An Empirical Study of Workplace Violence: Ideas on How to Stop It

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ABSTRACT

Zero-tolerance against Workplace Violence (WPV) should be the motto of every workplace. No worker should be a victim of such abuse. As such, organisations should ensure the existence of a safe working environment, and governments should introduce tough legislation to halt WPV. Furthermore, extensive research is required on ways to prevent WPV. The current research in this area is limited to defining WPV, finding where and when it occurs, and drafting prevention policies. But the actual way to prevent WPV remains a largely unexplored area. Brainstorming is an effective way to generate a pool of ideas on how to prevent WPV. This study generated a pool of ideas by conducting a survey on how to prevent WPV. The survey included 50 participants from various industries and found that 40% of the participants had experienced some kind WPV. This is an alarming statistic. Participants also shared their ideas on how to prevent WPV.

Keywords: Workplace Violence, Safe Working Environment

INTRODUCTION

The prevention of Workplace Violence (WPV) is an important aspect of Occupational Health and Safety and plays a vital role in the making of a safe work environment. Ignoring WPV can undermine the reputation of an organisation and that can have real and unfortunate consequences. In recent years, the understanding of the extent of WPV has heightened the need for its further study. The research to date has tended to focus on the definition of WPV, the types of WPV, the causes of WPV, and some research has been carried out to examine the occurrence of WPV in specific workplaces such as in health care. The question of preventing WPV, however, remains an important area that has not been fully researched. The aim of this study is to generate a pool of ideas on how to prevent WPV. To attain this aim, the study answers the following two questions: 1) what percentage of the research participants have experienced WPV? And 2) how can WPV be stopped or prevented? The first section of this paper is the literature review. The second section introduces the method of data collection for this study. The third section presents and discusses the analyses of the empirical data. Finally, conclusions are drawn and a suggestion for future research is made.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the literature review there is no common definition of WPV, and WPV has been defined differently in different contexts (Prevention of Workplace Violence DIY kit 2016). This is because WPV is an emerging concept in the domain of workplace safety. A consistent definition of WPV is thus needed for the future research (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health 2006). The World Health Organization has classified WPV into two primary domains. The first is as physical violence that includes a range of negative and harmful contact with other fellow employees, clients or third persons. And the second involves non-physical which is verbal abuse, threats, and intimidation or harassment. (Mitchell, 2017) defines WPV as 'threat of violence, against workers that could take place inside or outside the workplace environment, causing physical or non-physical incidents that may lead to serious harm to persons or mental distress.'

In both cases the performance of the employee could be affected. Federal Bureau of Investigation categorises WPV into 4 types:

WPV 1: unknown relationship with the offender and usual motive is a crime.
WPV 2: offender is a client, patient or consumer currently receiving some form of services.
WPV 3: known relationship, usually fellow employees, or senior employee.
WPV 4: not an employee but known to the victim and has a relationship (Romano et al., 2011).
This study attempts to reconcile the many definitions of WPV given by different researchers into one definition for the purpose of a conceptual framework. Simply, WPV is a situation wherein any type of employee in a work-related circumstance is in a state of physical or psychological suffering due to their interactions at work. WPV concerns were not given much prominence until the mid-1980s where the costs and serious implications of WPV significantly increased (Blasdel, 2008). WPV costs increase with payment to victims while productivity levels decline due to a disharmonious work environment (MSN, 2016). Another research finding indicates that WPV has contributed to much lost work time and illness since 1999 (Institute of Finance & Management, 2012). Except for a few studies, the bulk of the literature on WPV is published reports and guidelines by international and some government bodies. These reports are limited to the definition of WPV, the prevalence of WPV in some vulnerable industries, and some generic guidelines on how to prevent WPV. The act of violence in a workplace can be committed by various people, such as customers, suppliers, co-workers, managers, team leaders, supervisors, and any other person whom the employee interacts with in the workplace. Employees working in some industries such as health care, social services, public administration, education, law enforcement, retail, transport, and travel and tourism are at high risk of WPV due to the nature of their work (International Labour Organization, n.d.; US Department of Labour, 2006; Washington State Department of Labor & Industries Division of Occupational Safety and Health, n.d.). Needless to say, no employee is immune from WPV irrespective of the industry and type of work they engage in. Research on WPV is lacking in sophistication. Notwithstanding the increasing study of WPV, noteworthy lacuna in our knowledge of this domain remain (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2006).

