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Factors of Violence and Harassment at Workplace: Another Reading from the Strategic Analysis

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Abstract

Organizational and societal factors are generally put forward to explain violence and harassment at workplace. This article attempts to explore new avenues for explaining violence and harassment at workplace by emphasizing the role of the actor and the strategies that he can build for his benefit in the organization. The text is based on a literature review and a field survey carried out with 22 actors, including sixteen (16) at the institutional level (Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), Government Services (SG), trade union organizations (TUO) and six (6) workers in the formal sector. The article concludes that violence and harassment come from an actor's strategy. The aggressiveness that is its expression constitutes a resource for controlling and obtaining from others what the actor needs. Violence and harassment are only ways of expressing this aggressiveness.

Keywords

Violence at Work, Harassment at Work, Strategy, Ivory Coast

1. Introduction

The causes of violence and harassment at workplace are generally explained by factors external to the individual (Zaitseva & Chaudat, 2016; Bouville & Campoy, 2012; Bourgeois, Ohana & Renault, 2016). And yet, the latter is able to build strategies to achieve specific objectives. Sexual harassment is one example, because the employee plans a series of actions to obtain the sexual favors of another worker.

In the literature, violence and harassment at workplace have rarely been explained by the actor who develops a strategy. Factors external to the individual have generally been favored for this purpose. Some authors highlight the hierar-

chical relationships between workers (Debout & Larose, 2003; Bourgeois, Ohana & Renault, 2016) which would encourage abuse of power by those who hold authority. The organization has also been used to explain violence and harassment at workplace, even if the proponents of this thesis admit that it has its limits (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009; Hoel & Cooper, 2000). Another much more psychological approach explains violence by innate or acquired factors. Pillinger (2017), for example, highlights the vulnerability of victims that fuels the perpetuation of violence and harassment.

Whatever the angle taken to explain these phenomena, the actor seems to be passive and guided by exogenous factors:

"The reasons for professional harassment are as diverse as its effects." It is rare that only one factor is involved. Whether a conflict turns into workplace harassment depends on various factors and circumstances." The causes may lie in the organization of the workplace (including mismanagement), the working conditions, the perpetrators, the victim, the work group and/or the overall social context—in which one should not under-estimating globalization, which reduces job security and increases stress at work" (Graham, 2003: p. 65).

The field data collected during the survey carried out as part of a study on violence and harassment goes in the same direction by identifying a series of exogenous factors to explain violence and harassment at the workplace.

In fact, the field data and those of the literature favor deterministic factors making the actor an instrument driven by the system and/or society, sometimes making him not responsible for his actions. And yet, the latter can play a role of which he is aware in the production of violence and harassment to the point of making it a strategy to achieve private and personal objectives. It is therefore necessary to question the role of the actor in the occurrence of these phenomena. Hence our following research question: are violence and harassment the product of an actor's strategy to achieve their own goals?

To answer these questions, we formulate the following hypothesis: violence and harassment are explained more by actors' strategies than by any other reason. The factors put forward are part of a construction and a strategy of the actor. The article attempts to explore new avenues for explaining violence and harassment at workplace by emphasizing the role of the actor and the strategies that he can build for his benefit in the organization.

2. Materials and Methods

The data needed for the study was collected between July and September 2021 to determine the explanatory factors of violence and harassment at workplace. The localities of Abidjan and Bouaké have been identified because of their importance in the economy of Cote d'Ivoire. The study is based on both a qualitative approach and documentary research. A qualitative sampling made it possible to carry out interviews with 13 actors, including one (1) Labor Inspector (LI), one (1) Head of an NGO (HNGO), eight (8) Heads of Government Services (HGS);

two (2) Union Leaders (UL) and one (1) formal sector worker.

Three interview guides were developed for data collection: the first is for workers; the second is addressed to trade union leaders and employers and the third to those responsible for labor administration. The data collected was processed using the QDA Miner software to highlight the opinions, attitudes and perceptions of the actors in relation to the explanatory factors of violence and harassment at workplace.

A content analysis of the discourse delivered by the respondents revealed the salient points. The article draws on strategic analysis to provide new explanations for violence and harassment.

