



Foundation Findings

Physical and
psychological violence
at the workplace



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The policy context



Violence at work can manifest itself in many ways. The variety of negative behaviour covered under the general umbrella term of workplace violence is so large and diverse that it makes it difficult to adopt a unified and integrated approach dealing with all the forms of workplace violence. This is, indeed, a key challenge that policy makers are confronted with.

While the existence of physical violence at the workplace has always been recognised, psychological violence has only relatively recently attracted public attention and common concerns as expressed by workers, trade unions, employers, public bodies and experts across a broad international spectrum.

In 2001, the European Commission's Advisory Committee on Safety, Hygiene and Health Protection at Work, in its 'Opinion on Violence at the Workplace', drew attention to the emerging importance of psychological violence and acknowledged that 'physical violence can have consequences that are not only physical but also psychological, which can be immediate or delayed'.

More recently, the Community strategy 2007-12 on health and safety at work (COM (2007) 62) highlighted 'the emergence of new risk factors (violence at work, including sexual and

psychological harassment)'. The same policy paper strikes a warning note for policy makers by saying that 'problems associated with poor mental health constitute the fourth most frequent cause of incapacity for work [...]; the WHO estimates that depression will be the main cause of incapacity by 2020'.

In response to increasing concern for the dimension and severity of psychological violence, many European countries have introduced new legislation or incorporated new provisions in existing legislation to tackle the problem. Other countries have opted for non-regulatory instruments (e.g. codes of practice and provisions in collective agreements).

There are various reasons for this increased public and government recognition of psychological violence. In the first place, numerous research studies have indicated that psychological violence, particularly bullying, is a social problem of considerable magnitude with detrimental effects for the health and wellbeing of workers. Evidence comes also from administrative data showing that an increasing incidence of work-related health problems is due to psychological and psychosocial rather than physical causes. Additionally, several court rulings in different countries have recognised psychological violence as an occupational risk, equal in importance to other hazards in the

Racial harassment: an unwanted conduct related to racial or ethnic origin [...] with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.

Source: Council Directive 2000/43/EC implementing the Principle of Equal Treatment between Persons Irrespective of Racial or Ethnic Origin.

Sexual harassment: any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature [...] with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Source: Council Directive 2002/73/EC implementing the principle of equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions.

work environment. Spanish courts have been particularly active in establishing important principles in relation to workplace violence and, most importantly, recognising psychological violence as a work-related hazard (Espluga, 2002).

There is also a growing recognition that all forms of workplace violence imply an attack on a person's dignity, and are likely to constitute a risk to their health and safety. As can be seen from many definitions in European and national legislative and policy documents, the focus of attention in relation to workplace violence has widened to encompass dignity at work, human rights and combating discrimination. At EU level, this trend is exemplified by the adoption in 2000 and 2002 of EU 'anti-discrimination' directives addressing specifically racial and sexual harassment at the workplace (Council Directive 2000/43/EC and Council Directive 2002/73/EC). The definitions provided in these directives constitute the common basis for all national legislation in the area. Both directives indicate that any form of racial and gender discrimination and sexual harassment are violations of the dignity of the person.

Aside from the above mentioned directives, no specific European legislative provisions refer explicitly to violence and bullying at work, though it is considered by many implicitly to fall within the scope of the EU framework directive on health and safety at work dating back to 1989 (Council Directive 89/391/EEC).

In its 'Resolution on Harassment at the Workplace 2001/2339 (INI)', the European Parliament urged the European Commission 'to consider a clarification or extension of the scope of the framework directive on health and safety at work or, alternatively, the drafting of a new framework directive as a legal instrument to combat bullying and as a means of ensuring respect for the worker's human dignity, privacy and integrity'.

In January 2005, the European Commission consulted the European social partners – UNICE, the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (Union Européenne de l'artisanat et des petites et moyennes entreprises, UEAPME), the European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP) and ETUC – on the usefulness of an initiative in the field of violence in the workplace, including bullying. Consultation with the European social partners is required by the EC Treaty prior to presenting social legislation. It emphasised the negative consequences of psychological violence for the psychological and physical well-being of workers and drew attention to research findings estimating a 1–2% fall in productivity due to psychological violence (Weiler, 2007).

Following this consultation, the European social partners agreed to deal with the issue through the existing structures of European social dialogue. The autonomous agreement on harassment and violence at work signed by the European social partners in April 2007 is



testimony to the shared awareness about the nature and extent of the problem. The agreement states that these problems are 'a mutual concern of employers and workers, which can have serious social and economic consequences' and aims to significantly increase the awareness and understanding of workplace harassment and violence between employers, workers and their representatives.

The agreement acknowledges that harassment and violence can take many different forms, including physical, psychological and/or sexual harassment. It is recognised that workplace violence can be perpetrated through a range of actions, from minor cases of disrespect to more serious acts of harassment or violence and consist of either one-off incidents or repeated and systematic patterns of behaviour. Also, according to the agreement, workplace violence

can be inflicted not only by superiors or other colleagues but also by third parties such as clients, customers, patients or students. This reflects a growing awareness that violence or harassment is also carried out by people not belonging to the victim's place of work.

The national social partners in all EU Member States are required to adopt the agreement within a three-year period, according to their own procedures and practices. On 17 March 2008, ETUC also published an interpretation guide of the 2007 framework agreement intended to support ETUC member organisations in its implementation, and to allow better monitoring and evaluation of the results achieved. To date, the EU framework agreement has already been implemented in a number of Member States while in others negotiations are still ongoing.

