Raising awareness of
Psychological Harassment at Work

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Other booklets from the Protecting Workers' Health Series:
No. 1: Preventing Health Risks from the Use of Pesticides in Agriculture
No. 2: Understanding and Performing Economic Assessments at the Company Level
No. 3: Work Organisation and Stress

Preface

This document is the fourth in a series of occupational health documents entitled: *Protecting Workers' Health*. It is published by the *World Health Organization (WHO)* within the *Global Programme of Occupational Health*. It is the result of the implementation effort of the *Global Strategy on Occupational Health for All* as agreed upon by the WHO Collaborating Centres in Occupational Health.

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Psychological harassment is a form of employee abuse arising from unethical behaviour and leading to victimization of the worker. It is an increasing worldwide problem which is still largely unknown and underestimated. It can produce serious negative consequences on the quality of life and on individuals' health, mainly in the emotional, psychosomatic and behavioural areas. In addition, society as a whole becomes a victim because of increased pressure on social services and welfare.

This booklet aims at raising awareness of this growing issue of concern by providing information on its characteristics, such as the definition, differences between normal conflicts and psychological harassment at work, the ways it is practised, the consequences it can produce on health and society. Special attention is devoted to the causes that favour its development and the measures to be adopted in order to combat it and react to it.

Since psychological harassment is widespread in all occupational sectors, this publication has the intent to promote health and safety at work among health professionals, decision makers, managers, human resources directors, legal community, unions and workers worldwide.
The only way to combat psychological harassment at work is to unite the efforts of all these players, while viewing the issue from different angles.

Contents

One morning you get to your office, sit down at your desk, and turn on your computer. Just like the day before, like many other days before, but that morning there is something new in the air, something unusual, vaguely hostile. Maybe it is the boss who, absorbed by his thoughts, has not said hello to you in the corridor; maybe it is your colleagues who have not invited you to have coffee with them. How strange, they normally call you!

Maybe it is that secretary down there, the one who sees you and whispers something in her friend's ear, you wonder why...
Maybe it does not mean anything, it is only a coincidence, and tomorrow everything will go back to normal. Maybe, though, something has broken down in the relations between you and your work environment. Maybe someone has decided to turn against you, to isolate you, to exclude you from the group, and from that day on, little by little, everything begins to change at work... to get worse.

It is a chain of apparently unrelated events concealing a precise, progressive strategy. The threat at the beginning is surreptitious and indirect, made up of hints, glances, and remarks. At first, it is difficult to grasp them, to understand, to identify. But soon after it becomes ever more obvious and violent. It seems irreversible. And whoever you are, you feel terribly alone: you do not know that millions of other people, all over the world, are in the same trap. You are not aware that it is a social evil which is growing more serious, more widespread and yet is still hardly known. It has a precise name: it is called mobbing.

Some facts

Prevalence of psychological violence in the Health sector
(in Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Lebanon, Portugal, Thailand and South Africa)

According to a survey of ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI, "psychological violence is widespread everywhere, with verbal abuse right on the top. In Brazil 39.5% of the respondents had experienced verbal abuse in the last year; 32.2% in Bulgaria; 52% in South Africa with 60.1% in the public sector; 47.7% in Thailand; 51% in the health centre complex and 27.4% in the hospital in Portugal; 40.9% in Lebanon and up to 67% in Australia.

The second main area of concern is that of bullying and mobbing accounting for 30.9% in Bulgaria, 20.6% in South Africa, 10.7% in Thailand; 23% in the health centre complex and 16.5% in the hospital in Portugal; 22.1% in Lebanon; 10.5% in Australia and 15.2% in Brazil".

ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI, Synthesis report by V. Di Martino (2002)

Prevalence of intimidation at work in the European Union Member States

According to the *Third European Survey on Working Conditions 2000* "almost one in ten workers (9%) report being subjected to intimidation in the workplace in 2000, a slight increase from 1995 (+1)". As the graph illustrates "there are wide variations between countries, ranging from 15% in Finland to 4% in Portugal. Such differences most probably reflect awareness of the issue rather than the reality".