3. Results

The analysis of the data made it possible to identify seven factors that help explain violence and harassment at workplace in Côte d'Ivoire. These are 1) the power relationship, 2) precariousness, 3) impunity, 4) the insufficiency of laws, 5) the weak control capacities of labor regulators, 6) ignorance laws and protection mechanisms, and 7) the problem of the burden of proof.

3.1. The Power Relationship

The power relationship is one of the main explanatory factors of violence and harassment at workplace. It is, in general, a legal resource registered in the attributions of an individual within the framework of the management. The legal texts¹ in force confer this authority on the manager in order to achieve the objectives of the organization. In the Labour Code, for example, we can read: "*The employment contract is an agreement of wills by which a natural person undertakes to put his professional activity under the direction and authority of another natural person or 'a legal person, for remuneration*' (LC, Article 14.1)". While this power should, in principle, be used to fulfill the missions of the company or department, some managers use it to achieve other goals apart from the expected results, as described by this respondent:

"It depends on the managers who often mix up the power given to them, the hierarchical power they enjoy to compare direct collaborators as sub-humans, whereas the power we gave them because there always needs to be an organization in a society, and it is not because you are the boss that you have to infantilize your collaborator" (Union leader, Abidjan).

The search for the departure of a worker without assuming responsibility for it as well as the obtaining of sexual favors constitute the main manifestations of this abuse of authority:

"I handled a file of this kind where the gentleman was a cook who was in a restaurant. The owner of the restaurant, a woman, fired him. He came to complain to claim his rights. And in the exchanges, he let me know that the lady wanted to build a relationship with him. But he is a religious person, so he re-

¹The Labourcode and the general statute of the civil service, for example.

fused to have that kind of relationship. In fact, she is a lady who has the money, but who does not have a man in her life. Having therefore refused his advances, she got angry and started saying nonsense. he does not cook well, he is not clean. This is how she found arguments to dismiss him" (Heads of Government Services, Abidjan).

Power can also be explained by a set of resources beyond that conferred by the texts. The testimony below shows that an intern who is not usually in a position of authority but still harasses her employer illustrates this fact:

"There is an intern who has requested a school internship. The company gave him a qualifying internship. After 6 months, the internship was renewed. The intern says she has requested a school internship. So she harasses the employer to give her a permanent contract. The employer also does not want... But the intern came to ask for a school internship, 6 months later, she necessarily wants to have a permanent contract. It intimidates the employer. She does not come to work if he does not sign the contract until the employer even says no, wait 12 months. She leaves and goes to file a complaint, since she is becoming important in..." (Heads of Government Services, Abidjan).

The case of this trainee shows that one can hold power and exercise violence without being in a position of authority. Indeed, she would have helped her employer to obtain a contract and would demand to be hired in return; she would threaten to cancel this opportunity if her boss did not carry out his wishes. The precarious situation is another factor provided by respondents to explain violence and harassment at workplace.

3.2. The Precariousness

The data analyzed reveal that precariousness is one of the factors explaining violence and harassment at workplace. Indeed, many workers find themselves in a precarious situation because of their employment situation. And those who have a job consider themselves privileged, because they think it is a favor. They are, therefore, as ready as those who seek it, to make sacrifices to keep their jobs:

"In my opinion, what explains this reality is that the job market is getting tough, there is competition; so, some employers who necessarily want to have sex with women before giving them a job use this pretext to be able to give them a job" (Formal sector worker, Bouaké).

On analysis, precariousness transforms employment into a commodity with an exchange value diverted from its original purpose. Whoever holds it tells himself that he can offer it by asking for something else in return, including the acceptance of violence and above all the silence of the victims. Under these conditions, we are witnessing a kind of laxity which naturally leads to impunity, which the respondents also identified as an explanatory factor for violence and harassment at workplace.

3.3. Impunity

Impunity was also identified by respondents as a factor behind violence and ha-

rassment at workplace:

"The lady said she filed a complaint with the prosecutor, then the case was taken to the gendarmerie, and since the guy is strong so far, she was auditioned, but the main defendant was never auditioned or heard before a judge. He never appeared in court when she herself was the group's General Secretary. As a result, the small worker says to himself that there is no point in wasting his money on a complaint because it will never succeed' (Heads of Government Services, Abidjan).

