Literature review: Gender and workplace bullying. Gender matters when we talk about Bullying, Harassment and Mobbing

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Literature review: Gender and workplace bullying.

Gender matters when we talk about Bullying, Harassment and Mobbing

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Empirical evidence has demonstrated that bullying, harassment and/or mobbing in the workplace can happen in any type of organisation, public, private or non-profitable (Rayner and Cooper, 1997). Worrying figures show that the number of people subjected to bullying, harassment and/or mobbing at work has escalated in the last two decades. In spite of the numerous pieces of research, investigations and publications on the topic; the issue has not been tackled and it is still far from being eradicated. In 2005 Personnel Today and the Andrea Adams Trust carried out one of the biggest surveys regarding bullying in the workplace within the HR professionals in the UK, the results obtained revealed that more than 70 per cent of respondents had witnessed bullying in their organisation, cited by Suff and Streblor, (2006). Another survey lead by Rayner and Cooper (1997) showed that 53 per cent of participants had been subjected to bullying at some point in their working lives.

There is not an absolute or exclusive definition for each of these terms, bullying, harassment or mobbing, this lack of consensus, is reflected in a wide variety of definitions and interpretations. This variety of interpretations is hampering an effective solution that eliminates this issue from the workplace. Moreover, the research and study of the phenomenon is complex, as it requires the involvement of different disciplines such as business management, Human Resources Management, Industrial Relations, sociology, psychology etc. (Owoyemi, 2010). Namie and Namie (2009) defined bullying as the recurrent, cruel verbal mistreatment of a person by one or more workers.

According to Andrea Adams, cited in Spiers (2003), bullying is the misuse of power to repeatedly criticise, humiliate and undermine a target. Einarsen (1999) described bullying in the workplace as a recurrent, aggressive and negative practice directed at one or more workers. A more subtle definition was given by Glendinning (2001) whom defines it as a repeated less favorable treatment of a person by another in the workplace, which might be considered as unreasonable and inappropriate. According to Cooper et al. (2011), bullying is a systematic mistreatment of an individual in the workplace, which causes psychological problems to the victim. The victims of bullying can be a supervisor or subordinate (vertical bullying) or a co-worker (horizontal bullying), the victims of mobbing are normally targeted by a mixed group lead by an individual.

Bullying in the workplace is an ambiguous concept, since it definition focuses on the negative and recurrent behavior that one or more individuals (bullies) inflict on others (victim). To frame all the possible forms of negative behavior is a difficult task, since those are numerous; the negative conduct can be obvious in some occasions such
as pushing, shouting etc. but on others occasions, it can be more subjective and subtle; this will be more difficult to prove, as it is based on perceptions and what can be considered offensive by one individual, may be not interpreted the same way by another individual. The subjectivity element of bullying has obstructed the legislative recognition of the phenomenon in the workplace.

The first investigations about bullying in the workplace date from “1976” with the work of Brodsky and his seminal book titled “The harassed worker”, nevertheless this work went unnoticed until a decade later when bullying become one of the most common problems at the workplace, today his work is mentioned in numerous investigations. In the 80s, Scandinavian investigators as Leymann and Gustavsoon studied mobbing at work and its repercussions but their work was not translated into English until the late 90s.

There exist minor differences between the concepts of harassment, bullying and mobbing and the three of them have been used indistinctly for some scholars (Zapf and Einarsen, 2005) (Leymann, 1996) to refer to the same phenomena. The term harassment has not been subjected to as many interpretations as bullying, perhaps due to its definition is enshrined in the Equality Act 2010 “Harassment unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual’s dignity or creating and intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual on the grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity”.

The term mobbing has its origin from the English word mob, and is used to describe a group aggression (Munthe, 1989). Taking into consideration the meaning of the word roots, we could consider mobbing as the repetitive and psychological abuse perpetrated against a victim by a group of people in the workplace. Leymann (1996), and Vandekeckhove and Commers (2003), used the term mobbing to refer to a group of individuals persecuting and intentionally harming individuals/others in the workplace. Namie (2009) stated that bullying starts as one on one conflict but it always escalates to involve others in a campaign of harm against a victim. There has been little research about a person being subjected to mobbing in the workplace (attacked repeatedly by a group of people); this phenomenon should be studied in more detail since, people, individuals rarely act in isolation. We are continually being influenced and trying to influence individuals around us, adding them to our cause, to our beliefs, to our group etc. some of the influences take the form of malicious behaviors such as gossiping, attaching labels to people etc.

