

# MOBBING AT WORK: EXPERIENCES IN THE GREEK PUBLIC SECTOR

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## Abstract

In recent years a new, threatening phenomenon has been developed in the workplace, which entails major personal, family, professional and social implications. The phenomenon is known as "Mobbing Syndrome" and describes repetitive occasional behavior inside or outside the enterprise, which is manifested by fierce actions, words or ways of organizing work and aims at forming a hostile, degraded environment that affects personality, the dignity or physical and mental integrity of the worker in order to cause his resignation.

The purpose of this study is to quantify and record the incidents affecting the wider public sector of Epirus. A questionnaire was used to carry out the study, which was distributed to employees of the wider public sector in the region of Epirus. The WHS (Work Harassment Scale) questionnaire by Björkqvist and Österman (1992) consists of 24 questions. Workers must show their preference to a five-point risk scale several times during the past six months who have experienced depressive and oppressive behavior by their colleagues or their employer during work.

The results of the survey highlighted alarming trends in the public sector and highlighted the need for administrative and legislative measures to address it.

**Keywords:** work harassment, public sector, civil servants, work harassment scale, mobbing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of mobbing in the workplace is a theme that in the last few decades has raised the interest of the scientific community, mainly because of its significant and unpleasant effects not only on the worker and the organization, but also on the whole of society. However, the phenomenon of mobbing at the workplace, although very old in all societies (Brodsky, 1976; Olweus, 1978), due to its inconspicuous nature is by its very well hidden and the problems in identifying its characteristics and dimensions are too big. Mobbing at the workplace began to be described and systematically analyzed only in the early 1980s by Heinz Leymann, who used the term "mobbing" to describe workplace terrorism (Leymann & Gustafsson 1984).

Although there is no globally accepted definition of mobbing, most researchers agree that psychological terrorism or moral harassment in the workplace is a social interaction in which one or more individuals aim to bring another person in a number of different ways, which are hostile and unethical, in a position of weakness (Hirigoyen, 2013; Ramsay et al., 2008; Hirigoyen, 2002; Zapf, 1999; Schopenhauer, 1998; Leymann, 1996).

Some researchers describe mobbing as a single evolving phenomenon that is constantly increasing in intensity, others as a process that unfolds in distinctly distinct stages, Notelaers et al. (2010). Most researchers, however, are treated as a gradual escalating process. In the early stages, victims are hardly recognizing aggressive attitudes because they are indirect and covered. It usually develops after a long incubation period. It then appears at a repetitive rhythm, has duration and gradually escalates to the worst. Colleagues are being removed, victims are isolated and feel humiliated either because they have been exaggerated and unfairly criticized or because they have become the easy task at work. In the final stage, psychological violence and possibly physical violence can be used, Leymann (1990).

The exponential course of mobbing in the workplace has serious consequences for workers, their families, the organization, but also for the whole of society (Chappell & Di Martino 2006). The symptomatology and the effects (physical and psychological) on the health of the "victim" are those that differentiate workplace mobbing from other situations, such as, for example, false complaints, Hirigoyen (2002).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the incidence of mobbing among civil servants working in the Greek public sector. More specifically, the research questions asked were:

- a. the existence of incidents of mobbing among civil servants working and
- b. the impact of gender at the appearance of mobbing.

Field research was conducted during the period January 2019 – February 2019 and the population of the study consisted of 164 civil servants working (80 males and 84 females) in the wider public sector. We collected the primary data by means of interviews (see the Appendix).

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Surveys conducted over three decades show that systematic exposure of workers to situations of mobbing has a devastating effect on the health and quality of life of exposed individuals. There has been a correlation of the phenomenon with chronic fatigue, psychosomatic, psychological, physical problems as well as problems related to anxiety management (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003; Moayed et al., 2006; Carnero et. al. 2012).

In a recent work, Leon et al. analyzed results from 97 inquiries, using information about 98 samples comprising more than 220,000 workers across the globe. In this work they highlighted that bullying and harassment at the workplace is a widespread phenomenon that needs attention to develop safer working environments in which work can be performed with dignity, Leon et al. (2019).

Another study from 2018 which take place at the public health-care sector of Cyprus using the Greek version of Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT) instrument showed that workplace bullying is a very common phenomenon among health-care organizations. The study showed that the most common forms of mobbing were "Being continuously interrupted" (17.2%) and "continuously being given new work assignments" (13.5%). Furthermore, women were significantly more often exposed to at least one mobbing behavior than men, Zachariadou et al. (2018).

