Violence at the workplace: The global response

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A new awareness

For long a ‘forgotten’ issue, violence at work has dramatically gained momentum in recent years and is now a priority concern in both industrialized and developing countries. In the industrialized world, awareness has progressively been transformed into action, whereas in the developing world, an effective response has taken more time to materialize. Two types of obstacles, based on the following argumentation, are often mentioned:

• There is a great deal of violence in society at large. People’s lives and dignity are at risk in the streets, in their homes, practically everywhere. Why should we concentrate on the workplace alone?
• Measures to prevent violence are an important but costly business. Instead, we should concentrate our limited resources on more crucial areas, particularly the development of a competitive economy. Once this is attained and extra resources become available, violence at work will be tackled with proper means and put under control. Why rush into initiatives that are not economically viable?

Progressively, however, a new awareness is emerging. It is being argued that in a situation of generalized violence, it is necessary to concentrate efforts on one initial well-selected target having a high probability of success rather than wasting resources in an attempt to solve all problems at the same time. Increasingly, the workplace appears to be a ‘privileged’ place to tackle violence. In the workplace, confrontation and dialogue form part of normal operations. Workers and managers are often faced with personal and work-related problems, but dialogue usually prevails over confrontation. People usually manage to organize efficient and productive activities within the workplace. These are unique conditions that are not easily replicated elsewhere and that can constitute a very solid basis for efficiently combating violence.

While the special role of the workplace with regard to violence is recognized more and more often, the belief that measures to prevent violence are a mere cost item, is challenged. What appears instead is that the cost of violence represents a serious, sometime lethal threat to the efficiency and success of organizations. Nothing is worse for an organization than to be labelled as violent. Violence-free organizations show the benefits of policies and action to prevent violence at work and pave the way to new initiatives in this area.

Based on these considerations, the emerging message is to act now, without any delay, against violence at work. But in which areas, and by what means? Who should be the actors and how should the workplace be organized to respond more effectively to such a threat?

The real image of violence at work

The variety of behaviours that may be covered under the general rubric of violence at work is so large, the borderline between violence and acceptable behaviours is often so vague, and the perception in different contexts and cultures of what constitutes violence is so diverse, that it becomes a significant challenge both to describe and to define this phenomenon.

In practice violence in the workplace may include a wide range of behaviours – behaviours that are often continuing and overlapping, as illustrated in the box beside (1). People who have never experienced or witnessed any of these be-
behaviours in their working life are likely to be a very small – and lucky – minority.

Not all violence is physical. In recent years, new evidence has emerged concerning the impact and harm caused by non-physical, psychological violence. Such psychological violence encompasses harassment – including sexual harassment – bullying and mobbing. While the existence of physical violence at the workplace has been always recognized, the existence of psychological violence has long been underestimated and is only now receiving due attention. Psychological violence is currently emerging as a priority issue at the workplace, leading to a new awareness and re-evaluation of the importance of all psychological risks at work.

It is also increasingly recognized that psychological violence is often perpetrated through repeated behaviour, of a type which by itself may be relatively minor but which cumulatively can become a very serious form of violence. Although a single incident can suffice, psychological violence often consists of repeated, unwelcome, unreciprocated and imposed action which may have a devastating effect on the victim. The new profile of violence at work which emerges is one which gives equal emphasis to physical and psychological behaviour, and one which gives full recognition to the significance of minor acts of violence.

Violence at work goes global
Workplace violence – be it physical or psychological – has gone global, crossing borders, work settings and occupational groups.

In South Africa workplace hostilities are reported as being ‘abnormally high’. A 1998–99 Internet survey indicated that 78 percent of South Africans who took part in the survey had experienced bullying behaviour at the workplace during their working life (2).

In the USA, violence is a major contributor to death and injury at the workplace. According to the 1,000 security executives interviewed for the annual Pinkerton survey (3), in 1999 violence was the most important security threat to America’s largest corporations.

