

Violence at work

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Third edition

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PREFACE

Dialogue, discussions and disagreements form a regular part of the interactions in many work environments. As a result, most workers and managers are confronted with personal, work-related and client/customer challenges on a daily basis, including the anxieties and frustration of co-workers, personality clashes, organizational and production difficulties, diminished resources, increasing production/output demands, aggressive intruders from outside the business, and problematic relations with clients and members of the public. Despite this, dialogue usually prevails over confrontation, and most people manage to organize efficient and productive activities within the workplace. There are cases, however, where dialogue fails to develop in a positive way, relationships between workers, managers, clients or the public deteriorate, and the objectives of working efficiently and achieving productive results are negatively affected. Thus violence may emerge in work environments and turn a previously benign environment into a hostile and hazardous setting.

Contemporary community awareness about the issue of violence at work has been magnified by several recent tragic workplace killings perpetrated by disturbed individuals and fanatical groups armed with powerful weapons. For example, since the first edition of this book appeared in 1998, terrorist attacks on a number of workplaces, public transport facilities, and hotel and residential compounds have resulted in significant loss of life around the world. While media attention has generally concentrated on the victims of these attacks – and sometimes the risks faced by criminal justice system workers tracking the perpetrators – it is frequently forgotten that many victims were either at work or travelling to or from their jobs. Similarly, media attention often focuses on single events with multiple victims, such as when an armed individual attacks a group of co-workers, perhaps after unresolved interpersonal or employment disagreements.

Yet many other workplace violence events occur out of sight of the general public, in one-to-one situations, result in emotional rather than

physical injury to the victim, and produce extensive costs for both the employer and the recipient. Often the victims of these less-dramatic occurrences lack power in their employment relationship, have limited protection from unfair dismissal, and have few alternative job options. The end result is that victimized workers without support may resign from their jobs, be pushed out if they remonstrate, or accept low-level workplace violence or sexual harassment as the price to be paid for a job. Thus, the causes and consequences of workplace violence cannot be analysed independently of employment relationships.

In this book, the full range of aggressive acts that occur in workplaces are reviewed, including homicides, assaults, sexual harassment, threats, bullying, mobbing and verbal abuse. Part I (chapters 1 to 4) details evidence about the incidence and severity of workplace violence in different countries (including examination of some terrorist and mass murder events), identifies occupations and situations at particular risk, evaluates various causal explanations, and details some of the social and economic costs. In Part II (chapters 5 to 8), the potential benefits from different types of responses to workplace violence are evaluated, including regulatory innovations, policy interventions, workplace designs that may reduce the risks, collective agreements, and “best practice” options. In Part III (Chapter 9), international initiatives and recommendations for specific action are enunciated.

It is encouraging to note the increasing attention being paid to the extent and severity of all forms of workplace violence, including by workers, trade unions, employers, government authorities and experts across the world. The data and discussions in this book emphasize that workplace violence is not merely an episodic problem created by deranged persons, but a highly complex issue, rooted in wider economic, employment-relationship, organizational, gender-role and cultural factors. Thus instead of searching for simplistic, single solutions to deal with the entire problem, the full range of causes which generate violence must be analysed and a variety of intervention strategies applied. Recognition of the variety and complexity of the factors which contribute to workplace violence is a key precursor to the design and implementation of effective anti-violence control programmes.

Based on case studies, objective data and recent scientific publications, the contents of this book are intended to provide a basis for understanding the nature of workplace violence, and to enhance development and implementation of effective preventive interventions. The book stresses the importance of a systematic and targeted preventive response. For example, in many countries the scope of existing criminal, occupational safety and health, labour, environmental and allied law is being extended progressively and adapted to deal with the issue of workplace violence. In several countries,

violence at work is emerging as a separate legal issue, with legislative and regulatory provisions making for a focused rather than a diffuse response.

Integrated within this book are reviews of numerous guidelines emerging from governments, trade unions, specialist study groups, workplace violence experts and employers' organizations, most of which contain blueprints for action. Despite different approaches, these guidelines reveal common themes: preventive action is possible and necessary; work organization and the working environment can provide important pointers to the causes and solutions; the participation of workers and their representatives is crucial both in identifying the risk factors and in implementing solutions; the interpersonal skills of management and workers alike must not be underrated; there cannot be one formula for action because the unique risk factors in each workplace situation must be addressed; and continued review of policies and programmes is essential to keep up with rapidly changing work environment scenarios.

The ILO has been in the vanguard in addressing protection of workers' dignity and equality in the workplace, including publications on occupational stress, sexual harassment and child labour, among others. The commitment of the ILO to reducing workplace violence is demonstrated through the publication, in 2004, of its code of practice *Workplace violence in services sectors and measures to combat this phenomenon*.

The third edition of this ILO publication is directed toward all those engaged in combating violence at work: policymakers in government agencies; employers' and workers' organizations; occupational health and safety professionals; human resources managers; trainers and workers. We hope this book will promote dialogue, policies and initiatives "to repudiate violence and remove it from the workplace now".

*François Eyraud, Director
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