Furthermore, in a study in which data from 501 public servants employed in the tax administration institute of Taiwan was collected was found that male minority reported more workplace mobbing than did the female majority. However, male supervisors did not exacerbate the relationship between male minority and workplace mobbing, while female's exposure to workplace mobbing was attenuated when working with male supervisors. These findings support the view that gender is not merely an individual antecedent of bullying, but rather acts as a social factor to influence the incidence of workplace mobbing, Wang & Hsieh (2015).

Mobbing in workplaces is a problem that decreases the productivity of the workers. One of the reasons is that being exposed to bullying in the workplace increases long-term sickness absence. It was found that exposure to bullying is associated with negative immediate self-reported health for both genders and gender does not significantly explain exposure to bullying. However, bullied females have higher, persistent increases in long-term sickness absence and adverse long-term health. This suggests that men and women have different coping strategies, Eriksen et al. (2016).

When Niedhammer et al. (2013) examined the relation between sickness absence and 13 different psychosocial work factors in 31 European countries, he found that workplace bullying was the strongest factor for the risk of sickness absence. Furthermore, Niedhammer et al. (2013), is the only researcher who showed whether mobbing influences the length/duration of sickness absence and that exposure to workplace mobbing increased the duration of absence among women and not among men.

Nielsen et al. (2016a, b) came to the same conclusion after reviewing all published research on workplace mobbing and sickness absence and found that in 94% of the included studies the increased risk of having sickness absence was associated with the exposure to bullying. The meta-analysis estimated the association

and showed that targets of bullying had 1.58 higher odds (95% CI = 1.39–1.79) of exhibiting sickness absence compared to non-targets.

Recent studies converge to their conclusions on the high percentage of the phenomenon of workplace mobbing in the public sector. The main features that differentiate the harassment of the public sector from the private one are two: a) the duration of the harassment; and b) the connection of the phenomenon with the games of power and the possibilities of abuse of power in the public function (Ege, 2007; Schallcross et al., 2008; Hirigoyen, 2012).

Because mobbing at the workplace is a serious problem for the whole society and because of the increase of the victims a lot of different methods have been used to measure this phenomenon and to establish the criteria if someone has been bullied or not, Einarsen et al. (2011).

A person has been a victim if he is in a systematic way exposure to negative acts, which leads to an imbalance situation and the persons / victims feels that the others want to harm them. It can be described as a situation where an employee is persistently and systematically exposed to harassment at work and he finds it difficult to defend himself against the harassment. Later, in a second time they feel severe negative consequences for their health and well-being (Einarsen et al., 2011; Baillien et al., 2017; Notelaers et al., 2018) such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, Xu et al. (2018a, b).

### 3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The staff members of the research cover the whole range of Greek public administration as they work in the basic sectors which are health care, education, central administration (including Security and Armed Forces) and Local Government. Field research was conducted during the period January 2019 – February 2019 and the population of the study consisted of 164 civil servants working (80 males and 84 females) in the wider public sector. In order to calculate the sample size of the study, the number of civil servants was taken into account based on the data on the Greek Government Human Resources Register, (Confidence Interval Level of 95%, Confidence Level of 5% and a margin of error of 8%).

The sample for the selection of the participants in this research was based on probability sampling. Particularly, proportional stratified sampling was chosen, Cohen & Manion (1994). Layered sampling was chosen to ensure representation of all sections of the population, to reduce the estimation error and to have a sufficient number of participants from subpopulations. The population was then divided into layers (strata) consisting of homogeneous population groups in terms of certain characteristics and the individual samples were selected by simple random sampling from each layer.

In order to keep ethics in this survey, we followed the basic guidelines on honesty, confidentiality, anonymity and objectivity (Resnik 2015). Thus, questionnaires were distributed in open opaque (yellow) envelopes for the purpose of collecting the data so that the participant, when completing it, could then stamp and deliver the file. The questionnaires used were anonymous and there were no questions that could under any circumstances lead to the identification of the respondent. Measures to ensure confidentiality and other rights were taken in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration as amended in Tokyo in 2004 (WMA Declaration of Helsinki, Tokyo 2004).