Despite of the numerous investigations about bullying, the reinforcement of new legislation and the establishment of anti-bullying policies within organizations, the aggression in the workplace is increasing silently and is the plague in our society (Namie, 2009). Vandekeckhove and Commers (2003) describe it as the pathology of the contemporary organizations. Bullying is not just in the schools, it is on the internet, in our workplace, in our neighborhood etc., it is present in different spheres of our life and in every and each of them, the terminology used to define it, the behaviors, the characteristics, the perpetrators, the victims and the consequences share an incredible amount of similarities. The effects of bullying are very similar for women and men, low self-esteem, stress, depression, paranoia and anxiety, (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2001).
Bullying was not born in the workplace; it will not die there either. Leymann, (1990), stated that bullying behavior is something common in our everyday life and it causes humiliation or degradation to a person when it happens recurrently. Why this is happening, if mobbing is in the majority of the cases, a transgression of both the UK Human Rights Act and of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article 3: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment".

Vandekeckhove and Commers (2003), claimed that bullying can affect people from different backgrounds and with different cultural levels. Spiers (2003) considered that harassment is to some extent, widespread through the whole organizational structure and cited the investigation of Hoel & Cooper (2000), whom concluded that the rates of harassment are spread around a 10% in each of the levels of an organization. The fact is that Mobbing has reached unimaginable dimensions and nothing seems to indicate that the level will decrease in the near future. Despite the numerous reports studying the psychological and physical damage that bullies can do to a victim (Owoyemi, 2010), and the costs that it generates to organizations, the bullying rates in the workplace are still increasing. Victims of mobbing reported lower levels of job satisfaction and higher stress (Quinn, 1999).

To address effectively mobbing, different organizations, trade unions, universities, colleges, businesses, corporations etc. should concentrate efforts and work closer to eradicate the problem, as it is unlikely to eliminate bullying from the workplace when it is still present in streets and/or the education system.

Plausible and inexpensive solutions such as the following, should reduce and eradicate bullying at work; covering in detail the topic in business management books and in training of future managers; regular talks regarding the issue to employees by external personal; organizations should held conferences periodically regarding the issue and look to increase the awareness of bullying and the harm it has upon the victims. Both schools and colleges are continually supplying the market with a skilled workforce, these organizations over all, should have a zero tolerance of bulling together with a 0% rate of bullying at work within the organization.

According to Owoyemi (2010) bullying progresses from the school yard to the work yard. Zapf (1999) claimed we cannot apportion blame to organizations for harassing people; it is people who harm people. Nevertheless the organization’s main resource is people (Armstrong, 2006) and individuals have different values, perceptions, aptitudes, habits and beliefs. So, to reach the core of the problem we should start from the smallest but most complex piece, the individual, followed by the team, the organization and lastly to society. Organizations, businesses are going through a process of change, a shift toward a more global and competitive environment, where their principal aim is to maximize profits, at the same time that they attempt to project an ethical and friendly image to customers, being environmental friendly, supporting certain charities, sponsoring certain events, etc. Nevertheless when an organization has to deal with a bullying issue, usually their coping strategy is far from being ethical, they attempt to dismiss the issue as quickly as possible, look to censor any type of publicity or involvement from a third person and if possible, they eliminate the victim of bulling from the current workplace as they are typically considered a troublemaker, according to Rayner (1998) cited in Vandekeckhove & Commers (2003). Every employer has the obligation to provide a healthy environment for their
employees, nonetheless when they decide to ignore a bullying issues raised within their organization they are not providing a healthy environment and in certain way they providing an environment in which bullying prospers, therefore it is not strange, that bullying rates have increased in last few years.