Workers subjected to intimidation (by Country)

FIN	NL	UK	S	B	F	IRL	DK	D	L	A	E	EL	I	P	EU 15
15	14	14	12	11	10	10	8	7	7	6	5	5	4	4	9
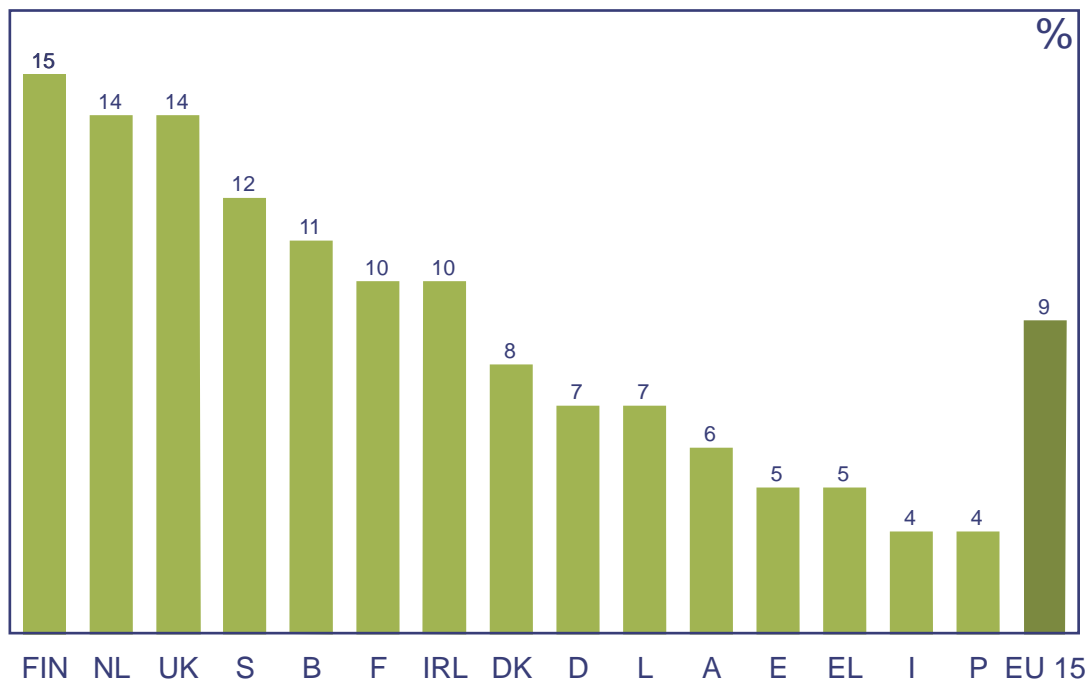
Paoli P, Merlliè D. (2001)

Workers subjected to intimidation in the EU (by sector)

%

Agriculture and fishing: 3
Electricity, gas and water supply: 3
Construction: 5
Financial intermediation: 5
Manufacturing and mining: 6
Real estate: 7
Wholesale and retail trade: 9
Transport and communications: 12
Hotels and restaurants: 12
Education and health: 12
Public administration and defence: 14
All EU: 9
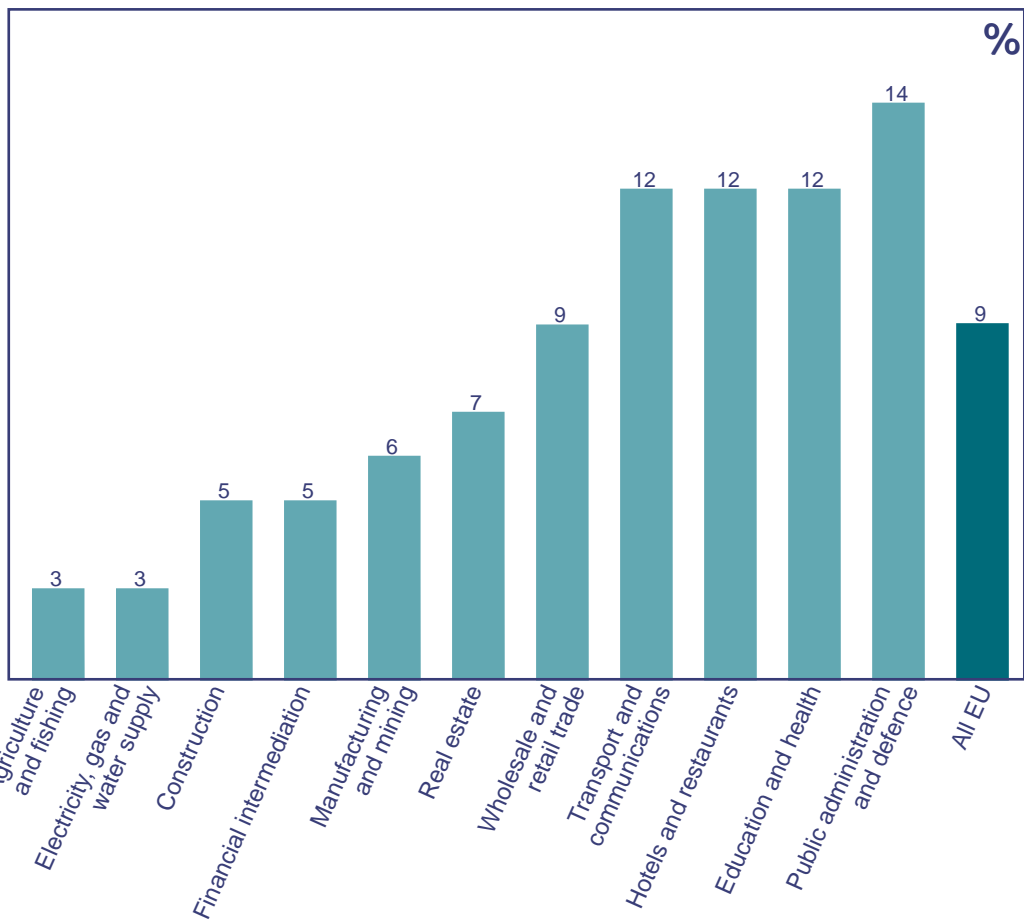
Paoli P, Merlliè D. (2001)