For the creation of questionnaires, the Work Harassment Scale (WHS) research was used which was developed by Björkqvist, Österman, Hjelt-Bäck and consists of 24 questions (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Björkqvist et al., 1992). According to this the workers must indicate on a five-level Likert scale how many times have been subjected to humiliating and oppressive behavior on the part of their colleagues or their employer during their work. For intercultural adaptation, the questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 21 people questioned about how much each question was answered individually and the questionnaire as a whole and whether they preferred to change a question or phrase to make it more comprehensible. There were no difficulties in understanding, completing the questions or negative reactions.

The data from the questionnaires were originally recorded in a computer database. For the statistical processing of the results statistical program Statistica (Statsoft, USA, 7.1) was used. Continuous variables were expressed as averages, while the categorical variables were as frequencies and percentages. In addition,

any variables were studied with statistical tests to check whether or not relationships exist between the different responses with their gender.

More specifically, in order to measure mobbing, the Work Harassment Scale was used as a research tool and then the responses given by the participants were evaluated using different criteria, Baguena et al. (2011).

The first criterion applied, as used by Björkvist (1994), was to record the questionnaires that had at least one question/statement in response to "very often-4". In addition, the questionnaires were recorded in a single question / statement in response to "very often-4". The next criterion applied was the calculation of the sum of responses, Björkvist et al. (1994). The minimum sum in the questionnaire is 0 and a maximum of 96. According to the researchers, the threshold for the existence of workplace mobbing was defined  $\geq 25$ .

Then, a cut-off point was used as a criterion, so that the sums in the work harassment scale above this limit are indicative of exposure to work harassment behaviors, Baguena et al. (2011). The minimum sum in the questionnaire is 0 and the maximum sum is 96. According to the researchers, the cut-off point for the existence of moral harassment is  $\geq 45$ , while values  $\geq 52$  are indicative of severe attitudes of moral harassment. The range of responses given by participants in the Work Harassment Scale ranged from 0 to 71.

Finally, instead of the sum of the answers, the Mean Score of the answers to the questionnaire, Autrauskaite et al. (2011) was used as the criterion. In this way, the average value is calculated for all participants in the survey and which is the criterion for whether or not there is moral harassment. Thus, those with an average WHS above the overall average are harassed, and those who have an average WHS below the overall average are not harassed.

The reliability of the Work Harassment Scale is very satisfactory and shows a high internal cohesion index Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$  Björkvist et al. (1992).

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to the Eurofound survey, an average of 14% of workers in Europe have been harassed in the workplace. The corresponding rate in Greece is 12%, and this is much higher in Austria, the Czech Republic and Finland (over 20%). In southern European countries such as Cyprus, Italy, Spain and Portugal, rates are below 8%. When dealing with the most affected by the work harassment work sectors, higher rates are recorded in health and welfare services with over 20%. Also 20% of catering, accommodation and transport services are equally affected, while rates in the public administration, which are 18% and above the European average (Eurofound, 2015).

In a cross-cultural study conducted by the United Nations (Human Rights Commission), involving seven countries (Brazil, Bulgaria, Lebanon, Portugal, South Africa, Thailand and Australia), professional harassment of 30.9% was recorded in Bulgaria, 6% in South Africa, 10.7% in Thailand, 22.1% in Lebanon, 10.5% in Australia and 15.2% in Brazil, Di Martino et al. (2003).

Furthermore, in a comparative study, between 1,919 Finnish workers from the city of Vasa and 1,007 Spanish workers from the city of Valencia, the percentage of work harassment was 15% and 18%, respectively, Varhama et al. (2010).

These conclusions are supported by our research. Specifically, from the descriptive analysis of survey data as outlined in Table 1, it was found that the question «Have you been exposed to being given meaningless tasks?» has garnered most of the answers "very often-4". This finding highlights a problem that is very common in the public sector and involves positioning. The lack of job descriptions that reflects the requirements of each department or organization, the qualifications that the post holder needs, and the goals of the service, often creates problems for the smooth operation of the services. It is therefore necessary to map out the duties and tasks by position and specialization in order to maximize the skills of the employees and to avoid tensions and conflicts between the employees.

The questions/statements: «Have you been exposed to Accusations?» and «Have you been exposed to lies about you told to others?» have also garnered a high number of "very often-4" answers. These questions fall

into the category of social manipulation, while the question «Have you been exposed to belittling of your opinions» is part of the aggressiveness that appears logically (Björkqvist, Österman, Lagerspetz 1994).

