV/AIDS and tobacco. Many MicroSolve modules will most probably evolve as the national facilitation capacity of SOLVE is developed in numerous countries. MicroSolve will be made available by national facilitators for SOLVE once an organization or enterprise completes a policy-level SOLVE programme. An organization will be able to select the MicroSolve modules it wishes to use and create their own action programme based on the organization’s needs. A number of the MicroSolve modules will be based on existing ILO standards such as the Code of Practice on the Management of Alcohol- and Drug-related Issues in the Workplace, the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work and the ILO Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems.

The policy-level SOLVE programme exists in English for the manufacturing sector. During the next few years it will be translated into French and Spanish, and in concert with ILO partners, will be modified and adapted for different sectors such as the healthcare, fishing, firefighting and public administration.

To date SOLVE policy-level workshops have been carried out in Turin, Italy, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Windhoek, Namibia. Additional courses are foreseen in Asia, Africa and Europe in 2002.
To carry out SOLVE at the national level, the ILO seeks to collaborate with a designated national institution that has the capacity to deal with psychosocial problems at work as well as the organizational structure to support SOLVE-related educational activities. National facilitating agencies currently include the University of Namibia, The Malaysian National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, the (US) National Safety Council and the T.T. Ranganathan Clinical Research Foundation in India. An educational programme designed to equip national facilitators with the capacity to organize and implement SOLVE will be held at the ILO International Training Centre in Turin, Italy in April 2002.

Violence is a problem that cannot stand alone. Along with other psychosocial issues the ILO addresses violence through prevention and the development of a course of action that leads from concept to policy to action. The goal of the ILO’s activity is to have safe, healthy and decent work by reducing absenteeism, turnover and losses while improving profitability, safety, health and well-being.

For further information on SOLVE please contact:

Dr. David Gold
Senior Occupational Safety and Health Education and Training Officer
SafeWork
International Labour Office
1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

E-mail: gold@ilo.org
Fax: +41-22-799-6878
Tel: +41-22-799-6183

The Malawi National Platform for Action (NPFA) is a declaration of the commitment of the Government of Malawi to improving the status of women with the long-term objective of achieving equality and equity between women and men in the 21st century. This involves input from politicians, policy makers, chiefs, traditional leaders and men and women from the grassroots level. This programme mainly focuses on four priority areas, namely: Poverty Alleviation and Empowerment, Violence against Women, the Girl Child, and Peace.

Responsibility for implementing, monitoring and following up the Platform for Action is vested in the government in partnership with agencies, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. All the stakeholders have a role to play in drawing up plans for operation and resource mobilization in order to ensure the effective implementation and the advancement of women.

The National Platform for Action in Malawi defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender based violence that results in sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women. This includes threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life’. Violence in Malawi, as in most countries, is prevalent at workplaces and in public institutions such as educational establishments, hospitals, prisons and police cells, as well as in the domestic arena. In these places, forms of violence such as assault and harassment, mental and physical abuse, do indeed exist.

The Malawi Constitution specifically acknowledges that violence against women is a problem and that there is a need for it to be eradicated in society. Thus Section 24, Subsection 2 (a) stipulates that ‘legislation shall be passed to eliminate customs and practices that discriminate against women, particularly practices such as sexual abuse, harassment and violence’.

Their male colleagues and bosses subject women to various forms of abuse which are perpetrated because of fear of the unknown. In a study on women in government, parastatals and private organizations, it was found that semi-skilled and junior-ranking women are more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment that takes the form of intimidation and the denial of opportunities, including training, for professional advancement. The limited number of women in workplaces makes them more vulnerable to abuse and reinforces the general view that their rightful place is in the home. Even if they are in senior positions, women are always underrated, insulted and looked down upon.

People in authority – such as prison warders, health personnel and welfare officers – also perpetrate violence against women at workplaces.

Violence in the home takes the form of wife battering, molestation of girl children, psychological sexual abuse, the withholding of necessities such as food and finances, abusive language, marital rape and child labour. Wife battering takes the form of actual physical beating, and sexual abuse manifests itself in intimidation. The media also promote domestic violence through their programmes and their sensationalization of offences committed by women.

Most women work for long hours, as they have to combine household work and office work without due regard to their need for time in which to attend to other personal needs.

The sad part of most of the violence is that it goes unreported. This is so because of the culprit’s inability to sense the violence or recognize it. A good example is a case where a job is offered in exchange for sexual abuse. In many cases of this sort, some women have realized their misfortune after already of-