Workplace mobbing experience at Antioquia companies between 2006 and 2019

Experiencias de acoso laboral de trabajadores de empresas antioqueñas entre los años 2006 y 2019

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Abstract

This study aims to uncover workplace harassment experiences of workers and contractors in Antioquia between 2006 and 2019, a period which corresponds to the enactment of Law 1010 and the end of this research. Workplace harassment experiences are characterized, and the participants' coping strategies, the consequences of harassment, and the possible involvement of Human Resources are identified. The research employs a hermeneutic methodological approach, applies the collective case study as methodological strategy and uses in-depth interview as data collection method. The data was processed using Excel content analysis matrices, allowing for the integration and comparison of narratives in order to identify trends. The findings show that harassment victims undergo the majority of its stages, and that the most common form of harassment is workplace persecution, which has serious physical and psychological consequences. It can also be concluded that the involvement of Human Resources can be decisive in allowing or avoiding harassment; therefore, an effective treatment of the problem may ensure that harassment actions cease; otherwise, they will be perpetuated within the company.

Keywords: Mobbing; Confronting strategies;   Human resources practices.

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Resumen

Con esta investigación se pretende develar las experiencias de acoso laboral vividas por trabajadores y contratistas de empresas antioqueñas entre los años 2006 y 2019. Este rango corresponde al momento en que entra en vigencia la ley 1010 y en el que finaliza la investigación. Se realiza una caracterización de dichas experiencias, la identificación de las estrategias de afrontamiento de los participantes y de las consecuencias del acoso, así como de la posible participación del área de gestión humana en las experiencias de acoso laboral. El enfoque metodológico en el cual se centró esta investigación es el hermenéutico, la estrategia metodológica escogida fue el estudio de caso colectivo y el método de recolección de información privilegiado en la investigación fue la entrevista a profundidad. La información generada se procesó en matrices de análisis de contenido en Excel que permitieron la integración y comparación de las narrativas para identificar tendencias. Los resultados evidencian cómo las víctimas de acoso recorren la mayoría de sus fases, siendo la principal modalidad de acoso la persecución laboral, con graves consecuencias físicas y psicológicas. Así mismo, permiten concluir que en efecto la participación del área de gestión humana puede ser determinante para permitir o evitar el acoso, por lo que un eficiente tratamiento a la problemática puede garantizar que las actuaciones de acoso cesen o en caso contrario se perpetúen.

Palabras Clave: Acoso laboral; Estrategias de afrontamiento; Prácticas de gestión humana.

1. Introduction

Workplace harassment, also known as mobbing, workplace bullying, or simply harassment, is defined in Law 1010 of 2006 as an action by a person or active subject, the "harasser", aimed at instilling fear, terror, contempt, or discouragement in a worker. Both, the harasser and the harassed person, are linked because they both work for the same organization. The harassed individual is usually subjected to psychological or physical violence on a regular and systematic basis over a long period of time.

The issue of abusive labor practices is a global one, reason why involved international organizations have expressed their concern. According to the International Labour Organization [ILO], 2019), the term "violence and harassment" in the workplace refers to "behaviors and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm".

The recent ILO 190 Convention (2019a) recognizes that workplace violence and harassment can "constitute a human rights violation or abuse, and is a threat to equal opportunities, which is unacceptable and incompatible with achieving decent work".

The 2019 Violence and Harassment Recommendation (No. 206), in turn, makes it a fundamental principle to ensure that "provisions on violence and harassment in national laws, regulations and policies take into account the equality and non-discrimination instruments of the ILO, including the Equal Remuneration Convention (N° 100) and Recommendation (N° 90), 1951, and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (N° 111) and Recommendation (N° 111), 1958, and other relevant instruments" (ILO, 2019b).

The issuance of Law 1010 in 2006 opened a path in Colombian legislation aimed at preventing, correcting, and sanctioning workplace harassment in both private companies and public sector entities. As a result, organizations were urged to implement mechanisms to prevent workplace harassment and to establish internal procedures for effective employee protection.