TABLE I - WORK HARASSMENT ACTIONS

Questions	Rate (%)
<b>Have you been exposed to:</b>	
1. Unduly reduced opportunities to express yourself?	3,7%
2. Lies about you told to others?	<b>7,8%</b>
3. Being unduly disrupted?	4,8%
4. Being shouted at loudly?	3,7%
5. Being unduly criticized?	5,4%
6. Insulting comments about your private life?	2,4%
7. Being isolated?	3,7%
8. Having sensitive details about your private life revealed?	2,4%
9. Direct threats?	3%
10. Insinuating glances and/or negative gestures?	3%
11. Accusations?	<b>7,8%</b>
12. Being sneered at?	1,8%
13. Refusal to speak with you?	3%
14. Belittling of your opinions?	<b>6%</b>
15. Refusal to hear you?	4,8%
16. Being treated as non-existent?	2,4%
17. Words aimed at hurting you?	2,4%
18. Being given meaningless tasks?	<b>16,8%</b>
19. Being given insulting tasks?	4,8%
20. Having malicious rumors spread behind your back?	3%
21. Being ridiculed in front of others?	3%
22. Having your work judged in an incorrect and insulting manner?	0,6%
23. Having your sense of judgement questioned?	2,4%
24. Accusations of being mentally disturbed?	1,2%

Source: research data

Then, in our research, we tried to investigate the relationship of mobbing with gender. For the evaluation of the existence of mobbing, the sum of the answers to each questionnaire was used as a criterion, Björkqvist et al. (1994). The minimum sum in the questionnaire is 0 and a maximum of 96. According to Björkqvist, the threshold for the existence of moral harassment was defined as the sum  $\geq 25$ . Of the 164 participants in the survey, 76 (46.3%) gave answers that their sum was equal to or above 25.

Regarding the gender of employees, 13.8% of men report that ever or almost never (WHS 0-6 scale) were not exposed to work-related harassment, while the corresponding rate for women is only 3.6%. Almost 58% of women report that they are always exposed to work-related harassment, while for men the figure is 33.8% (Table II).

TABLE II - FREQUENCIES IN THE SUBCLASSES OF THE WHS BETWEEN THE GENDERS

	Subclasses of the Work Harassment Scale				
	0-6	7-12	13-18	19-24	$\geq 25$
<b>Male</b>	13.8 (11/80)	16.3 (13/80)	25.0 (20/80)	11.3 (9/80)	33.8 (27/80)
<b>Female</b>	3.6 (3/84)	4.8 (4/84)	14.3 (12/84)	19.0 (16/84)	58.3 (49/84)

Source: research data

Therefore, it appears that the relative risk of women for work-related harassment is  $58.3 / 33.8 = 1.7$ . Therefore, women are 1.7 times more likely than men to be harassed. Based on harassment individuals (27/80 men and 49/84 women), the probability of being a woman in the sample (harassment group,  $\geq 25$  in the work harassment scale) is  $64.5 / 35.5 = 1.8$ . Based on those who are not harassed (53/80 men and 35/84 women) the probability

of being a woman in the sample (non-harassment group,  $\leq 25$  in the work harassment scale) is  $39.7 / 60.2 = 0.66$ . The chances for women to be harassed are  $1.8 / 0.66 = 2.75$ , Hopkins (2002).

The prevalence of mobbing among countries is caused by two main reasons. The first concerns cultural differences. Some bullying activities can be made more tolerable in some countries than in others. These differences can lead to a distorted representation of reality, so that countries with a clearer awareness of the problem appear to be statistically "punished" compared to those who have given less attention to this problem, Ciby & Raya (2015). The second reason, which is even more fundamental than the first, because it affects the prevalence differences observed not only between countries but also in each country, is related to the method used by the researcher to assess harassment and strategies (frequency and behavioral behaviors) used to determine whether an individual is considered a victim of harassment or not, Baguena et al. (2011).

Mobbing is manifested by increased cooperative difficulties, reduced resistance to stress, emotional exhaustion, abuses, and psychological reactions. It can cause sleeping difficulties, depression, mania, sometimes aggressive behavior, physical fatigue and/or suicidal tendencies. If the harassment is not stopped immediately, the causes of the workplace are not explored and the measures are not taken, there is a risk that the problems will become so serious that it will require long-term medical and psychotherapeutic treatment, Salin (2003).