Suicide has become the number two cause of death among bureaucrats in Japan, with a death toll higher than that for heart diseases and second only to that for cancer. A record high of 33,048 people committed suicide in Japan in 1999, with debt or job loss blamed for one in five of these deaths. (4)

In 2000, a European Union survey based on 21,500 face-to-face interviews with workers throughout the EU indicated that in the EU’s 15 Member States, 2 percent of workers (3 million people) were subjected to physical violence from people belonging to their workplace; 4 percent (6 million) were subjected to physical violence from people outside their workplace; 2 percent (3 million) were subjected to sexual harassment; and 9 percent (13 million) were subjected to intimidation and bullying. (5)

Preliminary findings from an ILO/WHO study on workplace violence in the health sector – one of the sectors at greater risk – indicate that both physical and psychological violence are extensively present in the countries under investigation. In Bulgaria 7.5 percent of the respondents reported having been physically attacked in the previous year; the corresponding figures were 10.5 percent in Thailand; and from 9 per cent in the private sector up to 17 per cent in the public sector in South Africa. Psychological violence is widespread, with verbal abuse topping the list. In Bulgaria, 32.2 percent of the respondents had experienced incidents of this type in the year prior to the survey; the respective figures were 49.5 percent in South Africa – with as much as 60 percent in the public sector; 47.7 percent in Thailand; and 51 percent in Portugal. Bullying and mobbing were reported by 30.9 percent of the respondents in Bulgaria, by 20.4 percent in South Africa, by 10.8 percent in Thailand and by 23 percent in Portugal. (6)

Causes and costs of violence in the workplace
Is the ‘disgruntled worker’ the ‘everyman’ of the workplace violence? News reports of violent workplace incidents often highlight the acts of an individual: enraged, aggrieved, irritated or frustrated for one reason or another, either personal or professional, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs. However often that view is repeated in the media, a far more promising approach to workplace violence can be found in an ‘interactive’ analysis of both individual and social risk factors. Workplace violence often stems from a combination of causes, including individual behaviour as well as the work environment, the conditions of work, the way in which co-workers interact, the way that customers or clients interact with workers, and the interaction between managers and workers.

The illustration above shows the complex interactions which generate violence at work (1).

What is the cost? Violence causes immediate and often long-term disruption to interpersonal relationships, the organization of work and the overall working environment. The cost factors involved include direct costs such as those deriving from absenteeism, turnover, accidents, illness, disability and death; and indirect costs, including diminished functionality, performance, quality, and timely production and competitiveness. Increasing attention is also given to the negative impact of violence on ‘intangible factors’ such as company image, motivation and commitment, loyalty to the enterprise, creativity, work-
A comprehensive approach is required for confronting violence. Instead of searching for a single solution good for any problem and situation, the full range of causes which generate violence should be analysed and a variety of intervention strategies adopted. All too frequently, the response to workplace violence is limited, episodic and ill-defined.

There is also a growing awareness that violence at work is not merely an episodic, individual problem but a structural, strategic problem rooted in wider social, economic, organizational and cultural factors. Finally, there is growing recognition that violence at work is detrimental to the functionality of the workplace, and any action taken against such violence is an integral part of the organizational development of a sound enterprise.

Consequently the response should tackle the causes, rather than the effects, of violence at work. In this respect, the importance of a preventive, systematic and targeted approach to violence at work is increasingly stressed.

Some policy measures which can produce more permanent results include:

- Disseminating information about positive examples of innovative legislation, guidance and practice in this area, to act as multipliers for other anti-violence initiatives
- Encouraging anti-violence programmes, particularly at enterprise level, specifically addressed to combating violence at work
- Assisting governments, employers and workers’ organizations to develop effective policies against violence at work
- Assisting in the elaboration of training programmes for managers, workers and government officials dealing with or exposed to violence at work
- Assisting in the elaboration of procedures to enhance the reporting of violent incidents
- Coordinating different anti-violence initiatives at different levels into organized strategies and plans.

**The virtuous circle**

Monitoring the socioeconomic impact of violence at work, assessing the costs of such an impact, and highlighting the benefits of prevention and intervention in this area are essential to the development of ‘high road’ policies. This is an area that has hardly been tackled yet, but it seems to call for the utmost attention.

The viability of the ‘high road’, once confirmed, would open the way to a natural process of proliferation of initiatives largely based on their self-sustainability. Policies would stimulate and sustain this natural process by means of stimulation and encouragement, creation of networks and awareness-rising. These will be accompanied by the issuing of guidelines, best practice, framework and support legislation.

A virtuous circle would thus be activated that develops from inside the workplace to expand progressively in a strategic prospective independently from the mechanics of short-term influences and forced interventions. Triggering the virtuous circle is the great challenge we all face.

**References**

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-