Key findings

- **Workplace violence is a social phenomenon of a certain magnitude.** Overall, approximately one in ten European workers report having experienced some form of workplace violence, either physical or psychological, in the previous 12 months.
- **Overall, levels of reported psychological violence are as high as those of physical violence.** The incidence of threats of physical violence tends to be higher than exposure to actual physical abuse. Among types of psychological violence, bullying/harassment is more prevalent than sexual harassment.
- **There are marked variations in exposure to workplace violence between European countries.** On the whole, exposure to all forms of violence is greater in northern Europe while incidence rates are lower in southern and eastern European countries. The significant country variations of reported exposure to workplace violence may reflect different levels of awareness of the issue and willingness to report, as well as of actual occurrence.
- **Major differences in the incidence of workplace violence are apparent across sectors.** Exposure to all forms of violence tends to be concentrated in sectors with above average contact with the public. The level of physical and psychological violence is particularly high in the education and health sectors as well as in public administration.
- **Women, particularly younger women, appear to be more subject to psychological violence (bullying/harassment, sexual harassment) in the workplace than men.** However, circumstantial aspects of women's work – e.g. sector, gender of boss, proportion of employees in customer-oriented roles – should be taken into account when assessing the incidence of workplace violence by gender.
- **Both physical and psychological violence have serious implications for the health and well-being of workers.** Workers exposed to psychosocial risks report significantly higher levels of work-related ill-health than those who do not. The most common reported symptoms are stress, sleeping problems, anxiety and irritability.
- **Exposure to psychological violence is correlated with higher than average rates of absenteeism.** Although psychological violence is, by its nature, more cumulative in its impact than physical violence, its negative health effects measured in terms of absenteeism due to work-related ill-health are more severe than those associated with physical workplace violence.
- **Work environment factors contribute to the incidence of workplace violence.** For example, low levels of control over one's work and high levels of work intensity (tight deadlines, working at very high speed), working in frequent contact with customers, clients and other non-colleagues are associated with a higher likelihood of being bullied.



Exploring the issue



Concepts and terminology

The term 'workplace violence' commonly includes both physical and psychological violence. When defining physical violence, the distinction is often made between real experiences of actions and threats of violence. The incidence of such threats often tends to be higher than exposure to actual physical abuse. According to the fourth *European Working Conditions Survey – EWCS (2005)*, about 6% of European workers reported being exposed to threats of violence against 5% reporting having been personally subjected to actual acts of violence in the previous 12-month period.

It is, however, important to bear in mind that different forms of violence may interrelate and overlap and it is difficult to make clear cut distinctions between one type of violence and another. For example, physical violence may be a feature of both bullying and sexual harassment. Therefore, a degree of caution is necessary in drawing a dividing line between physical and psychological violence.

The definition of psychological violence is even more challenging and elusive than the definition of physical violence and the borderline between

acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is not clear-cut. Broadly speaking, psychological violence encompasses a wide range of disruptive behaviour, including bullying, harassment, coercion, verbal abuse and sexual harassment.

Across Europe, different terms are used for the hostile and negative behaviour at the workplace. Reflecting differences in the efforts to grasp the more subtle forms of harassment and violence at work, such behaviour has been conceptualised as 'moral harassment', 'mobbing' or 'bullying'.

Previous Eurofound research (Di Martino, Hoel and Cooper, 2003) points to an assimilation of usage of terms defining negative and abusive behaviour in the workplace as well as a convergence in the actual behaviour associated with these terms. This may be an indication of the emergence of a general shared understanding of workplace violence. At the same time, however, specific national terms have gained currency in certain countries, for example, *pesten* in the Netherlands, *harcèlement moral* in France, *molestie* in Italy, *coacção moral* in Portugal, *acoso* in Spain.

In some countries, there has been a call for clarification of the terminology and policy or legislative documents have been amended accordingly. For example, in Ireland, the revised code of practice on workplace bullying has introduced a distinction between bullying and harassment. While bullying is defined as ‘repeated inappropriate behaviour that undermines [the person’s] right to dignity at work and aimed at a person or group to make them feel inferior to other people’, harassment, including sexual harassment, is based on one of the nine grounds to prevent discrimination listed in the Employment Equality Acts 1998 (Dobbins, 2007). In other countries, criteria have been established as to what exactly might constitute psychological violence. This is the case for Poland where relevant provisions were introduced into the labour code in 2004 (Sroka, 2008) and subsequently amended to include criteria defining this negative behaviour.

In spite of the many difficulties in defining such a complex phenomenon, terminology differences are becoming less of an impediment. Whether or not there is a convergence or divergence of terms used to define workplace violence, particularly regarding bullying/

harassment, it is recognised that the psychological processes as well as the outcomes (i.e. diminished wellbeing for the affected workers) involved in such abusive behaviour appear to be very much the same.

Trends and patterns in the experience of workplace violence

Time trends

The exposure of workplace violence has been charted and monitored by Eurofound in successive waves of the *European Working Conditions Survey* from 1995 to 2005, with a new wave due to be published in early 2011. An analysis of time trends in the different waves of the *EWCS* show an upward trend in levels of exposure to physical violence. In 2005, some 5% of European workers said they had experienced physical violence at work in the previous 12 months, as against 4% in 1995 and 2000. No time trends are available for threats of physical violence as the question was introduced in the survey questionnaire for the first time in 2005. The incidence of sexual harassment (or unwanted sexual attention) has remained stable since 1995 (2%). For workplace

Table 1: General EWCS data (1995–2005) on workplace violence

% of all workers in the previous 12 months subject to ...	1995 EU15	2000 EU15	2005 EU25	2005 EU15	2005 NMS
Threats of physical violence	-	-	6	6	5
Physical violence from people within workplace	4*	2	2	2	1
Physical violence from people outside workplace		4	4	5	4
Physical violence either from people within or outside workplace **	4	5	5	6	4
Intimidation	8	9	-	-	-
Bullying / harassment	-	-	5	5	4
Unwanted sexual attention***	2	2	2	2	2

Source: *European Working Conditions Survey, 1995–2005*

* The two phenomena were addressed in one single question in 1995

** A combined variable based on those answering yes to either Q29b (Physical violence from people within workplace) or Q29c (Physical violence from people outside workplace)

*** used as a proxy of sexual harassment



harassment or bullying, a change in the phrasing of the survey question in 2005 has made comparisons between the 1995/2000 and 2005 waves rather difficult.

It may be the case that levels of reported violence at work represent only a small fraction of its actual occurrence; the results from the fourth EWCS rely on the willingness of respondents to disclose the problem and identify themselves as a victim. It is important to point out that selection bias may also lead to underreporting. We may assume that many workers subjected to serious instances of physical or psychological abuse are likely to have already withdrawn from the labour market and therefore not to appear in the survey sample.