However, studies such as Moreno and Toro (2013) on the lack of workplace bullying protection demonstrate the ineffectiveness in the current application of Law 1010 of 2006 regarding the rules related to workplace bullying by the legal operator, and suggest finding an alternative solution in order to achieve legal certainty for workers (p. 112).

In terms of psychosocial impact, Harasemiuc and Díaz (2013) argue that workplace bullying is a silent epidemic affecting not only worker motivation and productivity, but also the victim's psychosocial balance; and identify depression as one of its most serious consequences (p. 361).

A study conducted by Da Rosa, Silva, and Krawulski (2013) found that organizational culture and the people management model produce or reproduce results- and productivity-focused practices, thus triggering harassment manifestations in workplace relationships caused by the pressure of achieving such results (p. 5).

Following Soares and Narbal (2016), "by understanding people management as an area responsible for the organizational processes concerning the relationship of human knowledge in organizations, we understand its fundamental role in preventing and combating harassment in the workplace." (p. 43). The authors conclude that workplace harassment is a form of violence that may denigrate the image of the victim, disqualify and humiliate them, depending on the power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim.

In their study on mobbing in health systems, Méndez and Silva (2016) define mobbing as a hostile work environment that exposes workers to verbal and/or physical offences or aggressions, or a combination of both, causing a negative impact on the individual, the organization and society (p. 4).

Some authors agree on defining bullying as an event that occurs within an organization and which may have devastating consequences for the victim, affecting their productivity and personality (De Miguel Barrado and Prieto, 2016, p. 26).

In view of the above, this study aimed at unveiling workplace bullying experiences shared by both employees and contractors in Antioquia between 2006 and 2019. This was accomplished through four specific goals. The first was to characterize the participants' experiences of workplace bullying; the second to identify the possible coping strategies to which they resorted; the third to identify the consequences of the participants' bullying experiences; and the fourth to determine the involvement of the human resources department in workplace bullying experiences.

The findings will allow to investigate current issues arising in the workplace, such as workers' lack of knowledge of this phenomenon, their lack of motivation to take action in order to defend their rights, and the ineffectiveness of current regulations.

2. Theoretical framework

Mobbing is a term that was first used in ethology to describe attacks by a group of smaller animals on a single larger animal, later extrapolated to the educational sphere as bullying, and then to the workplace (Lorenz, 1991).

In his work on the development of mobbing at work, Leymann (1996) indicates that mobbing is characterized by sophisticated behaviors such as socially isolating the victim, and suggests distinguishing it from other terms such as bullying, which refers to activities between children and adolescents at school (p. 17). According to the author, these actions occur at least once a week and over a long period of time (at least six months).

For Hirigoyen (2013), bullying at work is defined as "any abusive conduct (gesture, word, behavior, attitude) that, through repetition or systematization, threatens a person's dignity or psychological or physical integrity, jeopardizing his or her employment or degrading the work environment" (p. 19).

2.1. Profiles of active and passive subjects of bullying

It should be noted that in the literature there are several ways of naming those involved in a situation of harassment at work. The perpetrator of the harassment is referred to as the active subject, harasser or victimizer, whereas the individual on whom the harassment is inflicted is referred to as passive subject, harassed or victim.

With regard to the profile of the active subject of harassment, Piñuel and Zabala (2004) states that workplace harassers are "serial killers" within organizations; they are highly dangerous people who suffer from an inferiority complex, leading them to attack their victims in order to compensate for their shortcomings (p. 188). According to Piñuel and Zabala (2001), some of their characteristics include the ability to simulate, false seduction, compulsive lying, manipulation and distortion, envy, and professional jealousy (p. 187).

Heloani (2004) asserts that aggressors display narcissistic, destructive and insecure traits and that they are frequently paranoid, and that they project their "shadow," or rather, what they cannot accept in themselves, onto their peers (p. 5).

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In relation to passive subjects, Buendía (1998) discovered that the psychological profile of the bullied is associated with traits such as authenticity in pursuing self-realization and personal development; innocence that prevents harming others and identifying the malign desires that exist in others; and affective dependence on those who have the need to be loved and accepted (p. 11).

