

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND WORKPLACE MOBBING IN WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

Silvana Jovcheska

American University of Europe – FON, North Macedonia, silvana.jovcheska@fon.edu.mk

Lazar Arsovski

American University of Europe – FON, North Macedonia, lazar.arsovski@fon.edu.mk

Zorica Siljanovska

American University of Europe – FON, North Macedonia, zorica.siljanovska@fon.edu.mk

Abstract: Harassment and mobbing in the workplace have become increasingly prominent issues at the global level. The motivation and productivity of employees, on the one hand, and the experience of deprivation of basic labor rights and freedoms, on the other—referred to as mobbing—are being more frequently linked. According to Leymann (1990), “Mental terror, or mobbing, refers to hostile and unethical communication that is systematically directed by one or more persons, primarily towards an individual. These acts occur frequently (almost daily) and over an extended period (at least six months), and due to this frequency and duration, they result in significant psychological, psychosomatic, and social distress” (Leymann, 1990). Inevitably, the question arises as to why this topic is being discussed more frequently now. Is it a new development in labor relations within organizations in the countries of the Western Balkans, or has this phenomenon been present for years or even centuries? Additionally, how openly has it been addressed in the past? The Western Balkan countries, with their long-standing status as nations in transition, naturally developed unique job structures and positions that carry specific characteristics. While under communism, there was little opportunity to observe the dynamics between “superiors” and “subordinate” employees, today, we see a different reality—one in which harassment and mobbing in the workplace are both publicly “expressed” and “concealed.” The key questions are whether the conditions within work organizations have evolved, and whether managers have made progress in implementing modern management models that emphasize transparency and addressing inappropriate workplace conditions. Or, alternatively, does the culture or ethnicity of the individual facing harassment and mobbing inhibit them from resisting managers and colleagues who violate their legally guaranteed rights?

For the purposes of this paper, research was conducted on the relationship between the personal experiences of individuals who are victims of mobbing, their personal and cultural identities, and the ways in which they address—or fail to address—the issue. Do employees from rural cultures in the Western Balkans develop the resilience and capacity to confront workplace harassment independently, adopting a so-called “African culture,” where subordinate and junior members of a community, in this case the workplace, are expected to comply with the demands and wishes of superiors at all costs? Or has the reality of organizations in the Western Balkans in the 21st century changed, showing progress in terms of public discourse, reporting, and the elimination of all forms of violence, harassment, and mobbing?

This paper emphasizes the importance of educating employees on the various forms of mobbing, how to identify and report them, and ensuring full protection within and outside work organizations. Through direct surveys conducted with employees who have experienced mobbing, a model outlining the stages of the mobbing process will be developed. Additionally, recommendations and conceptual solutions will be provided to help employees recognize mobbing, encourage reporting, and protect themselves from its negative consequences.

Keywords: mobbing, workplace harassment, management, organizational culture, employee protection

1. INTRODUCTION

Mobbing causes violation of human rights and dignity. Mobbing has a negative impact on the physical, mental and social health of the victims. The professional development and career of the victims is prevented in a mobbing situation. Mobbing is psychological harassment through certain repeated activities, whereby the person is degraded on various grounds. Mobbing directly affects the productivity, innovation, creativity and competitive advantage of organizations. Mobbing is harassment with the aim of threatening the integrity of the victims both on a professional, social and private level. Dealing with mobbing means taking care of a healthy work environment.

Workplace mobbing has been an ongoing problem throughout human history. The unprofessional ambitions of unprofessional holders of power and control and those who desire it led and still lead to a state of harassment in the so-called workplaces. mobbing. The victim is subjected to constant criticism and objections and is under constant control by the authorities at his workplace. According to Mujtaba and Senathip mobbing is the most urgent problem

that employees, managers and directors of most businesses can face in their daily activities (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020).

Research shows that mobbing leads to an unprofessional working atmosphere, the appearance of a high level of hierarchy, a lack of communication between employees, an inappropriate and unprofessional attitude on the part of management structures... In the most common case, mobbing is carried out by an employer, director, colleague or a group of colleagues, and the victim of this negative phenomenon is the worker or a group of workers. In a working environment where mobbing exists, the following prevails: a strict and hierarchical structure, greater concern for economic gain instead of interpersonal relationships, undefined work responsibilities and a great lack of professionalism.