Psychological harassment
at work or mobbing

Psychological harassment is an old phenomenon present in many workplaces, caused by deterioration of interpersonal relations as well as organizational dysfunctions.

This behaviour is related to a variety of factors including discrimination based on gender, religion, ethnicity, age, nationality, disability, background, sexual orientation, and other diversities as well as to socio-economic reasons.

Mobbing occurs in every workplace throughout the world, but is a culture-related phenomenon: therefore the way it is performed and sensitivity to it may vary in different countries.

The first researcher who deals scientifically with this problem is Heinz Leymann, a Swedish psychologist who borrows the term mobbing from the animal sciences, that is the investigations of Konrad Lorenz. This term, literally meaning *to form a crowd around someone in order to attack him/her*, defines the behaviour of some animal species of assailing one member of the group which, for various reasons, is to be expelled.
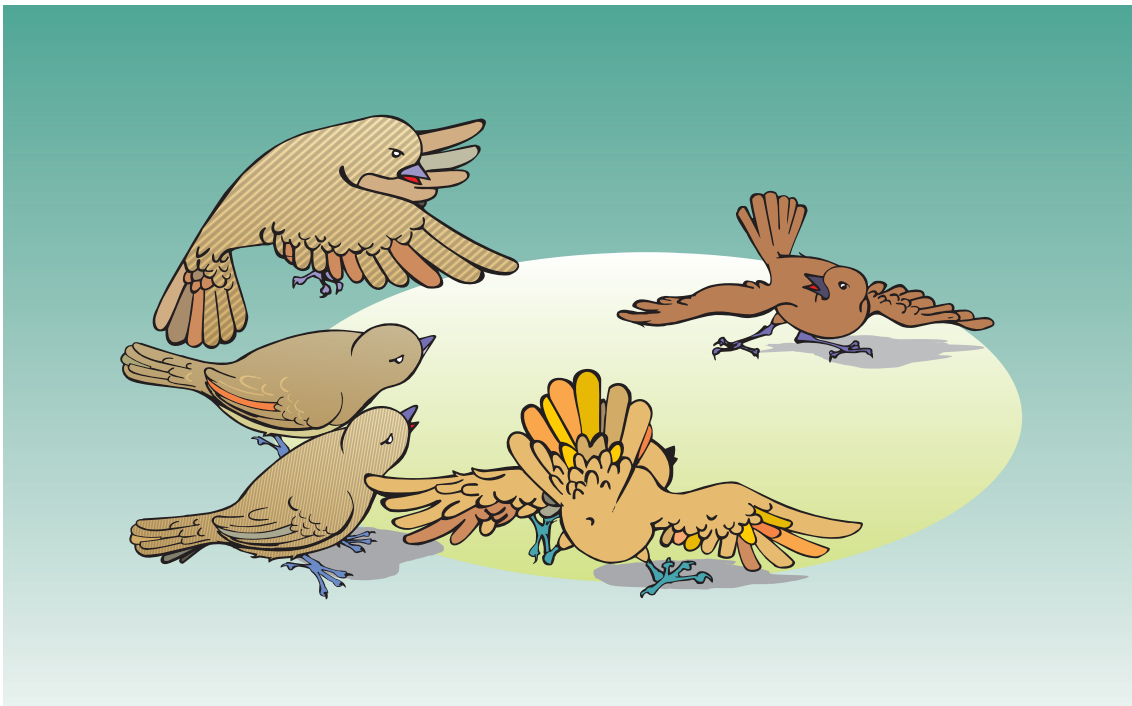
In this context mobbing is applied to the work environment to indicate the aggressive and threatening behaviour of one or more members of a group, the mobber, towards an individual, the target or the victim, though, occasionally mobbing can be practised on groups.

Heinz Leymann began his studies in the early Eighties and deserves credit for having given a general picture of the phenomenon by studying the various features, such as the epidemiological characteristics and the health effects as well as its prevention.