According to Hirigoyen (2006), discrimination-related factors (racial or religious motives, handicap or illness, sexual orientation, or trade union membership) also influence the victim's choice (p. 70).

2.2. Harassment stages

Parés (2006) identifies the following harassment stages: seduction, conflict, harassment, work environment, company intervention, exclusion or marginalization, and recovery (p. 1).

The process begins with a seduction phase in which the bully approaches the victim in an attempt to learn about his or her weaknesses in order to appropriate knowledge that can be used in the future. The typical cause of this experience is the desire to expropriate from the future victim something that is desirable for the active subject of the harassment, such as his or her position, reputation or relationships.

This is followed by a period of conflict, which is usually triggered by a difference of opinion that escalates and does not end, potentially leading to harassment. The victim is viewed by the bully as someone who dares to limit his or her power, which, in his or her opinion, makes the victim an immediate threat.

Once the conflict has been generated, bullying would be defined as the degenerated state of the dispute, under the control of the manipulator or bully. The bully's position is one of control and power over the victim, as he or she has more resources (support, power, psychological dominance), resulting in an obvious and real asymmetry of the parties. Harassment begins with subtle, indirect actions that are difficult to detect but are no less harmful to the victim, particularly because they are deliberate and systematic in nature, and are aimed at attacking the victim's weak points. If alerts are not triggered to detect the situation in a timely manner, the harassment situation will begin.

The workplace environment is crucial in the process because it determines whether the bullying is resolved quickly or becomes permanent. If the environment allows it, especially if the victim's coworkers act as silent witnesses, the manipulator will gain the support he or she requires to create a space in which lies spread and the victim is isolated to the point of introjecting guilt, which leads to the next phase.

According to the author, when the company becomes aware of the situation, it attempts to act, but it usually approaches the situation by identifying the victim as the problem. It interprets it as an interpersonal conflict, blames the victim, and avoids taking responsibility; this lack of mediation significantly interferes with the victim's social and work performance as their coping system falters, as well as their physical and mental health, leading to successive leaves of absence.

Throughout the bullying experience, the victim suffers from the isolation he or she is subjected to in the workplace. This isolation can take various forms, ranging from marginalization to useless tasks, unfair dismissal, apparent voluntary resignations, early retirement, and loss of life due to fatal workplace accidents or suicide.

Finally, the author discusses the recovery phase, which is based on assistance from third parties, both internal and external to the company, who refuse to engage in any form of conduct against the victim. In the author's opinion, this is where the harassment ends, though it should be noted that reaching this stage is not always possible.

2.3. Consequences of bullying and coping strategies

Peralta (2004) stresses that the physical consequences of bullying are common to other psychosocial phenomena. Gastrointestinal disorders, headaches, bone and muscle pain,

as well as coronary problems, appetite, sleep and sexual disturbances may occur (p. 117).

According to Luna (2003), psychological consequences of harassment include cognitive distortions such as concentration, attention, and memory issues; feelings of threat and failure; impotence; apathy; frustration; undervaluation; susceptibility; hypersensitivity; isolation; irritability; severe depression; and, in some cases, even suicide (p. 22).

According to Ireland and Snowden (2002), victims may respond to mobbing in a variety of ways, including emotional reactions such as fear, anger, paranoia, anxiety, depression, grief, despair, or vulnerability. Fear can cause an individual to "role-play" and adopt behaviors that differ from his or her own style, such as acting aggressively (p. 547).

Heloani (2005) posits that workplace bullying can be understood as a disciplinary procedure and is inextricably linked to current forms of management that employ more or less subtle and "invisible" forms of violence as strategies to maximize results at the expense of "moral" health (p. 102). Slowly but progressively, "harassment translates into suffering, pain and low productivity" (Heloani, 2003, p. 7).

3. Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach that values the participants' voices in terms of their experiences with workplace bullying, which contributes to better understanding the phenomenon in order to detect, and most importantly, prevent it.

This study's methodological approach is hermeneutic in that it seeks to understand workplace bullying experiences through the participants' own narratives.

The case study was chosen as the methodological strategy. This refers to "the collection, analysis, and detailed and structured presentation of information about an individual, a group, or an institution" (Galeano, 2004, p. 166), emphasizing individuals' participation rather than institutional or corporate participation.