In an investigation carried out by Unison (2009) 34.5% of the workforce participating in the investigation affirmed to have been bullied in the last six months, in contrast with the 18% that had been reported in 1997, not one organization has reported publicly an issue of mobbing/bullying raised against them by an employee, rather they hide the issue and dismissed the victims claims as the most effective and efficient method of addressing the issue of bullying. Organizations have policies available to tackle the issue of bullying, yet these policies have proved to be unserviceable, as they are not implemented/ driven by the correct culture within the organization. Davenport et al. (1999) recognized three main factors prevalent in workplace mobbing, bad communication, dysfunctional organizational structure or culture and external environment.

**Gender and bullying in the workplace**

To date, there exist numerous investigations about gender in the workplace, however little research has been conducted in regard bullying and gender at work. Gender has been studied in relation to job satisfaction (Brown et al., 1998), career success (Powell et al., 1992) job promotion and salary (Donna et al., 1999), (Lazear et al., 1990). In the last 40 years, the rates of women joining the labor force have risen dramatically, (Brush, 1992), changing the structures of organizations and of the society as a whole. Currently it is difficult to analyze and study bullying in the workplace in relation to gender, as the differences between both, women and men are still not recognized and/or admitted by academics and society. According to Simpson and Cohen, (2004) bullying is directly related to gender and this issue should be analyzed further and be considered in a gendered frame.

To talk freely about differences between women and men, other than the biological (sex), can result in a war of the sexes or an accusations of prejudices/discrimination. There still exists many issues, taboos and preconceptions around this topic and the existing literature suffers from a lack of objectivity and certain predispositions, thus, some academics when referring to gender differences, regard these as false, classifying them as simple stereotypes. Academics that adopt a passive or neutral-gender attitude should consider then, why the incidence of woman bulling other women is considerably higher than women bullying men or why industries with a predominance of women in the workforce, such as in health care or education present rates of bullying well over the national average and are regarded as high risk working environments, (Di Martino et al., 2003).

Acknowledging the differences between gender, does not mean to consider one sex superior to the other, both genders have their own strengths and weaknesses, and knowing them better will provide paradoxically more equality and should contribute to the elimination of the inclination of women being overly aggressive and over competitive towards other women.

It is also important to mention the contribution, the role that human resources departments have with interpersonal conflict in the workplace, the individuals or
workforce selected by the human resources department, come to form part of the business organizational culture and structure. Independently of the role to cover, the characteristics that any business seeks in any individual are easy going, energetic, enthusiastic and assertive. Actually, human resources confuse in many cases aggressiveness with assertiveness. An assertive person is direct, respectful toward others and achieves personal goals while at the same time creates positive environment (Reece et al., 2008) whilst an aggressive person likes to intimidate and dominate others (Namie & Namie, 2009), and aggressive behaviour allows bullies to feel in control.

**Female workers as victims of bullying**

In the last decades the role of the women in families, in the society, in organizations has changed radically, thus women roles have undergone a profound change, they have gone from performing largely domestic chores to predominate in some industries of the market, currently some sectors within the labor market are dominated disproportionately by women, (World Bank, 2012). In the last few years media, surveys and different investigations have aimed to bring about awareness of the high rates of women bullying other women in the workplace (WBW), cited in (Fox & Lituchi, 2012) however there is a reluctance by researchers, businesses and society in general to acknowledge or even investigate/recognize this phenomena.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions survey, 2007 observed that women are more subjected to bullying than men across the member countries of the EU. Female workers are more prone to be victims of violence at work than male co-workers, (Cortina et al., 2001). Namie (2007) pointed out that the female workers bully other women 2.5 times more regularly than they bully male workers. The National Survey of the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) lead by Zodgy in 2011 and cited in Fox and Lituchi (2012) found that women bullies target other women in 80% of the cases whilst men in 20%. In an article in the New York Times (2009) Peggy Klaus defined the increasing occurrence of woman bullying other woman in the workplace as the “the pink elephant” in the room, highlighting the aversion of other females, organizations and investigators to recognize or debate this threatening issue. These findings are consistent with the theory that woman bullying woman is currently a common practice in our workplace, does this imply that women are perpetrating more acts of bullying than men in the workplace?