2. FORMS OF MOBBING

Mobbing is usually carried out in a hidden form. For this purpose, it is necessary to educate employees on how to recognize mobbing. The most frequently observed forms of mobbing are:

- long-term mental harassment, torture, isolating pressure at the workplace;
- fear, "slow poison", experience;
- an unfair way to remove from the workplace: the hard-working, honest, expert, advanced employee;
- mental torture;
- exposing the employee to: humiliation, intimidation, gossip, incitement, ridicule, avoidance; workplace violence;
- a blow to self-esteem;
- strategy for maintaining the power of the incompetent;
- a way to achieve personal goals and interests at the expense of another. (pravdiko.mk, 2015)

The negative effects of mobbing cause a series of negative consequences both on the person who is the victim of mobbing and on the organization as a whole.

- The lack of appropriate and adequate communication results in a bad organizational climate and behavior. The victim is prevented from the basic human right - free expression, and non-verbal communication is ignored.
- Exclusion of the victim from the possibility of maintaining social relations – victims are isolated from all events, are not invited to meetings and are excluded from all company events.
- Attack on personal reputation - belittling the victim by mocking and mocking.
- Attack on work results - constant criticism of work results, the employee is evaluated low for the performance of work tasks, and at the same time suffers excessive control. The attitude towards the employee moves in two extremes, that is the complete taking away of the work and the abolition of the means of work ("empty chair" syndrome) or giving work responsibilities that exceed the expertise and ability of the victim.
- Attack on the victim's health - the victim is denied the rights to use rest, days off, there is no possibility of sick leave, etc.

The division into two types of mobbing, horizontal and vertical mobbing, is generally accepted.

Vertical mobbing is mobbing by superiors on subordinates, that is, by employers on employees or vice versa - by subordinates on superiors, which in practice is very rare.

Horizontal mobbing is between employees who are at the same organizational level.

Research shows that the initial trigger for mobbing is envy, jealousy and antipathy, and it is related to the personality characteristics of the perpetrator of the mobbing. As an activator of mobbing, a certain conflict usually appears, in the broadest sense of the word, which happened or which exists as a latent in the head of the perpetrator of the mobbing. At the basis of mobbing is the fear or feeling of danger felt by the perpetrator of the mobbing in relation to the victim. Mobbing begins with the fear of the perpetrator of the mobbing, and continues and is maintained because of the fear of the victim and other employees. During this process, a power imbalance between the perpetrator(s) and the target develops or worsens, making it difficult for the target to defend themselves (Einarsen et al. 2020)

What clearly contributes to the occurrence of mobbing in some work environments are some of the following problems: insufficiently transparent work atmosphere, deficiencies in internal information, inappropriate behavior of the management structures of the company, etc. These procedures are performed frequently (at least once a week) and over a longer period of time (at least 6 months). Due to the frequent repetition and long duration of the hostile behavior, the victim of mobbing has consequences of a mental, psychosomatic and social nature.

3. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND MOBBING

Throughout history there are countless examples of mobbing where "subordinate" employees submissively perform their work tasks believing that everything given as a task and behavior of "superiors" or colleagues with whom they share the workplace should be respected and accepted as is designed. The question we posed as the main hypothesis for the purposes of this paper was - to what extent does culture influence the acceptance or non-acceptance of

mobbing as a normal workplace situation and how many members of certain cultures have the courage and initiative to prevent this negative phenomenon, they report, and to initially recognize her. We have witnessed that in most cases the victims are not aware that mobbing is happening to them and do not mobilize their defense potential to oppose this negative phenomenon. In some cultures with the so-called "African culture" according to which the subordinate and younger members of the community should respect and at any cost realize the requests and wishes of the superiors, it is very difficult for the victim to recognize mobbing on his own. The conditions in the countries of the Western Balkans show us a specific, self-recognizable organizational behavior that in recent history has its roots in communism through the difficult and long-term transition to a "real" democracy that has not yet been reached. Communism imposed a form of organizational behavior where employees were left at the mercy of the professionalism of managers. The employees in most cases kept the mobbing silent due to the fact that they should be "loyal" to their boss and the organization as a whole. The idea was implanted in their consciousness that the dissatisfied manager is dissatisfied because of the unprofessionalism of the employees, and not because of his inability to respond professionally to the managerial challenges. In such cases, the ability of employees to recognize mobbing is reduced to a minimum.