When a worker experiences aggressive behaviors, he experiences high levels of stress (Leymann, 1996; Zapf et al., 1996; Leymann and Gustafsson, 1996). As long as the management does not take the necessary measures to deal with these behaviors, the stress mechanism is in continuous activation, developing intense biological responses resulting in a mental or physical illness that will lead to a lack of security work (Mc Carthy & Mayhew, 2004; Einarsen et al., 2005; Zapf et al., 2005). In working environments in which long-term conditions of mobbing prevail, there is a gradual weakening of the workforce and an increased intention of the workers to leave the enterprise, Djurkovic et al. (2008). People who are considered to be key to the operation of the business due to their knowledge, skills and experience are more likely to abandon it either because they are the same targets of harassment or because they know that it happens to others (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2009; Rayner et al., 2002). This has a particularly negative impact on businesses or organizations that are forced to operate with reduced staff because of the difficulty they face in finding skilled executives. Harassment behaviors absorb daily much of the time and energy of employees, which in a healthy and pleasant work environment could be invested in productive and innovative work, Tehrani (2005).

The financial cost for a business of having workplace mobbing due to the process of seeking and training young workers is also very high. The image of the business is also reflected in its public image and plays a role in negative advertising, Heames and Harvey (2006). It is also defamation in the market and it negatively affects the potential interest of highly capable executives to work on it. In addition, the high economic costs due to long-term sick leave and early retirement, Di Martino et al. (2003) should also be taken into account.

The experience of mobbing has a serious negative impact on the victim's family as well, as the whole spectrum of negative feelings, chronic stress and the frustration experienced by the victim both by work and by himself are transferred to it, Rayner et al. (2002). The family is experiencing almost every day the impact of workplace mobbing on quality of life, health, social life and economic data. The decline in total productivity, long-term unemployment and income dependence, loss of productive workforce, early retirement on health grounds, the burden on the health system and social security systems, the further financial burden on the family are only some of the impact of workplace mobbing on the state and society, Di Martino et al. (2003).

It should be noted that the economic crisis experienced by Greece in recent years is a favorable condition for the development of mobbing in the workplace due to the radical change in work relations and job insecurity. This, combined with the high incidence of mobbing, makes it imperative to implement effective prevention and response policies in line with the European Union's requirements. The prevention of the phenomenon of mobbing, with the training and briefing of employees and employers, should be the main concern of all the factors of working life. The state, the trade unions and the research centers should be able to take adequate measures and rules to limit and protect both workers and businesses. Therefore, a strategic planning to prevent from work harassment should concern:

- proper work planning (avoiding workload)

- good administrative practices (conflict resolution)
- developing formal procedures for complaints and guaranteeing anonymity (appropriate management of unacceptable behavior)

It is the responsibility of the Public Service Administrations, to protect their employees, to take care of their mental and physical health. They should provide them with a calm and safe work environment that is a prerequisite for both the performance of the employee and the evolution of the service, Sancini et al. (2013).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In Greece, with the exception of Health, mobbing has been poorly studied. This study, is the first quantitative survey who was carried out, recording the behavior of mobbing in the wider public sector in Greece. The purpose of the study was to capture through quantitative research both the existence and the forms of mobbing as it occurs in all areas of Public Administration. More specifically, for the study of workplace mobbing, the questionnaire method was used in conjunction with different evaluation criteria to identify the victims of mobbing, based mainly on reports from the same victims (Cowie et al., 2002; Hoel, Rayner and Cooper, 1999; Randall, 2001; Coyne et al., 2003; Papalexandris & Galanaki, 2013).

Our descriptive research showed that the workplace mobbing, ranging from 12.8% to 46.3%, which are higher than the European average, depending on how the Work Harassment Scale (WHS) is assessed. Furthermore, the effects of gender were then investigated. The fluctuation analysis performed showed a statistically significant primary effect of gender on workplace harassment (WHS) values.

Mobbing has its roots in human weaknesses and organizational dysfunctions of a work environment. Its existence has a very high cost for the worker because the consequences are not limited only to the same as the occurrence of psychosomatic disorders but extend to his social and family environment. The consequences for public agencies are summarized in a fall in efficiency and productivity, lower employee satisfaction with work and degradation of services. It is necessary to develop a positive organizational culture for the development of an organization, all the individual characteristics of the employees, the leadership style and the characteristics of the organization that affect it. An important role in the prevention of workplace mobbing is the education and training of management executives (managers and supervisors) in human resources management and crisis management and conflict at work. It is also necessary to inform all civil servants through seminars and lectures so that they can recognize in a timely manner work harassment behavior.

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