A wide range of literature considers females as passive, self-controlled and non-aggressive individuals. Nevertheless, the reality has proven to be different, as recent research in the workplace has demonstrated that women can be as aggressive as men, while it is true that both sexes, women and men normally display a different type of hostility. Men use more often than women, a direct type of aggression also called “rational appearing aggression” (Osterman, 2010) whilst females perpetrators prefer to use an indirect type of aggression, also termed as “social manipulation” (Osterman, 2010). Namie (2009), stated that physical or verbal harm are forms of displaying direct aggression whereas ignoring, isolating victims are forms of displaying indirect aggression. (Leymann, 1996) women practice mobbing actions such as gossiping, slandering and encouraging other individuals to carry out mobbing. It deserves being emphasized and briefly analyzed the term used by
Osterman (2010), “social manipulation”, to refer to common practices adopted by women, when bullying others. This statement, this terminology confirms/recognizes that women usually show hostility towards a victim, using the cover or anonymity of a group. Forms of social manipulation are those based on spreading rumors, gossiping, isolating, etc. and only can be exercised when there exists a group, a network of people or a clique. Social manipulation, clique and mobbing are three concepts closely interrelated thus, social manipulation are tactics used by bullies (such as spreading malicious rumors, gossiping, isolating individuals). When there exists more than one bully, we are referring to mobbing rather than bullying (both excluding and gossiping, embroils more than one person, one individual by himself/herself does not have the capacity to make another individual feel isolated nor the capacity to spread rumors, as this necessarily involve more than one person, the target would feel uneasy, uncomfortable but never excluded, it requires a group of people to isolate someone else), all this occurs in a determined group frame, cliques at work, in this case. Osterman, 2010, stated that indirect aggression is more effective among social networks.

There is considerable research dedicated to analyze the reasons behind individuals targeting others in the workplace and those factors which make them to choose certain individuals above others (targets). However (Adams 1992, cited in Rayner, 1997) stated that different bullies have different reasons, and being a target of bullying can happen to anyone. (Osterman, 2010) claimed that bullies are individuals who experience discomfort and social anxiety. For (Cartwright and Cooper, 2008) concern and low self-esteem are common characteristics of many targets of bullying. (Namie & Namie, 2011) stated that bullies victims rarely will confront aggression. (Coyne et al, 2000 cited in Cartwright and Cooper, 2008) stated that individuals who are introverted, neurotic, hardworking and submissive are more likely to be bullied. (Rayner and Cooper, 1997) claimed that some individuals are bullied because they are considered difficult or different from those who for the social group. These characteristics define what personalities are more likely to become targets of mobbing at work, independently if they are women or men. Thus, the reality is that women in any work organization, simply by the fact of being female, would have more chances of being bullied than men, moreover if a woman is introverted, shy and non-aggressive, it is not unrealistic to say that, she will be subjected to bullying at some point of her working life.

According to this, if it is real that certain personality characteristics have a predisposition (shy, introverted and friendly) to be targeted by bullies then, the bully must have a reciprocal personality, it means that the bully would have conversely an aggressive, cowardly and despotic personality, in addition to exhibiting a low degree of empathy towards their victims. In none of the cases, confronting and challenging the bully would be easy but the challenge would almost be impossible when the bullying is practiced by a group. The bullying will involve more people against the target, (Namie, 2009). When one person is being subjected to mobbing by a group of people, it is difficult for the victim to put across their case and normally is labeled as a troublemaker and in the end ultimately leaves the company in the majority of the cases. According to (Leymann, 1997 cited in Vandekeckhove & Commers, 2003) top managers tend to solve mobbing issues by removing the victim from the workplace.
Female workers as perpetrators of bullying

Are female workers perpetrating more acts of bullying than men in the workplace? This is a difficult question to answer, as gender is not distributed equally within different industries, there are no official statistics or rates of bullying published by organizations. Contributing to this, investigations carried out on this phenomena, have obtained mixed results. Some of them support the theory that men are more likely to be perpetrators of bullying than women (Namie et al., 2009), (Cooper & Rayner 1997), while others purport that women are more likely to be the bullies whilst others still claim that there is not difference between the rates of bulling committed by men/women. Thus, the Unison bullying report (2009) lead by Rayner, observed that women bullying occurred in around 70% of the cases in the workplace whilst male bullying was about 45.5%, therefore females workers are more likely to be identified as bullies than their male counterparts.