Variations from country to country

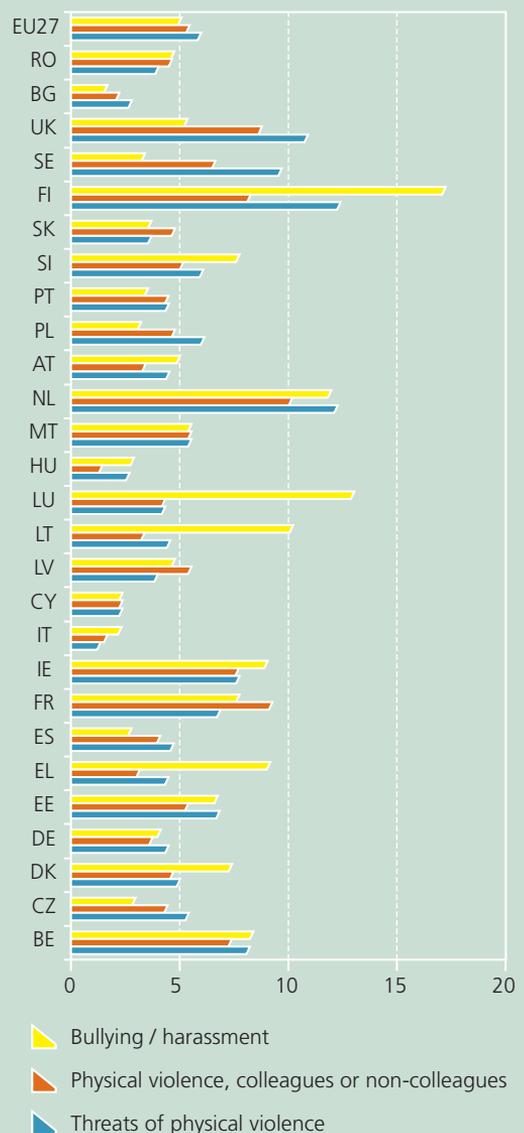
From the country breakdown of the fourth EWCS (2005), it can be seen that in general, exposure to physical violence and threats of violence are greater in northern Europe: higher-than-average levels are reported in the Netherlands (10%), France and the UK (both 9%) and Ireland (8%).

Northern European countries remain at the top of the list in relation to reported levels of workplace harassment or bullying with Finland and the Netherlands recording the highest levels (17% and 12%, respectively) while countries with the lowest levels of exposure to bullying are Italy and Bulgaria (2%).

These figures require some qualifications however. The level of reporting may well reflect cultural and linguistic differences and not only actual prevalence. Particularly, concepts and definitions are often loaded with cultural significance and ingrained in deeply rooted stereotypes and traditions that, in some cases, may lead to underestimating the phenomenon or to tolerance of unacceptable behaviour. For example, in some countries (e.g. some southern European countries), the concept of bullying commonly implies weakness on the part of the victim and may trigger fears of being labelled difficult or even mentally unsound if the problem is revealed.

It is not easy to identify with any degree of certainty those countries that have the highest incidence of workplace violence, particularly bullying; different statistical sources tell different stories. Previous Eurofound research indicates

Figure 1: Exposure to workplace violence by country, EU 27 (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005

that the prevalence of bullying varies greatly, with percentages ranging from 1% to above 50%, depending on the phrasing of the question, time-frame indicated, occupation or sector, as well as country (Di Martino, Hoel and Cooper, 2003). In other words, the empirical methods used to investigate the phenomenon differ amongst themselves and tend to generate wide variations in outcomes.

Eurofound's *European Working Conditions Observatory (EWCO)* provides further evidence of prevalence rates of different forms of workplace violence, at least in some European countries. The following briefly outlines the findings from national studies reported in the observatory.

The most recent *Finnish Quality of Work Life Survey (2008)* provides a more nuanced picture on the prevalence of bullying in Finland than that emerging from the fourth *EWCS*. According to the national survey, more than two out of five (44%) Finnish workers reported that bullying took place at their workplace at least occasionally, while 6% of respondents reported constant bullying at the workplace. When asked about their own experiences, the incidence rates drop; only 4% of workers reported being personally subjected to workplace bullying at present, 13% had been bullied previously at their current workplace and 8% at a previous workplace (Lehto, 2009).

As indicated by the fourth *EWCS*, another country with higher-than-average reported exposure to bullying is the Netherlands. Using a similar format of questions to that in the Eurofound survey, the *Dutch Working Conditions Survey* has been charting the incidence rates of different forms of workplace violence since 2000 (Houtman and van den Bossche, 2006). In 2006, a relatively large proportion of Dutch workers (14.2%) experienced intimidation by their co-workers. Nevertheless, the incidence rate has remained rather constant over the period 2000–2006. By

contrast, intimidation by customers has increased from 21% in 2000 to 23.5% in 2006.

Up to 2004, the concept of intimidation (by colleagues) was used in the Dutch survey to refer to acts of bullying, in the same way that it was used in previous waves of the *EWCS*. However, it has been suggested that intimidation refers more to threats of physical violence. Therefore, a new indicator of bullying was introduced in the Dutch survey in 2004. While bullying at the hands of colleagues has remained stable since 2004 (10%), there has been a slight increase in the exposure to bullying by customers (from 7% in 2004 to 8% in 2006). Also small variations are recorded for exposure to physical violence by customers (from 7% in 2000 to 6% in 2006) while physical violence by colleagues remains stable at 1%.

Some national studies have used a more 'objective' measurement of bullying gathered by means of the Negative Acts Questionnaire.¹ Unlike the above mentioned surveys, respondents only have to indicate how often they experience a range of negative behaviour by others. Although some negative acts are not in themselves bullying, they indicate the risk that bullying may occur. Negative acts become bullying when they are directed towards the same person systematically over a certain period of time.

Following this method, a recent Danish study conducted by the National Research Centre for the Working Environment (Det Nationale Forskningscenter for Arbejdsmiljø) revealed that 10.8% of Danish respondents are exposed to bullying. While some 1.4% of the respondents experience bullying at least once a week, 9.4% say that they are sometimes bullied (Christiansen and Nielsen, 2010).

A similar approach was followed by research conducted in Belgium (Van Gyes, 2006) which distinguishes six clusters of respondents: those who are 'not bullied' (35.3%), the 'limited work

¹ The Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAS) developed by Ståle Einarsen and Bjørn Inge Raknes in 1997, consists of 22 descriptions of negative behaviour which a respondent might potentially encounter in the workplace. Such descriptions do not use the actual term 'bullying' or 'harassment'.



criticism' cluster (27.7%), those with 'limited negative encounters' (16.5%), those who are 'sometimes bullied' (9%), those who are 'work-related bullied' (8.3%) and 'victims' (3.2%). The workers who are 'sometimes bullied' report exposure to a wide range of bullying behaviour, although most such behaviour occurs only occasionally, while the group of highly exposed respondents systematically indicate a high level of exposure to the work-related negative acts.