In different countries other terms have been adopted to indicate similar behaviour in the workplace:

Bullying, Work or Employee Abuse, Mistreatment, Emotional Abuse, Bossing, Victimization, Intimidation, Psychological terrorization, Psychological violence, Harcèlement Moral, Harcèlement Psychologique, Assédio no Local de Trabalho, Assédio Moral, Acoso Moral, Maltrato psicológico.

Sometimes these words are used as synonyms, but sometimes they are not. As an example, the alternative use of bullying and mobbing derives from the cultural and scientific background of the researcher who faces the problem. The term bullying was adopted to investigate the phenomenon among schoolchildren, while the term mobbing was applied to the workplace.

According to the *European Agency for Safety and Health at Work* there is no single definition of this phenomenon which has been agreed upon internationally.

One definition is:

Workplace bullying is repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee, or group of employees, that creates a risk to health and safety.

Within this definition:
"Unreasonable behaviour" means behaviour that a reasonable person, having regard to all the circumstances, would expect to victimise, humiliate, undermine or threaten;

"Behaviour" includes actions of individuals or a group. A system of work may be used as a means of victimising, humiliating, undermining or threatening;

"Risk to health and safety" includes risk to the mental or physical health of the employee.

Bullying often involves a misuse or abuse of power where the targets can experience difficulties in defending themselves.

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2002)

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

BOSSING

VICTIMIZATION

INTIMIDATION

PSYCHOLOGICAL TERRORIZATION

MISTREATMENT

PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

WORK ABUSE

HARCELEMENT MORAL

BULLYING

HARCELEMENT PSYCHOLOGIQUE

MALTRATO PSICOLOGICO

ASSEDIO MORAL

ACOSO MORAL

ASSEDIO NO LOCAL DE TRABALHO

Another definition is that of the recent French Law (2002-73) that reads as follows:

«agissements répétés de harcèlement moral qui ont pour objet ou pour effet une dégradation des conditions de travail susceptible de porter atteinte à ses droits et à sa dignité, d'altérer sa santé physique ou mentale ou de compromettre son avenir professionnel»

Harcèlement moral au travail,
Loi n° 2002-73 du 17 janvier 2002

(repeated actions of psychological harassment having as object or effect a degradation of working conditions, able to cause damage to the rights and dignity, to affect physical or mental health or harm an individual's professional future)

Editors' translation

Hereafter, the term **"mobbing"** will be used throughout this paper, except when citations from other sources are made.

Differences between normal conflicts and mobbing

A certain degree of competition is a normal and useful component of everyday worklife.

Mobbing differs from normal conflicts for two main reasons: it is characterised by unethical actions and is ultimately counterproductive for all. Thus it is essential to learn how to distinguish mobbing from normal conflict.

Normally, individuals enter the work environment with specific expectations (salary, competence development, career progression), develop varied professional skills and share experiences relating to the company's objectives.

Competition is instrumental in reaching goals, though it can include conflicts and arguments which may even be heated but are based on factual data and are focused on content, not on personal values.

In a mobbing situation the climate becomes foggy, communication ambiguous, and interaction hostile.

The following table compares conflicts in "healthy" situations with conflicts characterizing mobbing situations.

Table no.1 "Differences between *healthy* conflicts and mobbing situations"

"healthy" conflicts	mobbing situations
Clear roles and tasks	Role ambiguity
Collaborative relations	Uncooperative behaviour/boycott
Common and shared objectives	Lack of foresight
Explicit interpersonal relations	Ambiguous interpersonal relations
Healthy organization	Organizational flaws
Occasional clashes and confrontation	Long lasting and systematic unethical actions
Open and frank strategies	Equivocal strategies
Open conflict and discussion	Covert actions and denial of conflict
Straightforward communication	Oblique and evasive communication

In a situation of healthy competition conflict may possibly be resolved. This is, however, questionable in a mobbing situation.

Effects on health and quality of life

Mobbing has the potential to cause or contribute to many psychopathologic, psychosomatic and behavioural disorders.

However, it is unknown how many victims of a mobbing situation actually develop health effects. This probably depends on the duration and intensity of the stress stimuli, but the personality traits of the victim may play either a protective or an enhancing role.

At present in the industrialised countries workers are beginning to turn to specialised centres for help in greater numbers, but, overall, the awareness of this issue is still very limited.

Health effects generally comprise a number of symptoms, many of which are listed in table no. 2.

Table no. 2 "Health outcomes"

Psychopathologic	Psychosomatic	Behavioural
• Anxiety reactions • Apathy • Avoidance reactions • Concentration problems • Depressive mood • Fear reactions • Flashbacks • Hyper-arousal • Insecurity • Insomnia • Intrusive thought • Irritability • Lack of initiative • Melancholy • Mood changes • Recurrent nightmares	• Arterial hypertension • Attacks of asthma • Cardiac palpitations • Coronary heart disease • Dermatitis • Hairloss • Headache • Joint and muscle pains • Loss of balance • Migraine • Stomach pains • Stomach ulcers • Tachycardia	• Auto and hetero-aggressive reactions • Eating disorders • Increased alcohol and drug intake • Increased smoking • Sexual dysfunctions • Social isolation

There is no single way to classify the health effects of mobbing.