Sexual harassment, for example, is punishable by the Penal Code. The same goes for the other forms of violence identified during the study. However, the survey revealed that there are very few convictions for this type of violence and harassment. This has the effect of eroding the confidence of victims in the justice institutions, as this respondent pointed out:

"Often also it is the fact that people do not trust the institutions, we say to ourselves that I am going to file a complaint, it will not succeed; when you have a boss who is a minister or army colonel, you are afraid, when this kind of action happens, to file a complaint. We say to ourselves that it will not succeed; around us, we are not aware enough to tell the other, but have the courage to go and bring the case, we tell you to drop it, it will not succeed and that is what we are living" (Heads of Government Services, Abidjan).

On analysis, impunity creates a lack of trust in institutions, which in turn fuels a climate of impunity that benefits both known and potential perpetrators. This creates a general feeling of weakness that discourages even those who intend to defend the victims. The perpetrators thus benefiting from virtual impunity are willing to reoffend; but also new people are not afraid to take action, because they know that they will not be worried; or else they will get away with it without too much damage. Impunity is in turn fueled by insufficient laws.

3.4. The Insufficiency of the Laws

Although Articles 4 and 5 of the Labour code refer to violence and harassment at workplace, there is no text to punish the perpetrators. And yet Article 7 alludes to additional texts to punish violators of the article quoted above: "The provisions provided for in Articles 4 and 5 are displayed in the workplace as well as in the premises or at the door of places where the hiring takes place.

It is the same for the texts adopted for the application of the said articles". This last paragraph suggests that texts should be adopted for the application of Articles 4 and 5. To date, they are not yet available. Victims must therefore refer to other institutions, other jurisdictions, and other texts to obtain justice and reparations. Which seems tedious.

Also, for particular categories considered more vulnerable at workplace, there are no specific texts to protect them (women, workers in the informal sector, domestic workers, etc.). Moreover, this inadequacy of the legal framework is combined with a lack of assistance mechanism for victims at the national level, as this respondent pointed out:

"There is no mechanism in place for the protection of witnesses. It is said that he cannot be fired for having testified to moral and sexual harassment. That's fine, but what protects the witness now. And the witness, if he is dismissed, what does the employer expose himself to? You see, there is not all that. Therefore, the witness must have sufficient protection to avoid finding himself in such a delicate position, of precariousness overnight. Otherwise no one will testify. And then, protecting the identity of the witness is really important. It is necessary that the services which receive can not disclose it" (Heads of Government Services, Abidjan).

The insufficiency of the laws is fed by the ignorance of the law and the mechanisms of protection.

3.5. The Ignorance of the Law and Protection Mechanisms

People interviewed during the survey identified ignorance of the law and protection mechanisms as another factor explaining violence and harassment at workplace:

"I admit that there are many women who are in this situation, but they do not know where to go. Some do not even know that in the Labor code, there are provisions today that criminalize moral harassment and sexual harassment. There must therefore be awareness at the national level on harassment in the sexual environment and in the workplace vis-à-vis workers' organizations, organizations of women in the workplace and even employers. In the old Code, it didn't exist, if he doesn't know, he thinks it's so normal' (Heads of Government Services, Abidjan).

As a result, these phenomena have long remained taboo. This may explain the low attention given in many countries. In Côte d'Ivoire, there is a diffuse body of texts making it possible to repress the perpetrators of violence and harassment at workplace; but it is not always known by victims who do not know their rights and most often have a low level of education, particularly domestic workers and those in the informal sector. This is reflected in the testimonies of these respondents:

"The causes, there is ignorance of rights, there is illiteracy in this sector which is really very recurrent and then the informality of the sector, in a way. Because the sector is not organized as it should be. So, everyone does what they want, if I can put it that way" (Union leader, Abidjan).