With regard to sexual harassment, the fourth EWCS found that overall only 2% of the workforce report having experienced 'unwanted sexual attention' in the previous twelve months. By contrast, drawing from findings of national studies reported to EWCO, high incidence levels have been found in a number of EU countries. In a 2006 survey conducted in Slovakia among 1,041 economically active adults, a total of 66.4% of respondents had at least one experience of sexual harassment at the workplace, 36.7% had personal experience of such harassment and 55.5% had indirect experience. High incidence rates were also found in a Czech survey (1,025 respondents) conducted in 2005 by the Sociological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. According to the survey, one quarter of the Czech population has either experienced sexual harassment personally or is aware of its existence in their

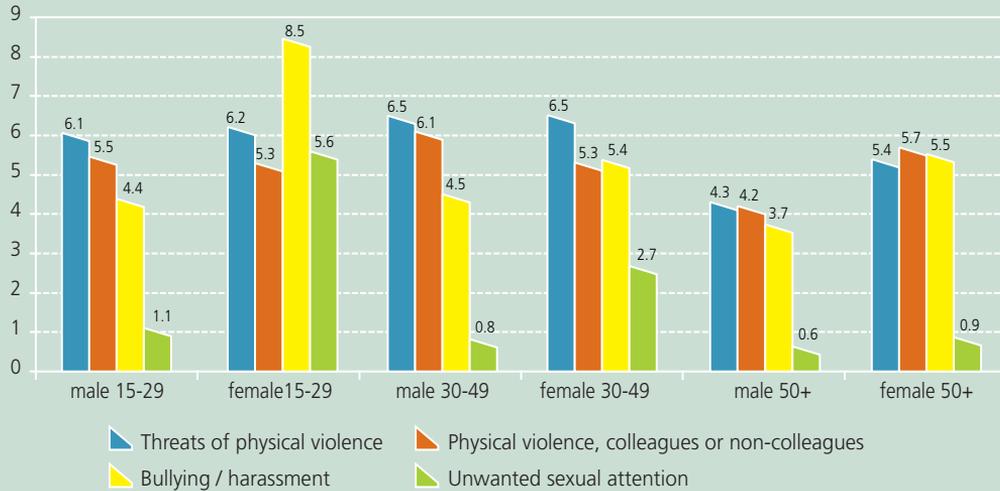
workplace. In Slovenia, a national survey carried out in 2007 by the government's Office for Equal Opportunities, found that 27% of the respondents (out of a total of 1,820) had been subjected to verbal sexual harassment (e.g. unwanted messages or emails), followed by another 15% reporting experiences of non-verbal sexual harassment (e.g. gestures, sexual exposure) and physical harassment respectively.

These country variations are often regarded as reflecting different levels of awareness about the problem and willingness to report on the part of the respondents in the different countries rather than necessarily being a reliable, objective measure of prevalence of workplace violence.

Are women more exposed to workplace violence than men?

From a gender perspective, the fourth EWCS found that female workers are more exposed to workplace violence – particularly bullying and sexual harassment – than their male counterparts. Younger women appear to be at the greatest risk of all. Around 6% of young women under the age of 30 report that they have been exposed to sexual harassment in the previous 12-month period, compared to only 1% of men in the same age group. Young men and

Figure 2: Exposure to workplace violence by sex and age, EU27 (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005

women are equally exposed to threats of physical violence and actual acts of violence.

This high level of exposure among women could be explained by the fact that they may be less reluctant to label themselves as victims than men. Therefore, the higher prevalence rates reported by women could result from a mix of factors including actual occurrence of negative behaviour and cultural stereotypes.

Previous Foundation research (Di Martino, Hoel & Cooper, 2003) emphasised the importance of cultural influence, arguing that in the area of sexual harassment at work, for instance, cultural differences may play a major role. In some European countries, sexual harassment is associated with entrenched stereotypes about the roles of men and women in society.

Also caution should be used when interpreting the results emerging from surveys. For example, multivariate analysis of the fourth EWCS data reveals that the higher exposure of workplace violence among women is likely to relate to specific circumstances of female employment such as sector, gender of boss, proportion of

employees in customer-oriented roles than gender as such (Hurley and Riso, 2008).

The picture that emerges from other statistical sources is, indeed, rather mixed. Information collected through EWCO indicates that it is not always the case that women are more exposed to workplace violence compared to their male counterparts. For example, according to the already mentioned Danish NFA survey, men appear to be more exposed to bullying than women (Christiansen and Nielsen, 2010). Overall, 12.9% of male respondents report being sometimes bullied against 7.8% of their female counterparts. The difference in exposure rate is smaller among those who are exposed to bullying on a daily or weekly basis (1.3% women and 1.7% men). Following the same research approach, Belgian research has found no direct relationship between the probability of being bullied and sex (Van Gyes, 2006).

These findings help to highlight the danger of stereotypes and point to the complexity of this phenomenon emphasising the need to research this issue in greater depth.



Sectors and occupations at higher risk

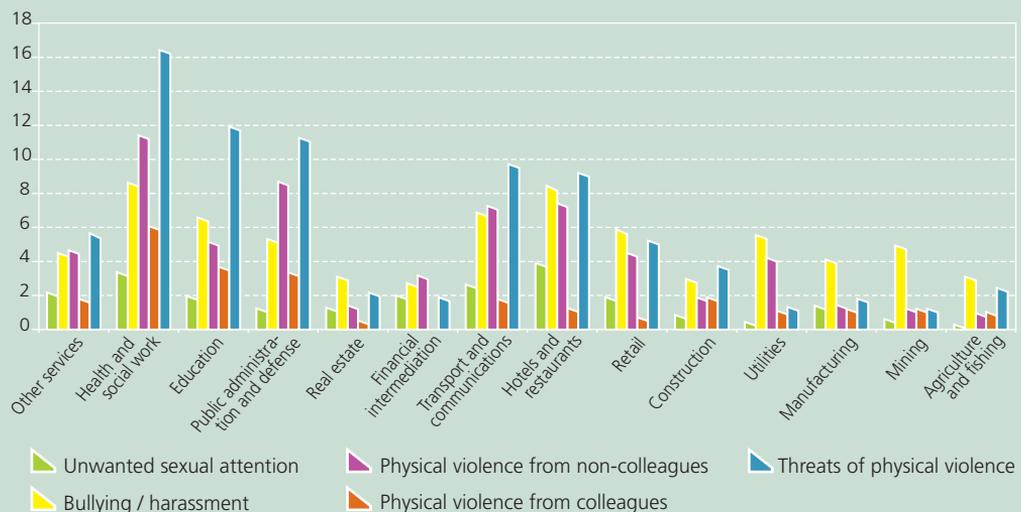
From a sector perspective, the fourth EWCS shows that sectors in which there is a high level of social interaction tend also to have the highest levels of incidence of workplace violence. These are health and social work, education, public administration and, to a lesser extent, the transport and communication and hotels and restaurant sectors.