Depression and *Anxiety Disorders* are commonly diagnosed disorders, but other diagnoses are frequently established, namely A*djustment Disorder (AD)* and *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),* because they typically represent the response to external events.

Table no. 3 "Characteristics of Adjustment Disorder and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder"

Adjustment Disorder	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
An adjustment disorder is a psychiatric condition occurring in response to a stressor in which a number of life changes act as precipitants. The person displays either marked distress or impairment in functioning (inability to work or perform other activities).	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is a psychiatric condition characterised by: - Reexperience of the event with recurrent and intrusive recollections, distressing dreams, nightmares and flashbacks - Avoidance of situations recalling the event - Hyper-arousal causing difficulty in falling asleep or concentrating, or exaggerated startle response.

The diagnosis of PTSD is questioned by some psychiatrists because it implies a highly traumatic and often acute event, whereas mobbing generally is characterised by a prolonged negative situation.

Therefore, other researchers have proposed the supplementary diagnosis of *Prolonged Duress Stress Disorder (PDSD).* (Scott M.J. and Stradling S.G. (1994))

Case Study

Mister C., 38 years old, works for an international company producing dams, bridges and platforms.
He works on a drilling platform and his tasks require lifting and pushing heavy objects. He has to work 3000 miles away from home, but he is satisfied with his work because he has a good salary and can ensure a future for his family.

Later on he develops severe back pain due to a slipped disk, and is considered unfit by the factory physician to continue operating in the same job. However, he is forced to do so and continues working with great difficulties.

A year later, he is invited to resign. He refuses because his family has no other financial resources and his children still attend school.

The company takes reprisals against him. He is left inactive for weeks in a waiting room, isolated from colleagues and superiors and without any possibility to communicate with others. He is being insulted for his ethnic origin, and he is ridiculed for being unable to do his job.

He asks to be transferred to a more suitable position, but instead is demoted and his salary is reduced. His work post is in a narrow corridor, without windows, facing the wall, among boxes containing toxic residues.

Three years later he is sent back to his country, but develops recurrent panic attacks and is taken to hospital.

From then on, he suffers from severe depression and persistent back pain and is under drug treatment.

Being unable to perform any activity, he is eventually dismissed from his work.

Effects on Quality of Life and Social Costs

Mobbing affects the victim's self-confidence and self-efficacy in all domains and displays its effects in all areas of life, such as family, friends, social relations, and work environment.

The victim becomes confused, less efficient and has high levels of fear, shame and embarrassment, thus affecting not only work but also interpersonal relations.

The possible consequences for the family, the social network, the employer, and the society are briefly outlined below.

Table no. 4 "Possible consequences for the family and the social network"

- Avoiding social meetings

- Complaints of physical discomfort and sickness

- Desertion of social engagements

- Detachment from family ties

- Difficulties in qualifying for other jobs

- Disengagement from father, spouse, son/daughter roles and responsibilities

- Intolerance of family problems

- Litigation

- Loosening of friendship relations

- Loss of income

- Loss of shared projects

- Marital problems and divorce

- Medical expenses

- Outbursts of rage

- Violence

- Worsening of children's performance at school

Table no. 5 "Possible consequences for employers"

COSTS DUE TO
- Additional retirement costs
- Damage to the company image
- Decrease of competitiveness
- Decrease of product quality
- Disability
- Increase of persons unfit for work
- Increased staff turnover
- Interpersonal climate deterioration
- Litigation costs
- Loss of qualified staff
- Reduced individual and group productivity
- Reduced motivation, satisfaction and creativity
- Reduction in the number of clients
- Repeated transfers
- Replacement costs
- Sickness absenteeism
- Training new staff

Table no. 6 "Possible consequences on society"

The entire society becomes a victim because of increased pressure on welfare. Consequences, however, may vary depending upon the national health system and the social services of each country.

- Benefits and welfare costs due to premature retirement
- High costs of disability
- High costs of unemployment
- Loss of human resources
- Medical costs and possible hospitalisation
- Potential loss of productive workers

(**modified from** *Hoel H, Sparks K. and Cooper C.L. (2001)*)

Risks

The terrain on which mobbing develops is a veritable micro-society in which each event is the result of manifold elements: cultural, human, material and organisational.

The probability of being harassed may increase due to a bad management style, inadequate organisation of work and an unfavourable work environment.