"The first cause would be the ignorance of the texts related to the aspects. We also have the non-popularization of the texts prohibiting harassment in the workplace and the same for the promotion and awareness of the texts which regulate the working environment" (Heads of Government Services, Abidjan).

In addition to the ignorance of laws and protection mechanisms, victims still have to face the burden of proof.

3.6. The Problem of the Burden of Proof

The burden of proof was identified by almost all respondents as one of the fac-

tors contributing to perpetuating violence and harassment at workplace. In fact, this is another hurdle victims face. They have the obligation to prove that the perpetrator actually committed the act. According to the Labor code, "*Harassment can be proven by any means*" (LC, Article 5). It is therefore up to the victim to prove that he is indeed a victim. But in reality, it is not obvious, as this respondent pointed out:

"But in general, to prove harassment, it is a bit difficult. So, the workers really prefer to come and say that it is an unfair dismissal or to ask that their rights be paid so that they can leave. Otherwise during the treatment, it is with the exchanges that the work inspector detects that, behind, there is harassment" (Heads of Government Services, Abidjan).

Difficulties in proving the facts do not encourage victims to denounce. At the same time, the authors are encouraged to repeat the offense as suggested by the words of this respondent:

"And we must also educate women to have the courage, to dare to denounce, because when there is no denunciation, it continues. A woman who is harassed in the workplace if she resigns and another woman comes to replace her, she too will be exposed to the same violence. Whereas when she denounces, even if the author does not go to prison, but at least, if he is cornered and he knows that he is being followed, that can calm his ardor a little and then it also gives lessons to others" (HNGO, Bouaké).

On analysis, the burden of proof as practiced in the Ivorian context is to the advantage of the authors. Indeed, a wise person would take all the measures not to leave traces. A denunciation should in principle automatically trigger an independent investigation to establish the truth: if the facts are proven, then the author is punished; otherwise, the person who gave the false alarm is sanctioned.

In addition to the problem of the burden of proof, the weak control capacities of labor regulators is another factor put forward by respondents to explain violence and harassment at workplace.

3.7. Weak Monitoring Capacities of Labor Regulators

The survey revealed that the people responsible for monitoring the work are unable to carry out their missions in adequate conditions and thus to fight effectively against violence and harassment. This benefits the perpetrators, fuels the feeling of impunity and undermines the confidence of victims in the institutions responsible for protecting them. Under these conditions, it is almost impossible for them to properly fulfill their missions which are among others: advice, conciliation, control, election of the staff representative, installation of health and safety committees at work, correction documents such as rules of procedure, etc.

The working conditions of labor inspectors particularly deserve to be reviewed. Inspectors interviewed as part of the study even pointed out that they are constantly victims of violence from certain employers:

"It is important. Because the last time, you saw that I even gave the service ve-

hicle, with the yellow plate, to the employees who went to file notices, but that did not deter people. They didn't even have access. However, they did not have access. Moreover, the employer came out and even threatened them. He did not agree to unload the mail' (Labour inspector, Abidjan).

In addition, it emerges from the analysis that there is a weakness of the technical and human capacities at the level of the Labor Inspectorate. The direct observation carried out as part of the study made it possible to note that the technical means made available to them are not sufficient to properly process all cases submitted to them. Also, because of the low importance given to violence and harassment at workplace in Côte d'Ivoire, they are not sufficiently equipped to qualify the facts, listen to the victims and provide them with appropriate assistance.

4. Discussion

This section aims to analyze one of the main causes of violence and harassment at workplace while questioning received ideas.

4.1. Beyond Received Ideas

The different causes identified in the context of the study highlight factors that cannot structurally explain the behaviors observed. They do not say why a worker is aggressive and exercises violence and/or harasses other employees. Indeed, in the same situation, not all individuals use verbal violence, for example against their employees. What ultimately drives the individual to action?