The high exposure levels to various forms of workplace violence in these sectors may be partly due to the greater emphasis on customer satisfaction as well as the nature of 'customer-facing' occupations which tend to be inherently more demanding and potentially stressful than those with a limited amount of social contact. This may make people working in sectors with high levels of interaction with the public more exposed to abusive behaviour and excessive demands from clients and customers.

It is often assumed that psychological violence rather than physical violence is typical of white-collar work environments. However, the survey data shows that white collar workers tend to report higher levels of exposure to both psychological and physical violence compared to blue collar workers (see figure 4).

It also should be noted that a high level of occupational skill does not seem to offer protection from exposure to workplace violence. High skilled white collar workers are particularly exposed to threats of violence, whereas low skilled white collar workers report higher levels of psychological violence (including bullying/harassment and sexual harassment) as well as physical violence from people outside the workplace. Due to the importance of power imbalance in bullying/harassment situations, one would intuitively expect that those at the lower end of the organisational hierarchy more commonly report bullying/harassment.

Figure 3: Exposure to workplace violence by sector, EU27 (%)



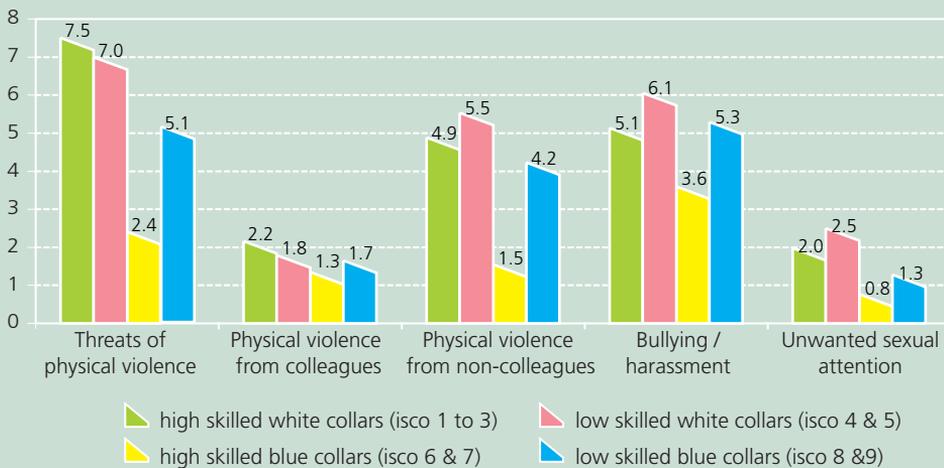
Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005

Health and social work sector

Of all sectors, health and social work reports the highest incidence of workplace violence and bullying. Around 9% of workers in this sector report having experienced bullying and harassment (against the EU27 average of 5%), another 11% say that they have been personally subjected to physical violence from people

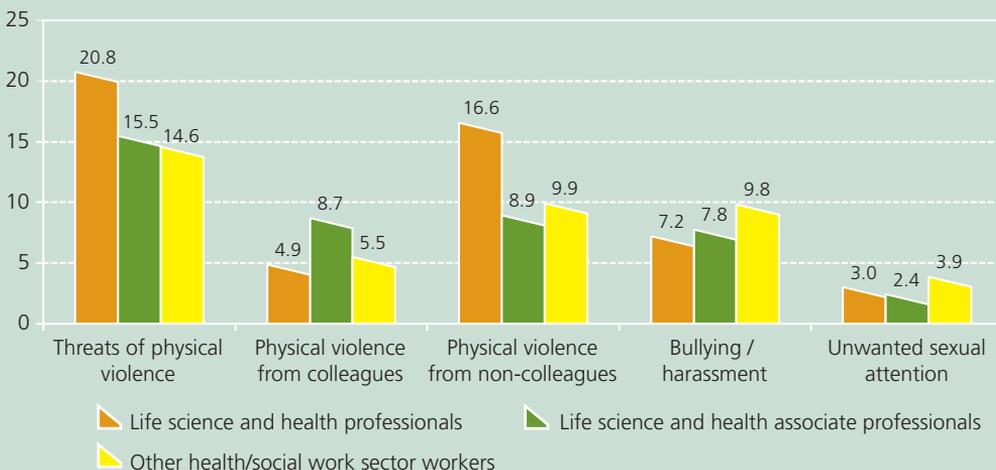
outside the workforce in the previous twelve-month period (against the EU27 average of 4%). Also, exposure levels to physical violence at the hands of fellow workers and threats of physical violence are higher than average (respectively 6% and 16% against EU27 averages of 2% and 6%).

Figure 4: Exposure to violence by occupational groups (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005

Figure 5: Exposure to violence of main occupational groups in the health and social work sector (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005



From an occupational perspective, professionals – i.e. those generally holding more senior positions (for example, medical doctors, dentists, etc.) – are comparatively more affected than associate professionals. Of particular note are the high levels of exposure to threats of physical violence and physical violence from non-colleagues among the medical professionals. For associate professionals (for example, nurses and dental assistants) violence is as likely to originate from people at their workplace as from people outside the workplace. Associate professionals also report high levels of threats of physical violence.