1. Management style

a) **Inertia of management and higher level staff,** in a culture favouring a disciplinary, intolerant and discriminatory style of management, creates a climate of fear, distrust, excessive competition and awe. Without norms concerning social behaviour, certain persons may consider themselves "authorised" to use abusive behaviour.

b) **New management methods** have introduced a more extensive concept of competition; thus employees may be asked to perform not only better than colleagues, but also with less ethical concerns in order to obtain results. More horizontal forms of direction are established, but without clearly defining the rules of collaboration. This apparent liberty leaves a wide scope for abuse of power. This is amplified by a whole series of instruments used by management, such as, for example, the individual evaluation of performance or salaries of merit. These may divide employees and have a potential to generate suspicion and a negative atmosphere.

When people started talking of layoffs, I said to myself, it is better to crush my colleague than risk the layoff happening to me.

2. Work organisation

a) **Chronic under-staffing and heavy work constraints** create dissatisfaction, fatigue, and a feeling that it is impossible to change the work environment; tension may be vented on colleagues, family and friends.

b) **Badly defined tasks or disorganised work** without established limits of behaviour allow colleagues and superiors to take advantage of the situation.

c) **Excessive hierarchy:** mobbing is more frequent when the company's only reference value is hierarchy or where there are multiple chains of direction. For example, this is the case of hospitals where nurses are subordinated to doctors, nursing ranks and administration. The resulting confusion is a breeding ground for intimidation and derision.
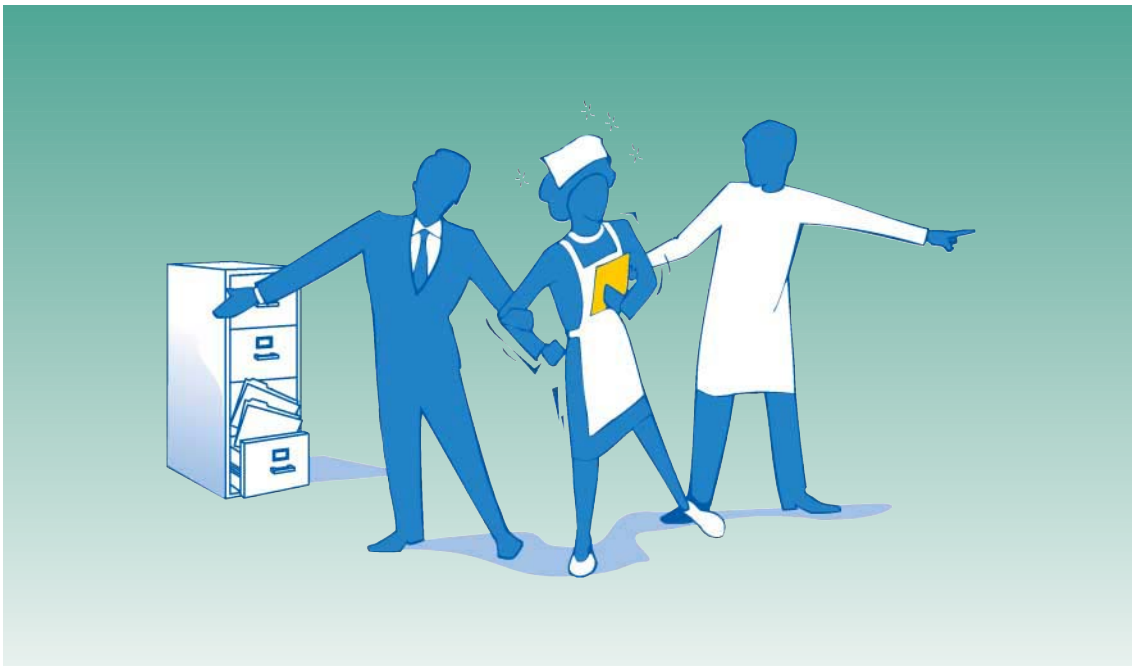
d) **Insufficient instructions and lack of information** represent another risk factor. For efficient performance, instructions on the task to be done, the time available, how the work should be carried out and explanations of the ultimate goal are absolutely necessary.

3. Work environment

a) **The international work environment** calls for a highly flexible organisation in working hours, employment and work status. Together with downsizing and restructuring, this can result in precariousness and fear of unemployment. These situations may represent a culture medium for the development of mobbing.

b) **The development of outsourcing and the multiplication of subsidiary companies** with different cultural traits may produce situations leading to the neglect of human and local characteristics of the employees.

Prevention

The employer, by means of its Health and Safety Services, should adopt risk assessment methods to identify the organisational factors that favour mobbing, which can eventually result in psychosocial problems. Specific instructions based on preventive measures can then be given to workers.

All parties, health professionals, decision makers, managers, human resources directors, supervisors, legal community, unions and workers must cooperate in the control of mobbing for the action to be successful.