Under this logic "one begins by thoroughly exploring a well-chosen case, structuring all the information, then integrating information from a second case, a third, etc., until reaching a saturation point where the new cases add practically nothing new" (Martínez, 1998, p. 74). In this manner, ten cases of people who experienced workplace bullying were studied, specifically following the concept of the Collective Case Study referred to by Galeano (2004), i.e., the researcher works with a "(…) set of a certain number of cases, with the intention of investigating a phenomenon, a population or a general condition. It is not about studying a collective, but an instrumental study that has been extended to several cases." (p.71). It should be noted, following Stake, that while "A case cannot represent the world, (…) it can represent a world in which many cases feel themselves reflected" (1994, p. 236).

The ten participants met the following inclusion criteria: men and women who were victims of workplace harassment between 2006 and 2019, and who live in the city of Medellín, some of them with an employment contract and others with a service contract. This is because, as the theory states, passive subjects of harassment can be so whether or not there is a formal employment relationship. The snowball survey was the sampling technique used to create the interest group.

The privileged method of information gathering in the research was the in-depth interview supported by expert judgement on the topic. The interview script was created using the categories and subcategories matrix shown in Table 1, and it was validated through expert judgement and pilot testing. Once the fieldwork was completed, the interviews were transcribed, preserving the originality of the answers and respecting confidentiality, and the data were analyzed on the basis of the categories.

The information was interpreted using discourse analysis matrices, beginning with a vertical analysis in which the narrative of each subject is analyzed against each subcategory, then moving on to a horizontal analysis that allows for the identification of recurrences and differences between the narratives of the participants, making it possible to establish trends by subcategory.

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Table 1. Categories and subcategories matrix	
Category	**Subcategory**
Experience of workplace bullying	Bullying's definition, stages, and profiles of the bully and the bullied
Coping strategies	Individual, legal
Consequences of bullying	Physical, psychological
Involvement of the Human Resources department	Active, pasive
Source: Authors' own elaboration.	

4. Results

The following subcategories are considered in order to respond to the specific aim of characterizing of participants' experience of bullying: definition of bullying, phases of bullying, profile of the bully and profile of the bullied.

When it comes to workplace harassment, most participants define it as a series of intentional acts of harassment aimed at destabilizing the victim and negatively affecting his or her mood and work performance. Harassment, according to them, occurs in an asymmetrical power relationship in which the power holder abuses his or her position, even using the norm to intimidate the victim.

> "Harassment at work, in my experience, occurs when someone in your workplace, who is generally related to you through an asymmetrical power relationship, takes advantage of that position of power over you, your work, and your position in order to negatively influence your decisions. Then their actions start to have a negative impact on your mood, performance, and it turns out to be something deliberate...." (Participant 8/ August 27, 2019).

It is necessary to mention the frequency of harassment in order to complete the definition of harassment. The majority of the participants agreed that it happens frequently, if not daily, in their work routine:

> "Every day, those were the most trying moments for me at the time." (Participant 9/ August 27, 2019).

Continuing with the harassment phases subcategory, despite the theory's reference to seduction, it is noteworthy that the participants make no mention of this stage, implying that the experience begins with conflict. This is fueled by the envy of the active subject of the harassment, the stereotypes of the person in power, the manifestation of disagreement of the passive subject of the harassment with the policies or practices of the hierarchical superiors or by differences in thinking and acting styles that clash with those of the leaders:

> "(...) When I started being assigned many functions and suddenly stated that I had a lot of work, I was met with fearful words like "if you can't do it, we'll assign it to someone else," so there is a sense of pressure that you have a lot of work and that if you don't do it, you might lose your job.…" (Participant 3/ August 28, 2019).

In the majority of cases, harassment was directed vertically downward, from managers to employees. It took the form of unjustified refusals to change shifts or authorize attendance at medical appointments; shouting and belittling treatment of the employee; discrediting the victim by minimizing his or her work; unjustified restrictions on incentives and legal rights; inclusion on the so-called "black list"; permanent threat of losing one's job; use of institutional mechanisms such as a disciplinary process to justify the dismissal of a worker with a sexual orientation questioned by those in charge of the human resources area; intimidations concealed in mockery; among others. These acts constitute persecution, hindrance and labor discrimination by law.