In the literature, these same factors are put forward to account for violence and harassment at workplace. Debout & Larose (2003: p. 108), for example, note that moral and/or sexual harassment is the consequence of an "abusive use of power, which is then transformed into an instrument of persecution of the employee, calling into question his fundamental rights and the respect due to him". This explanation is limited, as the study showed that actors who were not in a position of power could also be the cause of harassment. Also, these acts can occur between colleagues of the same rank and without a hierarchical relationship (Bourgeois, Ohana, & Renault, 2016). This is why we must be careful not to make the mistake of reducing power to the legal approach set out in legal texts. It would be appropriate to take a broader sociological approach to the notion of power and describe it as a set of resources (financial knowledge, social networks, etc.) that an individual holds and can use to achieve personal goals (Bernoux, 2014).

Authors also explain violence and harassment by organizational factors. Although they recognize with other authors (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009; Hoel & Cooper, 2000) several factors explaining harassment (Bourgeois, Ohana, & Renault, 2016) give preponderance to the organization. According to them, since this is directly under the control of the employer, it is easier to use it as a lever in the fight against this phenomenon in the workplace.

Zaitseva & Chaudat (2016) identify, after a review of the available literature, 5 types of factors to account for bullying. These include 2) work organization, 3) leadership, 3) organizational culture and social climate, 4) reward system and 5) organizational change. After an analysis of these different factors, they conclude that the organization of work is the most important of all and that more actions should be initiated to mitigate it and thus obtain satisfactory results in the context of the resorption of this phenomenon.

Bouville & Campoy (2012) explain moral harassment by 4 factors, in particular 1) work organization, 2) working conditions, 3) social relations and 4) employment resources. According to these authors, a "...a stressful psychosocial environment, i.e. comprising a strong time constraint, a low autonomy in one's work, poor social relations and a long working week, greatly increases the probability of appearance of situations of moral harassment at work" (Bouville & Campoy, 2012: p. 72). As a result, the organizational factor is more relevant in explaining harassment and violence at workplace, according to them.

To organizational factors, Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper (2003) add situational and societal factors. According to them, the situational factors represent opportunities offered to the perpetrators to perpetrate their acts. Otherwise, these are favorable conditions for the commission of violence and harassment. They cite, among other things, solitary and night work, work in contact with the public, manipulation of securities and cash, jobs or functions where the proportion of men and women is unequal, differences in hierarchical power, etc. with regard to societal factors, the authors highlight the social, economic, political and cultural determinants that drive the perpetrators to act: these are the levels of violent crime in society, economic change, rapid social change and immigration and growth of the informal economic sector.

In addition to organizational factors, Ismail, Chee, & Bee (2007) highlight individual reasons for violence and harassment at workplace. These include unequal gender relations in the workplace, sexist attitudes between colleagues, physical attractiveness between colleagues, victims' clothing and professional status and sexual roles.

All of these authors favor the organization and/or society as the main modalities in an attempt to account for violence and/or harassment at workplace. And yet, subject to the same organizational and societal constraints, not all workers engage in violence or harass other employees. What ultimately can sustainably explain violence and harassment at workplace?

4.2. Intrapersonal Conflict as a Driver of Violence and Harassment

The violence exerted by an actor A on another B is above all the expression of a conflict: "These conflicts are most frequent in the context of the company given the personalization of relations in the professional world and the rise of sense of individualism" (Malarewicz, 2009: p. 38). It should also be noted that the conflict is primarily psychological, because it is in the individual that it arises before any

interaction with other individuals. Touzard (1977) notes on this subject that in psychology, conflict is the expression of aggressive behavior in reaction to internal or external factors. The author points out that these factors are the source of a debate among psychologists.

For some, the factors are innate and naturally drive the individual to violence. The latter can only suffocate it under duress and/or social pressure. proponents of this thesis emphasize that sublimation is the only means by which the individual can avoid conflict. It consists, for the latter, in carrying out activities that allow the expression of aggression by other means, in particular painting, martial arts, etc. For other psychologists, on the other hand, aggression is the product of external factors such as learning and instrumentality. According to them, it is a reaction to frustrations suffered and integrated by the individual who must discharge them.

These positions call for two observations: 1) the individual is naturally violent and can only regain balance or well-being through aggression or conflict; 2) conflict is constructed from the experiences of the individual. Whether it is one or the other, we come to the conclusion that violence is first intrapersonal, that is to say that it is a confrontation at the level of the individual. The latter therefore presents psychological disorders that he tries to resolve through a projection towards another individual. The Violence then becomes interpersonal.

