

Workplace Violence: What Every Employer Needs To Know

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Globally, *violence* at work is becoming an alarming phenomenon. Affecting the dignity of millions of people, violence is a major source of inequality, discrimination, stigmatization, and conflict in the *workplace*. Increasingly it is becoming a central human rights issue. The enormous cost of *workplace violence* for the individual, the workplace, and the community at large is becoming more and more apparent. Recent research reveals that current knowledge is only the tip of the iceberg.

According to World Health Organisation (WHO), while *workplace violence* affects practically all sectors and all categories of workers, the health sector is a major risk: more than half of all workers in this sector may have experienced violent incidents at some point. Research shows that ambulance and pre-hospital emergency staff are reported to be at greatest risk, nurses are three times more likely, on average, to experience *violence in the workplace* than other occupational groups. Since the large majority of the health workforce is female, the gender dimension of the problem is very evident (WHO).

This worrying observation led the International Labour Office (ILO), the International Council of Nurses (ICN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and Public Services International (PSI) launched in 2000 a joint program to develop sound policies and practical approaches for the prevention and elimination of *violence* in the health sector.

The health sector is just one of the sectors affected and it is noteworthy that *workplace violence* is prevalent in all sectors.

What is workplace violence?

According to Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), *workplace violence* is defined as “any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the worksite”. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide. It can affect and involve employees, clients, customers, and visitors.

Workplace violence or *occupational violence* refers to violence, usually in the form of physical abuse or threat, that creates a risk to the health and safety of an employee or multiple employees.

Every year, millions of American workers report having been victims of *workplace violence*. In 2018, assaults resulted in 20,790 injuries and 453 fatalities, according to Injury Facts (2019). OSHA (2020) estimates that about 2 million workers report *violent workplace* incidents each year. The actual number of incidents is thought to be much higher as many events probably do not get reported.

Local research on *workplace violence*

Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe conducted interviews with women and girls who shared their experiences of sexual harassment in both the workplace and education (The Herald, 2019). The women interviewed included those in leadership, in the political arena, in Public Administration, and in civil society organizations (The Herald, 2019).

The perspectives from women in leadership indicated that no woman is safe from sexual harassment, even women occupying the highest and some of the most powerful offices on the land are being subjected to sexual violence in the workplace. It was noted that this was one of the most overriding factors hindering women from assuming leadership positions. It was also highlighted that in some spheres, women are subjected to harassment, victimization, and sexual abuse in return for favors at work or renewal of work contracts, thus elaborating how dysfunctional the Zimbabwean work society has become (The Herald, 2019).

Types/categories of *workplace violence*

According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), *workplace violence* typically falls into one of four categories:

Type I—Criminal Intent. In this kind of violent incident, the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship to the business or its employees. Type I violence is usually incidental to another crime such as robbery, shoplifting, or trespassing. Acts of terrorism also fall into this category.

Type II—Customer/Client. When the violent person has a legitimate relationship with the business—for example, a customer, client, patient, student, or inmate—and becomes violent while being served by the business.

Type III—Worker on Worker. The perpetrator of Type III violence is an employee or past employee of the business who attacks or threatens other employees or past employee(s) in the workplace.

Type IV—Personal Relationship. The perpetrator in these cases usually does not have a relationship with the business but has a relationship with the intended victim. This category includes victims of domestic violence who are assaulted or threatened while at work.

The Risk

Workplace violence needs to be seen as a risk that requires implementing risk-based programs, such as risk assessment. The assessment, which should be a specific *workplace violence* assessment, will provide an understanding of the likelihood of a possible workplace violence threat and recommended solutions. If companies do not accept and acknowledge the possibility of a violent incident occurring at worksites, signs of potential problems will be missed—as will the chance to develop solutions to avoid it.

How to handle *workplace violence*

Every organization needs to address *workplace violence*. Managers and safety professionals at every

workplace should develop a policy on the violence that includes:

- Employee training and creating an emergency action plan
- Conducting mock training exercises with local law enforcement
- Adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence

In terms of *workplace violence*, here are some things all employers should do to help protect workers:

- Have a written zero-tolerance policy towards *workplace violence* and develop a written prevention program.
- Provide *workplace violence* training emphasizing what to look for, what to report, and what to do during an actual incident.
- Encourage reporting of concerns or specific incidences. Make reporting easy and, potentially, confidential.
- Consider using outside expertise to provide threat assessment training and physical security upgrades.

Policy

A policy on *workplace violence* is developed at the senior management level. It is a broad-brush statement that serves as a template for the development of a plan that will make the policy functional. At a minimum, a *workplace violence* policy should:

- State the organization's right and obligation to ensure a workplace free of violent behavior.
- Use examples to show what is meant by violent behavior.
- Define terms to avoid misinterpretation and create escape holes that could defeat intent or precipitate litigation.
- Demonstrate an organizational commitment to deny employment to applicants with a history of violence and to weed out employees who engage in violent behavior. The policy can, for example, require background inquiries of job applicants and automatic dismissal of employees who commit serious acts of violence.
- Require and encourage policy compliance by all employees.

Know the Warning Signs

Not all cases of *workplace violence* stem from mental illness some people commit violence because of revenge, robbery, or ideology with or without a component of mental illness. While it is hard to predict an attack, you can be aware of behaviors in co-workers that might signal future violence:

- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Unexplained absenteeism, change in behavior, or decline in job performance
- Depression, withdrawal, or suicidal comments
- Resistance to changes at work or persistent complaining about unfair treatment
- Violation of company policies

- Emotional responses to criticism, mood swings
- Paranoia

Conclusion

The article has shown that *workplace violence* cannot be prevented 100 percent however, in today's world, it is a must for a concerned and well-informed employer to provide policies, awareness, physical security, and training to help reduce it. To be successful in delivering a solid workplace violence prevention program, senior management must be committed to it.

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