With regard to the response of the work environment, in about half of the cases the coworkers behaved as silent witnesses to the situation; despite being aware of their coworker's harassment, they preferred to stay out of the situation. As a result of the introjection of guilt caused by the lack of support from coworkers, most victims

prefer to remain silent and live this situation in solitude, which feeds aversion to the workplace. In some cases, colleagues' moral support was expressed through encouraging words and disagreement with the situation.

The company's involvement is manifested in the response of the bosses to the situation. In the cases studied, not only did they not support the workers when they expressed their needs, nor did they request the intervention of a mediator to try to understand what was happening, but they also increased the stigmatization of the victims, pointing them out as the problem, in order to avoid taking the responsibility for their actions as bosses.

Exclusion and marginalization are present in all cases, to a greater or lesser extent. There are instances where jobs are repeatedly threatened, such as withdrawals from a project or process, dismissal without apparent just cause, and non-renewal of contracts.

Another subcategory included in the category of harassment experience is the profile of the harasser, which identifies characteristics in these subjects from the perspective of the victims, such as abuse of power, expressed in assuming roles that do not correspond to their position, such as the imposition of long and unnecessary shifts and the manipulation of others to achieve their ends, thus establishing the perverse dyad of puppet and puppeteer: "(…) I believe the coordinator is a puppet of hers; he does whatever needs to be done and never speaks in meetings with his own voice." (Participant 1/ August 26, 2019); authoritarianism, evidenced in the imposition of their own criteria and ways of acting; fickleness of temperament: "(…) It's fine today, but not tomorrow, or he'd come in in a good mood one minute and then be in a bad mood the next, and everyone would pay him back, and so on." (Participant 2/ August 19, 2019); an extreme orientation to results and institutionalism that leads to a focus on errors, a refusal to listen, and a treatment of workers that prioritizes the company's needs over dignity.

In three of the harassed people's profiles, there is a temporary deterioration manifested in physical and mental health problems. Six of them are employees who expose the system by causing a quarrel with the boss: "I showed evidence of a chaotic situation, and he may not have liked like the fact that I told the students about it." (Participant 1/ August 26 de 2019); and a last participant reports work overload. In some cases, the harassed individual is portrayed as someone who is perceived as disloyal if he or she does not act in the harasser's best interests: "He's either with me or against me, and if he's with my adversaries, he's against me." (Participant 8/ August 27, 2019), and atypical, who is considered a moral danger to workers and clients because of their sexual orientation.

For the second specific objective, related to coping strategies, the findings are presented in terms of the two subcategories, namely, individual and legal strategies. Individual coping strategies range from remaining calm and avoiding retaliation, to engaging in psychological, psychoanalytic and psychiatric therapy processes, as well as discussing the issue with people they trust. Victims have also attempted to speak with the harasser or to inform their superiors, but both attempts have failed.

Regarding legal actions, the participants in two of the cases resorted to legal actions and were reinstated. One of them is the result of a *tutela* action brought about by a unilateral dismissal: "(…) I have to resort to legal actions, in this case a *tutela*, to appeal to some rights that were violated, because they had obviously violated an issue of sexual diversity., (…) a month and a half later, he was reinstated to the workplace." (Participant 10/ July 22, 2019). In other cases, a criminal complaint is not even considered for fear of losing the job or ignorance of the law: "'And you didn't file a complaint?' people asked me. Yes, I contacted the Ombudsman's Office, but I'm not sure what else I could have done; therefore, I'm not sure what legal avenues I could have pursued in response. I did what I could, or rather, what I knew, assuming the consequences, to put it another way." (Participant 9/ August 27 de 2019). The significance of this this event is that, while it has not had any legal impact, it establishes a precedent for the victim: "At the very least, it establishes a precedent and demonstrates that not everyone bows to him because he is accustomed to abusing his power and that everyone bows to the situation." (Participant 8/ August 27 de 2019).

