

Fact sheet 1-D: “Activities or policy against violence and harassment” indicator



Supplement to the Tool for Identifying Psychosocial Risk Factors in the Workplace

Indicators included in the tool

1- Work context and prevention measures in place

- A. Job and work context
- B. Illness absenteeism and presenteeism
- C. Occupational health activities or policy

D. Activities or policy against violence and harassment

- E. Return-to-work activities or policy
- F. Work/life-balance activities or policy

2- Key components of work organization

- A. Workload
- B. Recognition at work
- C. Social support of immediate supervisors
- D. Social support of colleagues
- E. Decision-making autonomy
- F. Information and communication

What is workplace violence and harassment?

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines workplace violence as “any action, incident, or behavior that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, injured in the course of, or as a direct result of, his or her work”. Contrary to conflict, violence interferes with a person’s right to speak and is aimed at imposing one’s will on that person through force. Violence may be physical or verbal, and it can be directed toward people (e.g. colleagues, clients, subordinates, hierarchical superiors) or things (e.g. equipment, work tools, physical environment).

Harassment is a form of violence. In Québec, psychological harassment at work is governed by the *Act Respecting Labour Standards*. The definition given in the Act includes the notion of sexual harassment.

Section 81.18 defines psychological harassment as: “any vexatious behaviour in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures, that affects an employee’s dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that results in a harmful work environment for the employee. A single serious incidence of such behaviour that has a lasting harmful effect on an employee may also constitute psychological harassment.”

Section 81.19 says that every employee has a right to a work environment free from psychological harassment. Employers must take reasonable action to prevent psychological harassment and, whenever they become aware of such behaviour, to put a stop to it.

This legal definition of psychological harassment also includes the concept of discriminatory harassment, which is based on one of the grounds contained in section 10 of the *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*, namely, race, colour, sex, pregnancy, language, civil status, religion, sexual orientation, age, political convictions, ethnic or national origin, social condition or handicap.

How do violence and psychological harassment manifest themselves?

Violence and harassment may be committed by a manager towards an employee or by an employee towards his or her manager, between colleagues, by a client or a subcontractor towards an employee or by a group of people towards one or more individuals. This latter phenomenon is known as *mobbing*. Violent behaviour and harassment may be obvious and consist, for example, of physical assaults, shouting, insults, verbal or physical threats, or humiliating or hurtful comments. They may also be more insidious and consist of actions aimed at isolating, destabilizing or discrediting a person or attacking his or her reputation. Violence and harassment can also occur online, through social media in particular. Here are some examples of the ways in which psychological harassment can manifest itself:

- Interrupting a person constantly, preventing the person from expressing himself or herself, or shouting at him or her
- Ignoring, not looking at or not saying hello to a person
- Mocking a person's tastes, weak points, physical differences or judgment
- Assigning a person degrading tasks that are beneath his or her abilities
- Putting a person in a situation where he or she will fail, by assigning the person tasks that he or she cannot successfully perform
- Making degrading, racist, sexist or sexual comments

Why be concerned about this?

Tolerating uncivil behaviour, failing to act in situations of conflict or injustice and exercising management rights in an abusive fashion pave the way for violent behaviour

and harassment and contribute to creating a work environment that is harmful to people's health. Workers who report being psychologically harassed display higher rates of psychological distress, depressive symptoms, use of psychotropic substances and musculoskeletal disorders than do workers who are not exposed to such harassment. In addition, the presence of situations of violence and harassment are often associated with other psychosocial risk factors. Truly effective prevention requires analyzing organizational factors that foster the emergence of violent behaviour among the members of a workplace, and eliminating those factors at their source.

What practices should be implemented?

Here are some examples of organizational and management practices that are likely to have a positive impact on the "activities or policy against violence and harassment" indicator in the workplace:

- Adopt a zero-tolerance policy on violence and harassment in the workplace, communicate the policy to staff members and assess it
- Have a clear and known procedure for reporting situations of harassment and ensure that it is applied in a confidential and impartial manner
- Analyze situations that have been reported in order to identify other psychosocial risk factors that might be present
- Provide employees and managers with training on harassment, conflict resolution methods and healthy communication and offer them the tools they need to put this training into practice
- Frequently remind staff about the importance of respect and healthy communication

References and useful links

1. <http://www.irsst.qc.ca/prevention-violence/en/index.html>
2. <http://www.cnesst.gouv.qc.ca> (French only)
3. Vézina, M., E. Cloutier, S. Stock, K. Lippel, É. Fortin et al. (2011). *Enquête québécoise sur des conditions de travail, d'emploi, de santé et de sécurité du travail (EQCOTESST)*, Québec, INSPQ – IRSST – ISQ.