In this respect, violence at workplace results from intrapersonal conflicts, that is to say from accumulated and/or repressed physiological antecedents and which emerge in particular circumstances and during which the individual dump. But it is illusory to think that the actor is unaware of his actions. Anyone who morally and/or sexually harasses another worker knows perfectly well what he is doing as well as the expected results. The same applies to someone who exercises physical violence on another employee. From this point of view, violence and harassment are elements of the strategies of actors seeking to achieve given objectives.

This psychological explanation, however refined, does not shed enough light on the violence and harassment observed at workplace. Indeed, every individual has; at one time or another in his life, recorded episodes of frustration. Under these conditions, why don't they all exercise violence or harass other workers? This last question suggests that the real causes lie elsewhere. What if they were an element of acting strategy?

4.3. Aggressiveness as a Resource in the Organization

The previous sections show that violence and harassment cannot be explained by so-called situational or organizational factors and/or by intrapersonal conflicts linked to the frustrations experienced by the aggressors. In many cases, perpetrators are aware of their actions and some take advantage of them. They obtain sexual favors, a position, the departure of a worker without taking responsibility for it, or even domination over one or more collaborators. Better economic performance of the company is to be put in this register. It follows that violence and

harassment are part of an individual strategy that the actor implements to achieve his objectives.

Consequently, the aggressiveness at the origin of violence and harassment is a resource, in the sense of strategic analysis (Bernoux, 2014) mobilized by the actor to achieve his objectives. Under these conditions, the power available to an actor who commits violence is a zone of uncertainty that he controls and uses for his own benefit. In fact, what some authors call organizational factors are nothing more than areas of uncertainty created by the work environment. These include the proximity between workers, the organization of work, leadership, organizational culture and the social climate and organizational changes.

On analysis, violence and harassment can be explained more by a strategy than by other reasons. However, the others should not be overlooked, especially the individual and organizational dimensions. In fact, it is a process involving both psychological (individual) and systemic (organization) aspects to which is added the strategy to produce the act of violence or harassment. Three phases can be identified in the production of violence:

- 1) Construction of the foundations of violence and harassment: whether innate or the product of frustration, it is here that the individual develops the tools and capacities to produce violence. This can happen without the actor being aware of it. This phase can take place before the worker enters the company and also while he is there;
- 2) **Development of the strategy**: the actor is in the company; he identifies the areas of uncertainty and those which are within his reach and which he can use to achieve a given objective. In other words, he develops his strategy;
- **3)** *Expression of violence and harassment*: this is the phase where violence and/or harassment occurs. But in fact, it is the end of a process. The actor is in favorable conditions allowing him to take action.

This explanation and the resulting process for explaining violence and harassment at workplace constitute a new avenue of research to nourish and enrich the debate on this theme.

5. Conclusion

The data from the field study made it possible to highlight the explanatory factors of violence and harassment at workplace as provided by the respondents. According to them, the relationship of power, precariousness, impunity, the insufficiency of laws, the weak control capacities of labor regulators, the ignorance of laws and protection mechanisms, and the problem of the burden of proof makes it possible to account for the aggressive behavior of certain workers towards others.

In addition, the review of the literature has revealed that authors favor organizational and societal factors to explain violence and harassment at workplace; which, to a certain extent, clears the aggressor, because the latter would be under the influence of organizational data that would push him to take action. This is a

reductive vision of the actor who acts in the direction of his interests and for whom violence and harassment can constitute an additional resource for his own objectives. All things considered, aggression is a resource for controlling and getting what the actor needs from others. Violence and harassment are only ways of expressing this aggressiveness.

That said, our initial hypothesis is verified, which implies that violence and harassment are explained more by actors' strategies than by any other reason. Consequently, the factors favored by the authors in the literature constitute participating elements in the construction of a strategy of the actor who seeks to achieve personal goals.

On analysis, attempts to reduce violence and harassment at workplace should focus on the individual before focusing on organizational and/or societal factors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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