Below, prevention methods are proposed at primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

Primary prevention

The employer should adopt ways to inform and train managers and staff. This could be pursued by producing guidelines and codes of ethics to encourage ethical behaviour, confidence in one's professionalism, a climate of tolerance and freedom of attitude and discourage refusal to collaborate or indulge in improper behaviour.

- **Information and education** on mobbing and its consequences
  1. Workers must be adequately informed
  2. Management must be educated in conflict resolution
  3. Awareness campaigns may be implemented
  4. Anti-mobbing policy should be developed

- **Guidelines** containing information on the nature and extent of the problem and its effects on health and quality of life.

- **Code of ethics**
  Charter with indications that the company will not tolerate unethical acts and discrimination.

- **Contracts**
  Terms should be included in the contracts, regulating the matter and applying sanctions for any breach of the rules.

Secondary Prevention

Once a mobbing process has started, it can become difficult to control, unless timely and effective measures are taken.

- **A confidant**: a person, either an employee or someone outside the company, can be charged with the task of listening to anyone who considers himself/herself a victim of mobbing. The very fact of recognising the person's problem is essential because it can break the denial that often covers the aggression. It also allows the person to clarify his/her experience, to distance himself/herself from the situation and finally to take an initiative to stop the aggression.

- **A mediator**: mediation is defined as a process in which an impartial third party, the mediator, offers people in conflict the opportunity to meet in order to appease differences and negotiate a solution. It allows the confrontation of viewpoints and the expression of emotions. Mediation does not aim at finding a culprit, but at allowing the persons in conflict to understand each other, to analyse what has happened and to establish the terms of an arrangement in order to continue to work together or separately in a climate of greater mutual respect.

Tertiary prevention

Since mobbing can cause serious consequences on the workers, various measures can be taken to help them recover their health and dignity.

- **Early diagnosis of health effects** can help reduce the consequences at all levels (the individual, the family, the social network).

- **Consciousness raising groups** that bring together people who have suffered from mobbing in different situations. Sharing similar experiences in a group allows the victims to realise that they are not the ones responsible for the event, to recognise the aggression, and, if necessary, modify their own behaviour.
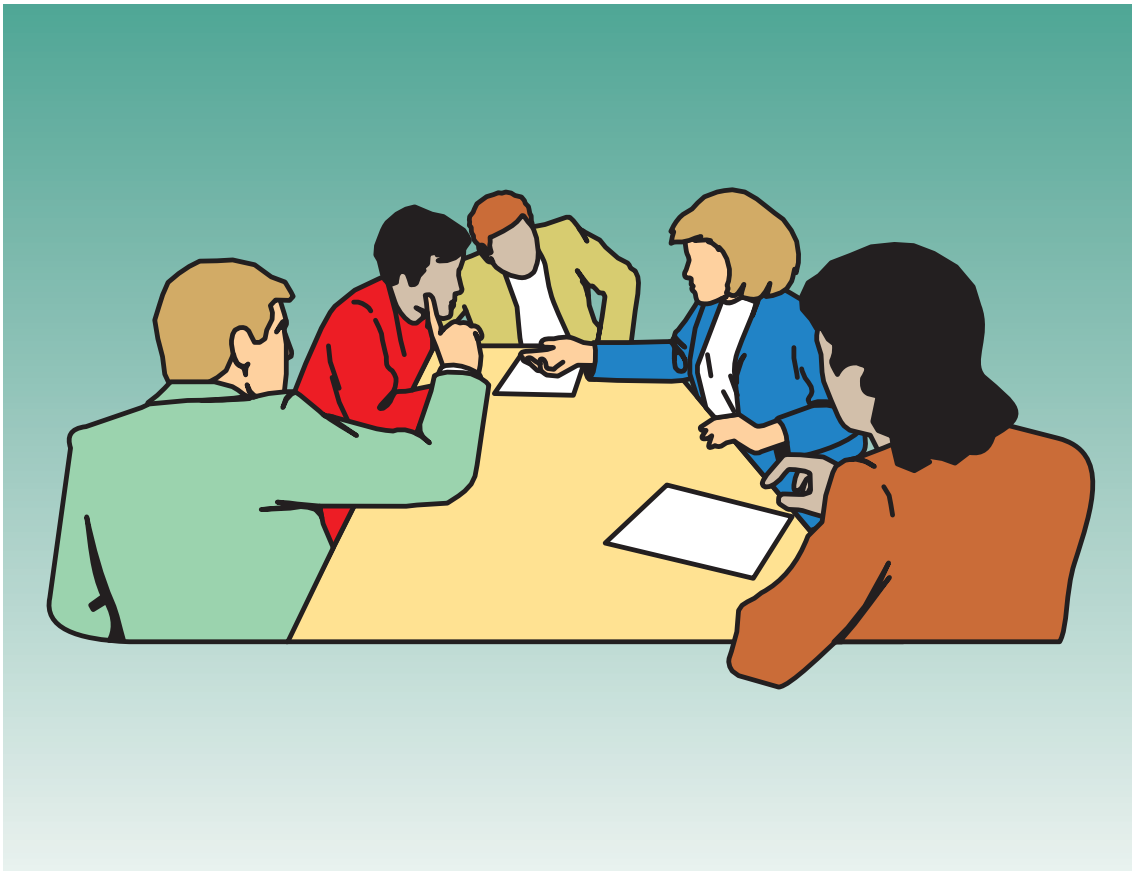
- **Legislation**