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As for the third specific objective, which deals with the consequences of workplace harassment, the results are presented in terms of physical and psychological consequences. Physically, there is exhaustion to the point of work accidents and health problems that result in permanent disabilities and sleep disorders in the affected person and family members: "It got to the point where I couldn't sleep, and he couldn't sleep either [referring to her husband]. We had both stopped sleeping for three days in a row. Then it wasn't just me who was going insane; it was both of us." (Participant 7/ August 28, 2019).

At the psychological level, some participants report depressive states: "I didn't want to get out of bed, much less go to work. I recall being in a shopping mall one day and having a sudden crying fit in a corridor, forcing to lock myself in a bathroom to cry." (Participant 8/ August 27, 2019); anxiety, stress: "I was in a lot of pain, I was crying all the time, and in the end, I didn't want to go to work, so I called in sick. (...) I went to the ARL and told them about the problem, and they started treating me like I had an occupational disease." (Participant 6/ August 30, 2019); and renounces their personality traits: "(...) But I wasn't smiling anymore, because I'd been smiling my whole life, singing and everything, and I wasn't there anymore, I wasn't me." (Participant 9/ August 27, 2019).

Finally, regarding the fourth objective, Human Resources involvement in workplace harassment is only found in two cases in which they dealt with these situations in a responsible manner. In one of the cases, they acted decisively, putting an end to the harassment. It is noteworthy that in the second case, although there was a willingness on the part of those responsible for the human resources area to intervene, the passive subject decided not to take action: "And I told the person in charge of human resources, who supported me and even told me that there were enough elements to start the process if I wanted to, but I was the one who said no." (Participant 1/ August 26, 2019). This reduces the possibilities for human resources management to act. Hence the importance of focusing more on prevention through training.

In half of the cases, the involvement of Human Resources is passive, with employees failing to recognize harassment as such and acting as "silent witnesses" rather than preventing or avoiding such incidents: "I believe it is a bad area because they never listen, never ask how I am feeling, never check how we are treated at work, and nothing like that has ever happened." (Participant 3/ August 28 de 2019); and permissively accepting harassment, by self-sacrificially supporting it rather than speaking out and taking action against it.

Finally, the main accusation against the area is that of complicity in allowing and even reproducing harassment practices:

"I believe that human management is complicit in these practices in many, if not all, cases, not only because it permits them, but also because it reproduces them. I believe that there is a call for coherence in the human management areas". (Participant 7/ August 28, 2019).

5. Discussion

Leymann (1996) refers to mobbing as an experience of psychological terror in the work life of an individual who is systematically attacked by one or more individuals until he or she is pushed into a position of helplessness because his or her internal resources falter. In agreement with the author's argument, most of the participants in the research mentioned that there was repetition in the acts of harassment of which they were victims, isolation, and negative consequences for their employment either through poor performance or termination. This ending is closely related to Hirigoyen's (2013) definition of moral harassment at work as systematic abusive behaviors that threaten the dignity of the person, the job and the work environment, and confirm the author's argument that moral harassment is violence in small doses that goes unnoticed but is extremely destructive: "Bullying consists of insidious, cold, covert violence, all the more violent because it is almost invisible. It is fueled by small, continuous attacks, often carried out without witnesses, sometimes non-verbal or ambiguous, as they are subject to a double interpretation. Each isolated attack is not considered truly

serious; what constitutes aggression is the cumulative effect of frequent and repeated micro-traumatisms." (Hirigoyen, 2003, p. 40).

Harassment is triggered in the absence of seduction, according to the participants, by the expression of an unresolved conflict, which usually has to do with expressing disagreement with a peer or the direct boss. According to Parés (2006), this phase occurs when a difference of opinion is triggered, becomes acute and is not resolved, potentially leading to harassment. It was identified that at this point the victims feel confused, the actions constituting harassment are not yet clear and they still regard the conflict as natural (p. 4).

In relation to the harassment phase, and in, it is noteworthy that the most common form of harassment is workplace persecution, as stipulated in Law 1010 of 2006. At this stage, the active subject of harassment is tasked with persuading the victim to resign.