METHODS
A variety of methods have been used to study WPV. Each has its advantages and drawbacks. It was decided that the best method to adopt for this study was survey. Surveys have many advantages; for example, through a survey data can be collected from a large number of respondents and survey is the only method where generalized information can be collected from almost any human population (DeFranzo, 2012; Mathiyazhagan & Nanda, 2010). A survey software such as Survey Monkey enables the user to analyse the data and extract reliable results. The survey for this study contained two questions. 1) Have you experienced WPV? 2) State your opinion on how to stop/prevent WPV? (This question was a semi-interview type question). A solicited email containing the Survey Monkey link was sent to (n=500) random participants from different industries and (n=50) responses were collected (10% response rate).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
The first question was-Have you experienced WPV? 40% of participants responded 'Yes' and 60% responded 'No'. The findings of this question corroborate with the following studies (Table 1). The percentage of participants exposed to WPV ranges from 25% to 91%. These high figures reveal that WPV is widespread and that governments and employers need to take drastic measures to eliminate this epidemic. This is even more so as the findings of the literature from 2003 to 2015 and the results of this study from 2019 suggest that the level of WPV has not been reduced.

TABLE 1 PREVIOUS STUDIES SHOWING THE PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO EXPERINCED WPV

Sample Size	Percentage of participants who experienced WPV	Year of study	Reference
1000 nurses with 46% response rate	91% of participants have experienced verbal abuse in the past month	2003	(Laura & Susan, 2003)
742 workers	43% of respondents being verbally threatened and 25% being physically assaulted	2005	(Privitera et al., 2005)
123 participants	70.7% of participants had an experience of physical assault and 89.4% had verbal assault experience	2010	(Franz et al., 2010)
1000 social workers	67% of participants have experienced at least one form of violence in the past twelve months	2010	(Koritsas, Coles & Boyle, 2010)
271 participants	found 80.4% from 271 participants exposed to WPV	2012	(Kitaneh & Hamdan, 2012)
422 Jordanian nurses	70% of participants was exposed to verbal abuse	2014	(Abu AlRub, & Al-Asmar, 2014)
1404 healthcare workers	51.64 % of the respondents had an experience of WPV in previous year	2015	(Lin et al.,2015)

The studies under review did not provide reasons for these alarming figures, but the reasons can be correlated with the causes of WPV. As (International Labour Organization, n.d.) shows, due to the complexity of WPV it is rather difficult to establish the causes of it. However, past cases of WPV such as disgruntled employees, angry spouses, or unhappy, desperate, or people suffering from mental illness can provide an understanding of some of the causes of WPV. An understanding of the causes of WPV is a vital precursor to any effective prevention and control programmes (International Labour Organization, n.d.). There has been no clear understanding of the contributing factors, nor a specific model to resolve the increasing instances of WPV. One option is to review the WPV in the context of each workplace in which it occurs.

The second question was, what can we do to stop WPV? This study is the first of its type to generate a pool of ideas on how to stop WPV. Interestingly, some ideas suggested by the participants are based on their own experience of WPV. The common phrases used in their responses were as follows:

Access to legal advice on WPV
Public forum on WPV
Strict rules
Safe working environment
Implement prevention policies
Creating awareness
Having a reporting system
Educate employees
Instil a culture of mutual respect
Provide avenues for counselling
Recognition of good behaviour
Providing multiple layers of communication
Reporting WPV to external authorities
More respect for diversity and multiculturalism

The answers to this question are congruous with the findings of (Blaikie, n.d; Laura & Susan, 2003; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2006; OSHA Fact Sheet, n.d; Peterson, Brasch & Ficek, n.d; US Department of Labour, 2006; & Washington State Department of Labor & Industries Division of Occupational Safety and Health, n.d.). In contrast to earlier findings, however, no study provided a more robust finding that covered the experience of participants from multiple industries. The following table shows some prominent verbatim responses. These verbatim responses validate the point that there is public outcry against WPV.

The responses suggest that workplaces should be safe, and the employees who have experienced WPV should have access to legal advice. Moreover, education, awareness and prevention policies should be used to avoid WPV.

TABLE 2 PROMINENT VERBATIM RESPONSES

"Do a public forum about violence in schools and workplace."

"Create strict rules for employees and to remind them through training about the consequences of getting involved into violence. If the manager is involved in violence towards their subordinate, then the manager should be sacked immediately and should face the court of law."

"Make sure all staff feel safe with rules and regulations. All employers must ensure that their employees are in a safe working environment and ensure they do not feel both verbally and physically abused at any situation."

"Implement necessary policies."

"Creating Awareness Providing Trainings both to senior and junior management and also setting procedures on how to avoid it or in case of experiencing such issues, what to do about it Developing Policies and best practices."

"Have a reporting system in which the victim is supported in making complaints without negative ramifications where people in power are held immediately accountable for their actions."

"Educate employees, provide training and provide relevant overseeing."

"A proper reporting line for those who feel threatened, be it within organisation or external. I witnessed happen in workplace in Sydney when working with other organisation before and it was very effective because employees have an outlet for grievance reporting."

"Prevention is the key. a. Promote teamwork b. instil a culture of mutual respect c. Provide avenues for counselling e.g. anger management d. Recognition of good performance and good behaviour."

"Train frontline managers properly on how to manage people not promote people just because they have been there longer or their face fits, also make it an instant dismissal for any offences. training on work place behaviour."