In general the law should address the following points while taking into account local habits and cultures when devising strategies:

1. encourage preventive measures to reduce occurrences of workplace bullying

2. protect workers who engage in self-help to address bullying and provide incentives to employers who respond promptly, fairly and effectively

3. provide proper relief to targets of severe bullying, including compensatory damages and, where applicable, reinstatement to his or her position

4. punish bullies and the employers who allow them to abuse their co-workers.

(from D. Yamada 2003)

In absolute terms, **prevention of mobbing** is based on the possibility of achieving a great cultural change of individual values, attitudes, verbal expressions and ways of interacting.
However, such a cultural change is a long-term process which can be favoured by combined efforts to raise awareness and to arouse individual insight into this phenomenon.

How to detect mobbing
and how to deal with it

Mobbing is an escalating process and begins with a change. In most cases it is a change in the work climate that is made not only of actions and behaviour, but also of feelings, perceptions and sensations.

At first the subject may sense an increasing distance from superiors or colleagues, less friendliness, scarce or excessive attention, absence or reduction of routine gestures, such as the coffee break, friendly chats, and the day-to-day communication with colleagues.

Later on, subtle or open hostility may develop and the situation can result in overt mobbing actions.

Two steps are outlined below which can help a mobbed individual to understand and to change his/her situation.

Step 1: Awareness

It is very important to detect any change occurring at work.
Awareness of a mobbing situation derives from the recognition of the behaviour listed in the following tables:

Examples of mobbing

Table no. 7 "Attacks on the person/individual"

- Damage of personal belongings

- Exclusion

- Gossiping

- Humiliation

- Instigation of colleagues against the victim

- Intrusions into private life

- Isolation

- Provocation

- Ridicule, especially if performed in the presence of colleagues or superiors

- Sexual harassment

- Spreading false information

- Threats of violence

- Verbal abuse

Table no. 8 "Threats to an individual's professional career"

- Assignment of meaningless tasks

- Assignment of new duties without training or instruments

- Assignment of tasks that are hazardous or unfit for the worker's health

- Demotion

- Excessive monitoring of the person

- Exclusion from meetings, projects, and training courses

- Forced inactivity

- Gradual reduction of the tasks

- Intentionally underrating or ignoring proposals

- Lack of communication

- Lack of recognition

- Remote, unjustified transfers

- Removal of essential work instruments

- Repeated criticism and blame

- Retaining information essential for performing the job

- Threats of disciplinary action

- Threats of dismissal

- Unjustifiably low merit rating

- Unjustified disciplinary action

- Work overload with deadlines that are impossible to meet

These are just some examples which can alert people to mobbing.

Step 2: What the victims can do

Even though victims would like to escape the situation, they should act with caution. Resignation or other important decisions to resolve the difficulties at work must not be taken under the pressure of emotions.

Consideration should be given to the initiatives listed below:
- Contact supervisors who have responsibility for workers' health and wellbeing
- Contact the Occupational Health and Safety Service of the company
- Request transfer to another workplace
- Collect evidence
- Identify allies (colleagues, trade unions, occupational physicians)
- Share experiences with other persons who have undergone similar situations.

In addition it is important to develop assertive behaviour, to avoid self blame, to keep up social relations and to look for help among family and friends, without venting emotions on them.

"*Many who live with violence day in and day out assume that it is an intrinsic part of the human condition. But this is not so. Violence can be prevented. Violent cultures can be turned around. In my own country and around the world, we have shining examples of how violence has been countered. Governments, communities and individuals can make a difference*".

Nelson Mandela
Foreword to *World report on Violence and Health*
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NIOSH

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
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Cincinnati, OH 45226-1998
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Fax: +1-513 533 8573
Email: pubstaft@cdc.gov
Web: http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/homepage.html

EU-OSHA

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
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Tel: + 34 944-794-360
Fax: + 34 944-794-383
Email: information@osha.eu.int
Web: http://agency.osha.eu.int

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Web: http://www.eurofound.ie/index.htm

ICP
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