Education

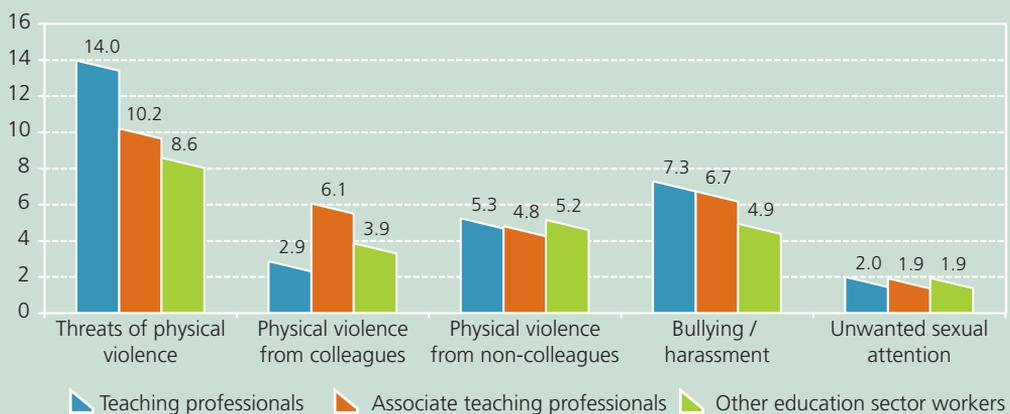
The education sector also ranks above average in terms of exposure to each of the forms of violence identified in the survey, albeit to a lesser extent than in health and social work. Particularly high is the exposure to threats of physical violence (11.9%) compared to the EU average (6%). Overall, of all education sector workers, teachers (accounting for over 70% of workers in that sector) are at the greatest risk of

violence. Teaching professionals are more likely to have been threatened with violence but less likely to have suffered physical violence at the hands of fellow workers than teaching associate professionals. There is no difference in exposure levels to sexual harassment and physical violence from non-colleagues between the three different occupational categories.

Public administration

Another sector strongly affected by workplace violence is public administration. Among the various forms of workplace violence, exposure to threats of violence and actual acts of physical violence from people outside the workplace is particularly high. It would appear from the analysis of survey data that white collar professionals are more likely to experience threats of physical violence and actual physical abuse originating from non-colleagues than other public administration workers, whereas employees in lower hierarchical positions, in particular clerks, report higher levels of exposure to bullying and harassment.

Figure 6: Exposure to violence of main occupational groups in education (%)



Note: Other education sector workers include a wide-ranging group of occupations such as clerks, protective services workers, managers.

Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005

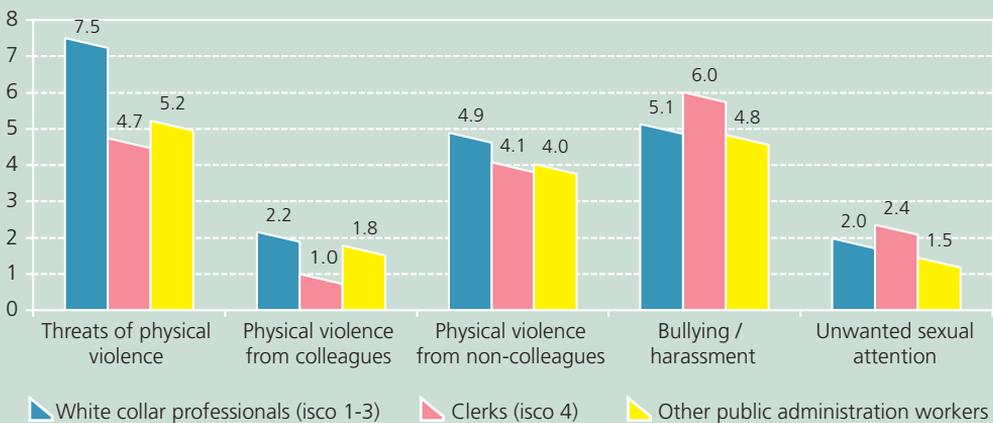


Public versus private sector

What does appear from the analysis of fourth EWCS data is that a higher incidence of all forms of workplace violence is found among public sector workers than those working in the private sector. Public sector workers are more than twice as likely to have experienced threats

of violence or actual violence than those in the private sector. This increased risk of exposure to violence facing public workers may be due to the nature of certain occupations in the public sector as well as greater levels of awareness of the problem among public sector workers who are more ready or willing to recognise abusive

Figure 7: Exposure to violence of main occupational groups in public administration (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005



behaviour. That said, it is also important to bear in mind that no sector or occupation is violence-proof or bullying-free.

Workplace violence and negative work-related health effects

In terms of impact of workplace violence on health, workers exposed to psychosocial risks, particularly bullying and harassment, report significantly higher levels due to work-related ill-health than those who are not.

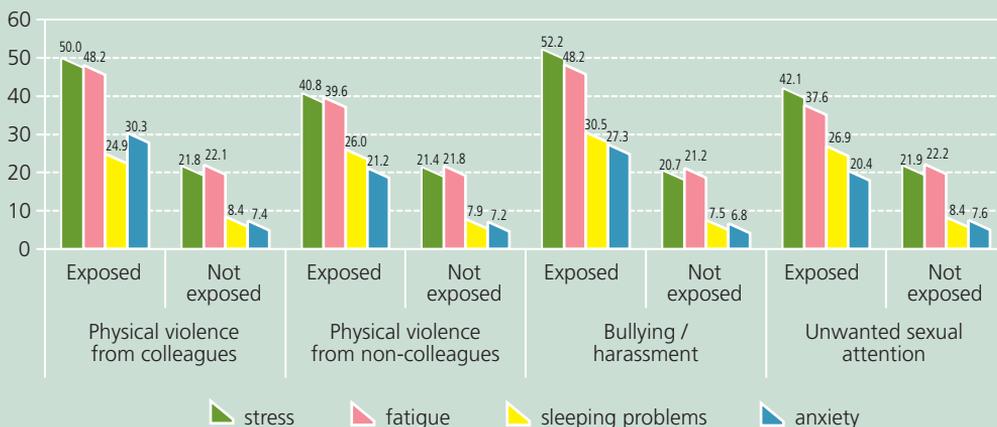
The most common reported symptoms are stress, sleeping problems, anxiety and irritability. Findings from national studies reported to EWCO highlight the correlation between workplace violence (particularly bullying) and increased stress levels and reduced psychological well-being. They also shed further light on the consequences of workers subjected to this negative behaviour. For example, the Danish NFA study found that most psychological stress is induced by negative acts which potentially isolate the individual at the workplace and result in unreasonable workloads (Christiansen and Nielsen, 2010). Similarly, the Finnish Quality of Work Life Survey 2008 highlights the link between the

experience of bullying and psychosomatic symptoms. According to the survey results, the threat of burnout is also significantly connected to workplace bullying (Lehto, 2009).