"My definition of workplace violence is not physical but blocking access to professional development, scholarship (I am an academic) and is more emotional abuse and lacking ethics from management. To stop such workplace violence there needs to be a structured environment that included a panel or mentoring program that provides access to professional and scholarly development. An individual line manager can block potential and access based on race, gender or inadequacies in his/her own qualifications and power. So structure and providing multiple layers of communication is an important way to stop workplace violence."

"Report it to organization, unions and Work Authority as appropriate."

"Have rigid Policies and Procedures in place within an organization."

"Protect minorities, education and introduce more serious penalties by the government for discrimination."

"More respect for Diversity and Multiculturalism ensure that the workplace is safe and has Policies and procedures in place."

"Access to training and alertness is a key factor in helping to prevent violence."

"Education and report to senior management, preferably MD."
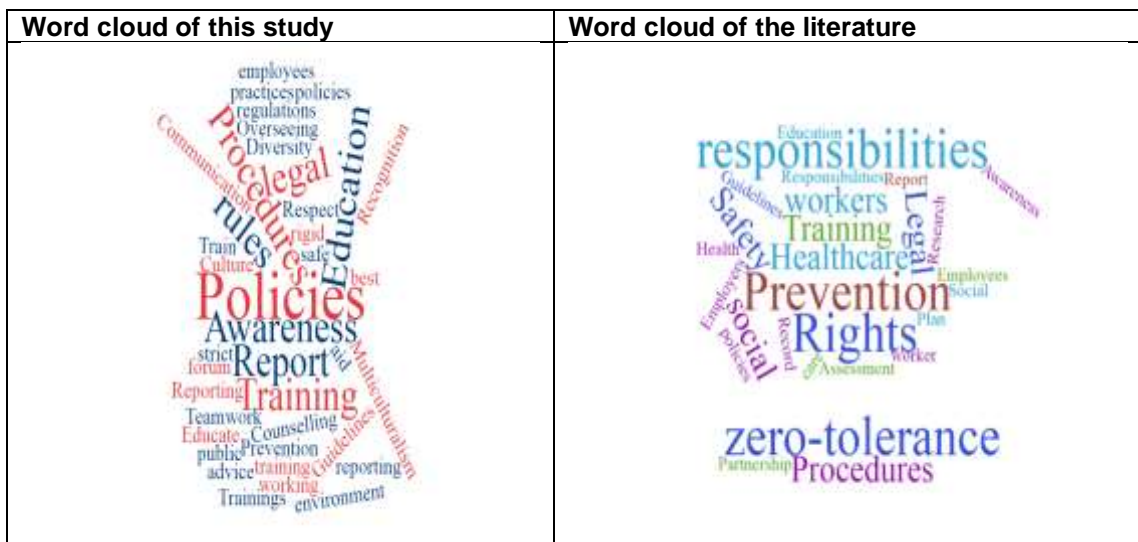
"Have proper Policies in place so that any instance can be quickly dealt with."

"Stronger working guidelines."

"Have open communication."

An advantage of a word cloud is that one can visualise action words. The following figure shows the action word cloud of the responses from this study and other studies (Abu AlRub, & Al-Asmar, 2014; Koritsas, Coles & Boyle, 2010; Laura & Susan, 2003; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2006; OSHA Fact Sheet, n.d; Peterson, Brasch, & Ficek, n.d, US Department of Labour, 2006, Prevention of Workplace Violence DIY kit, 2016; U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d, Washington State Department of Labor & Industries Division of Occupational Safety and Health, n.d & Workplace Safety & Prevention Services,2014) Action words such as policies, education, awareness, report, training, procedures, culture, and communication from this study and action words such as prevention, zero-tolerance, training, rights and responsibilities, procedure, and awareness from previous studies assert the doctrine of 'prevention is better than cure'. Two distinctive notions that emerged from the findings of this study are open communication and strong organisational culture. It is somewhat surprising that these important notions were not noted in previous studies. An organisational culture that promotes friendship, teamwork, and flexibility in which employees enjoy working rather than being under stress is a kind of culture that is likely to be free of WPV. In the same vein, open communication is also impactful as it promotes team building, sharing of the ideas, and friendship.

FIGURE 1 WORD CLOUD OF THIS STUDY AND THE LITERATURE

Word cloud of this study	Word cloud of the literature

CONCLUSION
This study explored WPV in different industries. The aim of this study was to generate a pool of ideas on how to prevent WPV. Forty percent of participants indicated that they experienced WPV. Participants made valuable suggestions on how to prevent WPV. The suggestions asserted the doctrine of 'prevention is better than cure'. Practical recommendations derived from this study are: in order to prevent WPV organisations should have strong prevention policies in place, educate their employees, and promote open communication. The empirical findings in this study provide a new understanding of WPV and offers ways to prevent it. The sample was nationally representative of WPV experience but missed participants from other countries. Further research might fill the lacuna that exists and that is to investigate the causes of WPV.

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