The researches show that today we can boast of a better picture and progress in terms of recognition, reporting and dealing with mobbing situations in organizations in the Western Balkans region. The culture of unreserved respect for above, in the case of managers of doctors, is increasingly changing and today examples of public debate, recognition and disapproval of mobbing situations can be given. Globalization, and with it the openness of the new generations to western factors and the raising of awareness of democratic values and the right to freedom are moving in an upward positive direction. In the areas of the countries of the Western Balkans, the cultural habits of the population, the replenished upbringing, went in the race for the advancement of the "silence and "turning the head" of the victims due to the fear of the people - loss of the job or because of that criticism for "bad", the job done, so very often patinas become obedient and mobbing people. The percentage of the occurrence of mobbing does not show a decrease, because as in the past, so today there were and will be non-professional persons both in positions of managers and in charge of departments. Progress in relation to the issue of mobbing is seen in raising awareness that there may be a condition we are facing but we need to invest a lot of time in recognizing it, classifying it as such and remediating it accordingly. Any inappropriate reaction would mean delving deeper into the reasons and causes. There is a critical need for an updated synthesis of daily and multiple baseline outcomes and associated mechanisms to provide a comprehensive view of our current knowledge of the effects mobbing has on baseline and the work environment. (Boundrias et. al. 2021) Mobbing creates an organizational climate in which the victim is brought into a state of psychological imbalance and pressure and leads him to destructive behavior, thereby making decisions to leave the workplace. Mobbing at work means harassing, insulting or socially excluding someone and negatively affecting someone's work. (Einarsen et al, 2020). It is necessary for the management to permanently take care of the mental health of the employees and in the case of mobbing, react appropriately and promptly.

4. RESEARCH

The research done for the needs of this paper was conducted on 30 employees in 20 organizations working in the countries of the Western Balkans, who declared themselves as employees who had or have personal experience of victims of mobbing. Their personal experiences over a certain period of time (at least 6 months) gave us a picture of the emotional problems and physical experiences of mobbing in the workplace. The period of 6 months was set as a condition due to the fact that by definition mobbing is not considered an isolated event or in a case where both sides are of approximately equal strength in the conflict. (Rodander and Blomberg 2019)

The conducted survey showed that only a small number of respondents (8%) of the victims recognized the mobbing earlier than two months from its beginning. More than 82% experienced multiple forms of mobbing, and only 23% reported the mobbing to the authorities. Mobbing is equally present among women and men, as well as among all age groups of employees and with different working experience. Victims of mobbing are usually employees who are perceived by superiors as a certain type of threat.

Mobbers by definition are the people who do mobbing. From the obtained results of the research, a profile of a mobber specific for the work organizations in the countries of the Western Balkans is created. Mobbers are people who have a problem with their self-esteem, are not sure of their professional qualities or suffer from various types of frustrations, do not know love, are not innovative and creative, do not have a sense of empathy, do not know how to share with others, have a constant need to abuse colleagues... They are selfish, manipulative and duplicitous characters who enjoy bullying colleagues around them. Mobbers are mostly non-professional, party employees who without the necessary professional skills have reached a job position to which they cannot adequately respond, people who know how to court to get to certain job positions, or they are people who are mostly relatives or any kind of close liaison with the owners and senior managers of the organization. Mobbers cannot be easily recognized

by other employees as they put a lot of effort into skillfully covering up their psychological flaws with fake manners and behavior. Because of this, the victims have a difficult path - to have their real problems taken seriously by others.

The results obtained from the conducted research showed that employees in the countries of the Western Balkans have made progress in dealing with mobbing. The culture is changing and employees are more educated to recognize mobbing, more courageous to report it and cooperate with the authorities to solve the problem.

Model of mobbing process forms

As a result of the conducted research, a model of forms of mobbing process was prepared. It is important to emphasize that mobbing is a condition that begins quietly, on a small scale, and the end can be fatal in the life of the victim. The seriousness of the problem is at the highest level, and managers are the people who should promptly and professionally respond to the challenge called mobbing over employees in their organization. Addressing these issues requires implementing robust anti-mobbing policies and fostering a supportive and respectful workplace culture to mitigate these negative effects (Wong & Greenwood, 2023).

Harald Ege, is one of the most significant researchers of mobbing in organizations. He introduces the concept of the cultural dimension of the mobbing phenomenon. Cultural factors as significant to the mobbing process have been emphasized in various organizational theories and intervention strategies. The research done for the needs of this paper defined the stages of mobbing in organizations in the countries of the Western Balkans.

Mobbing takes place in four different stages.