Though psychological violence is, by its nature, more cumulative in its impact than physical violence, data from the fourth EWCS confirms that its negative health effects measured in terms of absenteeism due to work-related ill-health are more severe than those associated with physical workplace violence. Those workers who report being exposed to psychosocial risks, notably bullying and harassment, are significantly more likely than average to report absence due to work-related ill-health (23% compared to 7%) and they are overrepresented in the category of workers taking at least 60 days off in the previous 12 months due to work-related health problems.

Previous Eurofound research argues that the correlation between bullying and absenteeism is relatively weak (Di Martino, Hoel and Cooper, 2003). In fact, exposure to bullying behaviour may push workers to go to work in order to avoid further retaliation or victimisation from the perpetrators. In line with this argument, evidence from national studies suggest that

Figure 8: Most reported health problems associated with bullying and harassment, EU27 (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005

‘targets’ of workplace violence often do not protest as they believe that this would make their situation worse (e.g. Trbanc, 2008; Holubová, 2007; Arrowsmith, 2006).

It should be also noted that the validity of self reported measure of bullying/harassment can be questioned and correlations with health outcomes are subject to limitations, for example in relation to other, confounding variables (health history of respondents, predisposition to depression, etc). Although significant positive correlations were obtained between perceived bullying and self-reported stress symptoms, the cross-national design of the survey prevents us from drawing any conclusion of causal effects between work-related factors and incidence of violence. Hypotheses concerning a causal relationship between workplace violence and ill-health are probably better investigated by using different methodologies such as in-depth interviews or focus groups.

The influence of work environment factors

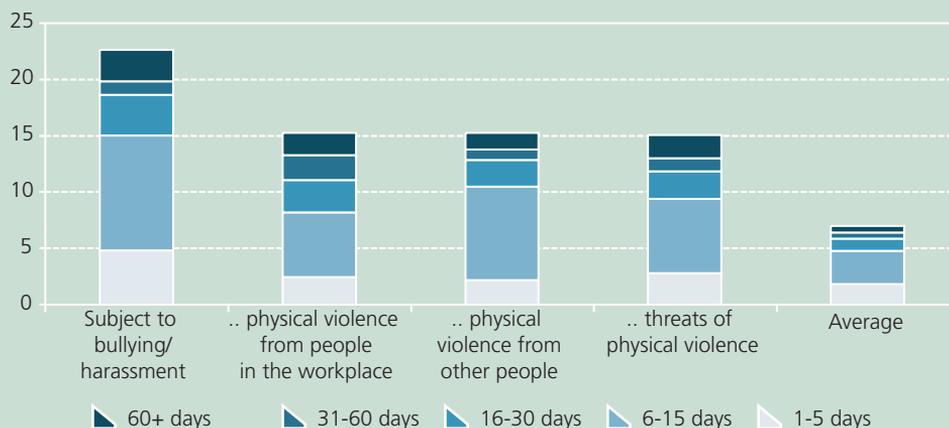
In recent years, various models drawing from behavioural and mainly cognitive perspectives have been used to predict the stressors and anticipate possible outcomes of workplace

violence (Di Martino, Hoel and Cooper, 2003). The emphasis is consistently on the interactive analysis of risk factors at individual, organisational and societal level.

It should be, however, emphasised that individual risk factors play an important role although they cannot be fully captured in a survey on working conditions. At the workplace level, both the working environment and the specific situation where the task is accomplished can influence the risks of violence. Workplace violence can represent a routine hazard in certain tasks and situations involving working alone and/or at night, with valuables, with people in distress (e.g. in hospitals), in environments increasingly open to violence (e.g. schools), and other conditions of special vulnerability.

For example, in relation to night work, a closer analysis of the fourth EWCS data demonstrates that working at night seems to be a risk factor, particularly in relation to exposure to threats of physical violence and physical violence at the hands of non-colleagues. The risk of exposure to these forms of violence is higher for those working more than five nights per month. A similar trend applies to evening workers. However, these results do not prove that

Figure 9: Proportion of workers absent and number of days absent due to work-related health problems (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005



working at night and in the evening is dangerous as such, but may just indicate that the particular circumstances of night / evening workers, for example taxi drivers or shop assistants in petrol stations may make them more vulnerable to workplace violence.

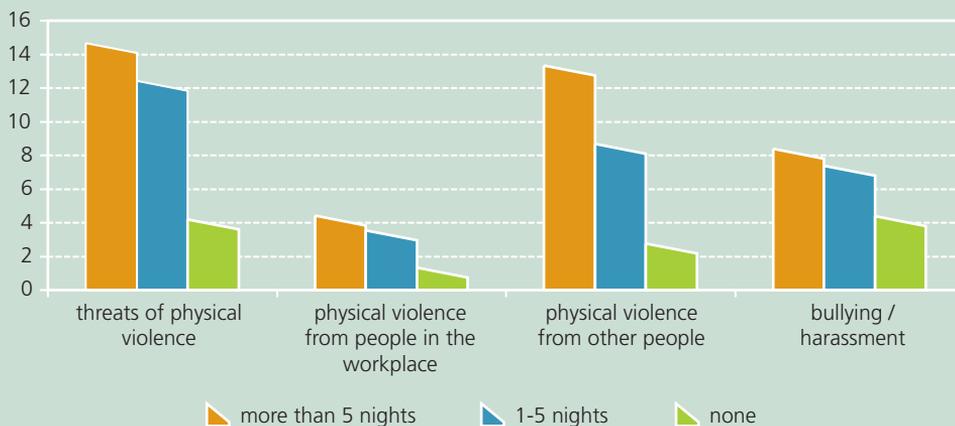
There are other work environment factors that may provide fertile ground for violence in the workplace. For example, a psychosocial work environment characterised by distrust, stress and unclear working conditions may lead to increased aggression and interpersonal conflicts among employees, which may possibly result in workplace violence and bullying/harassment.

Secondary analysis of the fourth EWCS data suggests that certain features of work organisation are, indeed, positively associated with higher levels of bullying or harassment, such as low levels of autonomy, high levels of work intensity (tight deadlines, working at very high speed), and working in frequent contact with customers, clients and other non-colleagues (Hurley and Riso, 2008).