Adding to this the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions survey, 2007 observed that violence at work is most common in sectors where women constitute the majority of the workforce. According to Abbot et al. (2005), female workers are the majority of the workforce in sectors or areas such as education, health care or retail. In all these sectors, the rates of bullying have been staggering, thus 90% of teachers have experienced bullying in the workplace (The Guardian, 2011). In a NHS survey by (Quine, 1999), it was observed that in 65% of cases, the bully was a woman, in 27% the bully was a man and in 8% was a mixed group.

These quantitative investigations are highlighting the importance and the need to investigate further this common practice in the workplace of “women bullying women”, the figures above are confirming the fact that in more than half of the bullying cases, women attack other women. Rayner and Cooper, 1997 observed that female workers rarely bullied male workers. It seems that despite the multiple difficulties and inequalities that women have suffered and despite the progress and successes that women have achieved through recent history, (Ragins et al., 1998), the new century, and decade has a new challenge for women, to eliminate the spread of those behavior that constitute bullying and its various forms from the workplace.

Recent research in leadership and management highlights the existence of gender differences in the methods that females and males approach procedures (Haar et al., 2010). Thus, Smith and So (2003), observed that the males and females differ significantly when making decisions; (Lituchy and Wiswall, 1991) found differences in the way they communicate. Harriman (1996), stated that female and male workers show a different aptitude to power and to progress in the organizational ladder. Women have also more difficulties in balancing family life and work (Lirio et al, 2007) and also display a tendency towards lesser independence and confidence and greater persuability than male counterparts (Harriman, 1996). Research reveals that women are more sensitive and more strongly to negative feedback or disapproval than men (Roberts and Nolen Hoeksema, 1989). Both genders, male and female react worst when the negative feedback is delivered by a female supervisor than if it was delivered by a man, (Atwater et al, 2008). Schieman et al, 2008, observed that women managed by another woman or a mix-gender team
suffered more anxiety and stress than women managed by a man. Whereas for men there was no difference between being supervised by a man or a woman however they felt distress when the team was a mixed gender team. Although these investigations help to understand the differences between both genders, they should go further and investigate differences in personality, perception and behaviour etc.

Women perceive things and behave differently than men in many spheres of life, not just in those relating to management or leadership. Moreover, literature is continually investigating different topics and related them individually to one or the other gender, thus, there is extensive research about women as consumers (Huddleston & Minahan, 2011), women and politics (Ford, 2010), women and heath (Wenger et al., 1993) etc. Throughout their life, women form/fix themselves to different social groups (cliques) to nurture their social needs at work, at university, within the neighborhood etc. According to (Lutgen-sandvik, 2009) cliques are formed by individuals who share mutual views, interests or objectives. Those cliques formed at work are known also as informal organizational structures and can be a barrier for new workers, cliques exclude certain individuals, isolating and out-casting them, (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2009).

The individuals outside of these cliques “the outsiders” are people that do not fit in; either because their beliefs, culture and/or behavior are different than those of the clique’s members. An outsider is always a potential target of bullying but the potential is far greater, if the outsider is a female. Although the cliques at work can be formed by men and women the literature links them more to women than to men. Thus, there exists extensive literature regarding and relating cliques to female teenagers, such as “Mean Girls Grown Up: Adult Women Who Are Still Queen Bees, Middle Bees, and Afraid-to-Bees by (Cheryl Dellasega, 2010)” “Queen Bees And Wannabes: Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends & the new realities of Girl World by (Rosalind Wiseman, 2011) etc. (Dellasega, 2010) stated that some women never outgrow these vile behaviors, and turned into bullies and aggressive adults. Thus, (Bjorkqvist, Osterman and Hjelt-Back, 1994 cited in Osterman, 2010) found that women used more often techniques of social manipulation to bully others, than men.