- Phase zero - psychological conflict
- The mobster follows his "victim" very carefully, analyzes and studies his intellectual abilities and level of tolerance.
- Beginning of mobbing with previously thought-out tactics of harassing and belittling the victim: indirectly, almost imperceptibly, he does aggression to the victim who is secretly but very often put in a situation of being accused and humiliated. In this phase, the first psychosomatic symptoms appear - health problems, which can last for a long period, a feeling of insecurity, insomnia and digestive problems.
- Systematic and prolonged exposure to mobbing that gradually pushes the victim into a helpless situation. Given that the victim has already been accused, the mobber creates the ground for direct aggression such as a state of public underestimation, humiliation, ridicule, isolation and even the threat of punishment. The victim publicly admits that mobbing is happening, he is often absent from work due to illness, which leads to the appearance of suspicion among his colleagues, and the victim finds himself in an increasingly difficult situation.
- The individual psychophysical condition of the victim is severe. The victim is in a state of despair and hopelessness and depression appears. The victim loses control and is unable to rationally deal with his emotions, so the mobster presents him as mentally ill. The victim is put in the most difficult situation of intense, multifaceted mobbing.
- Severe depression makes the individual seek escape, so this stage is the stage of leaving work due to dismissal, voluntary leaving the workplace, early retirement, and in the most extreme case, suicide or the development of obsessive mania or violence towards the mobber. All this is a direct result of mobbing.
- Mobbing has a huge harmful impact both on the victims and on the organization as a whole. Recognizing, remedying and protecting against mobbing from the management side guarantees a modern organizational climate with motivated, innovative and creative employees.

5. CONCLUSION

Mobbing results in major destructive consequences that affect the psychological, personal and social life of the victims. Victims of mobbing are brought to chronic conditions of post-traumatic stress disorder, they suffer severe psychological problems: they lose self-confidence, anxiety and depression appear. They also have physical health problems: insomnia, headaches, weight loss...

Mobbing greatly affects the organizational climate, productivity and efficiency. Employees work in a toxic work environment with low morale, they are demotivated, job satisfaction is low, and turnover is increasing. and increased employee turnover intentions. In a state of mobbing, absenteeism from work has increased, the level of stress has increased, and dissatisfaction is at the highest level.

Successful management in the organizations that work on the soil of the countries of the Western Balkans means the ability to promptly recognize, act, protect and support victims of mobbing according to the culture of the nation. The profile of a mobster does not differ in a large percentage on a global level, but the profile of a mobber belonging to the cultures of the countries of the Western Balkans implies a person who, by certain specifics, is recognizable only

to connoisseurs of the cultures of these countries. To manage in a certain area, means to fully understand, know and support the culture of the population that lives and works in that part of the world. Mobbing is an extremely negative phenomenon, its minimization and efforts to permanently eliminate it are one of the most important strategies for any organization and culture.

REFERENCES

- Birkenfelde, S. (2020). Labas vēstis. 176. https://arodbiedribas.lv/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/lbas_176.pdf
- Boudrias, V., Trépanier, S-G., & Salin, D. (2021). A Systematic Review of Research on the Longitudinal Consequences of Workplace Bullying and The Mechanisms Involved. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* no. 56.
- Calabro, R.S. (2021). Mobbing at Work in Italy: A Need for Legislation on a Growing Problem
- Cornoiu, Teodora S., & Gyorgy, M. (2013). Mobbing in Organizations. Benefits of Identifying the Phenomenon. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 87 (1): 708–712
- Dupate, K. (2021). Tiesu prakse darba tiesībās; Eiropas Savienības tiesību un tiesu prakses, kā arī starptautisko konvenciju ietekme darba tiesību vidē (tiesu prakse, normatīvā regulējuma salīdzinājums. 2015.–2020. gads). https://www.ta.gov.lv/lv/tiesuprakses-apkopojumi-0?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F
- Einarsen, S. V., Hoel, H., Zapf, D., & Cooper, C. L. (2020) The Concept of Bullying and Harassment at Work. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research and Practice*, 3rd Edition, pp. 3–53. CRC Press.
- Kulakova, A.B. (2019). K voprosu izuchenija mobbinga s sisteme trudovih otnoshenij ES. <http://socialarea-journal.ru/article/28187/full>
- Mujtaba, Bahaudin G., & Tipakorn Senathip. (2020). Workplace Mobbing and the Role of Human Resources Management. *Business Ethics and Leadership* 4(1):17–34
- Rosander, M., & Blomberg, S. (2019). Levels of Workplace Bullying and Escalation – a New Conceptual Model Based on Cut-off Scores, Frequency and SelfLabelled Victimization. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 28 (6): 769–83. doi:10.1080/1359432X.2019.1642874.
- Wong, B., & Greenwood, K. (2023). The Future of Mental Health at Work Is Safety, Community, and a Healthy Organizational Culture. *Harvard Business Review*
- Zapf, D., Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., & Vartia, M. (2020). *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research and Practice*. Boca Raton: CRC Press
- <https://www.pravdiko.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/mobbing1.pdf>