In line with this, evidence from national studies reported to EWCO highlights that workplace violence, particularly bullying, is connected to many problems in the work environment,

regardless of occupation or sector. For example, the *Finnish Quality of Work Life Survey 2008* reveals that bullying is more frequent in workplaces where time pressure is high and there is no sufficient discussion on the work and associated problems (Lehto, 2009). In the same vein, a recent Eurofound survey data report drawing from French research on psychosocial risk factors at the workplace indicate that hostile behaviour tends to develop in environments with high work demands from superiors and a high work pace (Nicot, 2009). More insight into the possible causes of workplace violence comes from research conducted in 2005 by the Centre for Business Ethics at Vilnius University. According to this study, the main reasons for bullying behaviour are ascribed to the lack of appropriate ethical management and inefficient work practices. The most frequently cited factors resulting in bullying were conflicts among managers and those supervised; a psychologically volatile work atmosphere; authoritarian, passive and pseudo-democratic management; power imbalances between superiors and subordinates; problems of work organisation; staff demotivation; and disregard for the principle of fairness and respect of employees (Zabarauskaite, 2006).

Figure 10: Exposure to workplace violence by number of nights worked in a month (%)



Source: Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2005



Policy pointers



- The analysis of the *European Working Conditions Survey* data found that some sectors – e.g. health and social work, education, and public administration – are at higher risk of violence and bullying / harassment than others. It may be appropriate to consider sectoral level interventions to combat workplace violence. Such interventions should take into account the fact that a large female workforce is concentrated in many of the ‘high risk’ sectors and occupations. Moreover, from a sector perspective, survey data also indicate that low levels of exposure to psychosocial risk factors are reported in sectors where traditional physical risks are high – for example, agriculture, construction and manufacturing. A reverse relationship is found in sectors where physical risks are low – namely, health, education and public administration. This may suggest that the populations affected by workplace violence are distinctive; hence, a single EU framework directive addressing both sets of risks may not be optimal in dealing with the problem.
- Moreover, the sectors with a high incidence of psychological violence also tend to exhibit higher levels of physical violence.
- This may not only suggest that forms of violence are somehow overlapping but it also indicates that an integrated and comprehensive approach may be more appropriate to combat and prevent both types of violence. However, due to the complexity of the problem, there cannot be a ‘one fit for all’ solution. Instead of searching for one single solution, the full range of causes which generate violence should be considered and reflected in a multi-level approach encompassing primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies.
- One should note, though, that all interventions, especially in relation to psychological violence, tend to raise the level of reporting. This does not mean that policy measures have failed; rather the increased level of reporting is a precondition of resolving issues which may have remained previously unspoken or dormant. As already highlighted, increased reporting may reflect greater awareness and sensitivity to the issues.
- The terminology in the area of workplace violence is often problematic and it is not easy to label what constitutes unacceptable or antisocial behaviour at the workplace. On



the one hand, the lack of common definitions of workplace violence makes it difficult to compare the findings from different studies. On the other hand, from a policy perspective, it is difficult to find a trade-off between broad and very precise definitions of workplace violence. In relation to the terminology, the term 'victim' and 'victimisation' is often used in many studies on workplace violence as well as policy documents. It would be more appropriate to call those affected by abusive and anti-social behaviour as 'targets' because the term 'victim' reinforces the concept of being vulnerable and disempowered.

- Another important objective is the evaluation and monitoring of pro-active interventions as well as the dissemination of best practice examples. Follow-up impact assessment and evaluation of preventive or remedial measures would contribute to determine what measures work well and why. Unfortunately this is not done systematically, if at all, across Europe.
- What appears to be clear from the statistics is that workplace violence is a serious source of deterioration of health and well-being. The differences in health outcomes between those exposed to psychological violence and those who are not, are all significant. Workers who have experienced violence or bullying and harassment are more likely to report stress, sleeping problems, anxiety and irritability than those with no exposure. However, due to the cross sectional design of the survey, it is not possible to determine to what extent psychosocial work factors contribute to the prevalence of violence, or to which the prevalence of violence causes a worsened psychosocial work environment. Studies with a longitudinal design or qualitative research are also needed in order to analyse in greater depth the cause and effect of abusive behaviour.
- The exposure rates of workplace violence emerging from the EWCS refer only to the working population. Those most seriously affected by abusive behaviour at the

workplace may have already left the labour market. At the same time, evidence from several countries points to the rise of mental health problems as a cause of long-term incapacity, which is the key reason, after retirement, for withdrawing from the labour market earlier. This trend is also consistent with research showing a general rise in psychosocial risks at the workplace (including violence and bullying/harassment). This may be suggestive of the need to address and prevent workplace violence for the long-term consequences it may have for the individual, the workplace and the community at large.

- It is recognised that workplace violence often stems from a combination of factors not only associated with personality traits but, above all, organisational problems. The high pace of change, increasing work intensity, uncertainties with regard to future employment may influence the level of stress which may provide fertile ground for workplace violence, particularly bullying/harassment.
- Particularly, in the current economic climate, it would be appropriate to explore the impact of organisational change (e.g. major reorganisation or restructuring) on workplace violence. Organisational change may directly encourage bullying or indirectly affect workplace bullying through various stressors such as increased workload, job insecurity, etc. Until now, sporadic attempts have been made to empirically disentangle the link between organisational change and workplace violence. The key challenge is to anticipate problems and improve work organisation and management practices.
- In order to design appropriate preventive measures, it is important to come to an understanding of the actual causes of workplace violence. This means developing a science-activist-practitioner approach which is based on a two-way interaction (science must inform practice and vice-versa). The common challenge is to solve problems and improve work organisation and management practices as well as create

and contribute to theories and models of work organisation.

- In spite of the challenges and yet unresolved issues, a number of factors are contributing to a shared European understanding of the phenomenon including the increased awareness and public debate, new legislation, the pioneering action of courts,

proliferation of collective agreements and initiatives of EU institutions and the social partners. In parallel, the research community is continuing its efforts to monitor the prevalence of workplace violence and to explore the extent to which cultural, linguistic and contextual differences frame the phenomenon.



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For more information at European level, see news features published on the *European Working Conditions Observatory* and the *European Industrial Relations Observatory*.

'Mutual respect for the dignity of others at all levels within the workplace is one of the key characteristics of successful organisations. That is why harassment and violence are unacceptable.'

Framework agreement on harassment and violence at work, European Social Partners, 26 April 2007

Foundation Findings provide pertinent background information and policy pointers for all actors and interested parties engaged in the current European debate on the future of social policy. The contents are based on Foundation research and reflect its autonomous and tripartite structure.



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