Female teenager from an early age are taught to compete ferociously against other females, labeling, criticizing, gossipping, judging and sticking firmly to their first impression, encouraging other members to join their cause etc. Potentially, the manner in which women have grown up in society has something to do with this nasty and long lasting habit, that after been nurtured for years is difficult to leave outside of the workplace. Namie & Namie, 2009, stated that women are taught to judge other girls, looking at physical appearance and judge them on their first impression.

The causes of bullying at work have been extensively investigated; however the reasons of why women bully other women have not been the subject of wide interest. It seems that the behaviors that females learn as teenagers, those mentioned above regarding rivalry, spread of malicious rumors etc., eventually become incorporated into their behaviour and even personality, and are difficult to abandon in adult life. The motives of bullying can be diverse, these depend a great deal on the personality of the bully; lack of leadership, insecurity, jealousy, a means
of stress release, the need for power and control so as to dominate others (Namie and Namie, 2009) etc.

All these arguments are showing the direction we need to take to comprehend why women target other women. The reasons should not be searched for in discrimination or inequalities suffered by women in comparison with men, as this will fall beyond the truth and will not provide a solution to the problem.

It is vital to emphasize that the core of the problem needs to be discussed and investigated without sentiment or concern, prejudices or entering into a battle of the sexes. In our effort to get equality at work, women are abusing and mistreating the rights that their mothers and grand-mothers achieved. Ignoring this issue and denying gender differences, only will contribute to a more uncivilized workplace and hamper women efforts to achieve higher status and positions within the workplace environment. According to (Nicolson, 1997) women receive little support in their career progress from other female colleagues. It seems rational and reasonable to obtain recognition and status in the workplace, once women demonstrate they deserve it, as result of displaying good working practices and professionalism at every moment.

Conclusion

“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power”, Abraham Lincoln.

In the last two decades there have been numerous publications and investigations about bullying in the workplace, research has focused on the issue from different perspectives such as, predisposition of personalities, culture of the organisation, imbalance of power, health consequences etc.

Nevertheless, there exists an enormous reluctance and an aversion to investigate gender and bullying in the workplace, the studies available about the subject are extremely limited and often are characterised by a lack of objectivity. Pursuing further this investigation will require gathering, collecting and merging information from multiple resources and crossing diverse disciplines. In the last decades of the 20th century different academics investigated gender differences but their conclusions are currently considered as stereotypes, without any value, which reflect a reality far from the truth. Gender differences exist and these need to be recognised and acknowledged, this does not mean that women are better than men or vice versa, this means that each gender has their own potential and has its own strengths and weaknesses. Are we afraid of being discriminated by men? Perhaps we should be more afraid of the hostility and violence than many women practice towards their female colleagues.

Investigating or acknowledging gender differences in the workplace is a very controversial topic, avoided by the vast majority of academics and only subtly approached by a minority. There exists too many bad connotations and prejudices about the subject that have made it, a challenging topic to study or to discuss. It seems that the simple fact of analysing and identifying gender differences in the
workplace will mean being challenged and opposed by a large section of the population, perhaps this explains why the topic has been so neglected. Rayner 1997, Namie 2007 and Zodgy, 2010, in their investigations identified an association between gender and bullying manifested by a tendency of women bullying other women in the workplace. Although this tendency has been confirmed empirically over the years, it has never been acknowledged, recognised or pursued further; instead it has been disregarded and ignored. This phenomena of women bullying other women in the workplace is not new, it has been in the workplace for years, maybe even for decades. However the literature available on the topic is very narrow, this can only be explained by two possible reasons, the first and more unlikely is that may be the academics have not considered this factor important enough to be investigated, or more probable, the investigators have felt anxious about analysing such a controversial topic, which could expose the investigator to being labelled as sexist or in being accused of having prejudices/discrimination against the opposite sex. There exist too much reluctance to investigate bullying and gender in the workplace, it seems that there exists a barrier and everything that can damage or expose female weaknesses, is better avoided, dismissed, denied or refuted. Is this equality?

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