Violence, according to Chappell and Di Martino (2006), can cause short- and medium-term organizational alterations that affect interpersonal relationships in the workplace. For this reason, the typical response of the work environment, that is, colleagues and other witnesses of harassment, such as suppliers and customers, is that of silent witnesses, unable to intervene for fear of retaliation.

The next phase, the company's intervention, can be viewed from two sides: management and human resources. In many cases, managers perpetrated harassment directly, sometimes with the consent or participation of some of their subordinates, and sometimes on their own. Human Resources involvement in the resolution of cases studied was not adequate. They usually act only when complaints are made and not in an informal, preventive manner. Therefore, if the affected party does not request support, they do not intervene, even when they are aware of the situation.

In terms of exclusion or marginalization, most of the study participants found relief when their contractual relationships ended and they were able to join other companies and continue their working lives, despite not having wanted to resign. This was due to the seriousness of the experience and the impossibility of handling the situation. The people who continue working in the companies because they were reinstated are still subjected to harassment, finding relief only when the managers or those who harassed them have rotated to other areas.

In the last phase of recovery, after finding some appropriate coping strategies, people manage to overcome the experience; they can now talk about the subject, although with difficulty because they are still affected by what happened. Many of them still cannot find any explanation for what happened, but, in general, this experience has allowed them to know and clearly identify which actions violate their labor rights. Although, as Hirigoyen points out, the experience of harassment for some victims becomes a bad memory that can be easily controlled, this is not achieved without difficulty: "Once the shock phase has passed, interest in work or leisure activities, curiosity about the world or people, and all those things that dependence had blocked, reappear." (1998, p. 129).

Continuing with the harasser's profile, Hirigoyen describes harassers, whether in the context of their couple, family or work environment, as "psychological annihilators" whose domination over the passive subject: "(…) consists of an intellectual or moral domination that attests to the ascendancy or influence of one individual over another. The victims do not realize that they are being forced. It is as if they were trapped in a spider's web, psychologically bound, anesthetized and at the mercy of the dominator, without being aware of it." (1998, p. 74).

The two typologies of victimizers or active subjects of bullying mentioned in the literature were found in this research. Some participants perceive their bully as an intelligent, calculated, egocentric individual capable of perplexing the other to the point that they believe they are responsible for what is happening to them. In other cases, especially when the harassment is exercised by a peer, the victimizer is a person who feels weak in front of the other, who is concerned that the other person may have greater acceptance and therefore seeks to generate acts that call him/her into question.

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Turning to the profile of the bullied, Hirigoyen presents a varied range of possible victims: highly capable people who unleash envy, jealousy or rivalry; inhomogeneous or atypical people who challenge the acceptance of otherness; inefficient people who slow down group results; and people temporarily weakened by physical or mental illness (2013, p. 93). The study participants fell into the category of temporarily disabled people who must be absent regularly due to health issues, implying that absenteeism is a result of bullying. They also fall into the category of atypical individuals who, for example, have a sexual orientation that differs from the dominant one. Other cases are similar to those of diverse thinking, capable of expressing an opposing viewpoint, making them targets of persecution.

With regard to coping strategies, the most relevant are self-control, positive reappraisal, avoidance and confrontation (Cabaco, 1995, cited by González-Trijueque, Tejero Acevedo, and Delgado Marina, 2012). The most common coping strategies mentioned by interviewees were psychological therapy, social support networks of family and friends, and leaving the harassing company. In this regard, several participants stated that all negative feelings vanished when the contractual relationship with the organization ended, either through apparent voluntary resignation or just cause (known as indirect dismissal), and that they were able to return to work, despite certain fears, which is related to the recovery phase mentioned by theorists.

According to the findings, harassment almost always results in some form of physical and / or mental illness, such as insomnia, depression, or suicidal ideation. Furthermore, the majority of cases result in dismissal or resignation because the victims are already experiencing low productivity as a result of harassment. As Harasemiu and Diaz (2013) point out, the psychosocial impact is a silent epidemic that affects not only workers' motivation and productivity, but also their psychosocial balance, with depression being one of the most serious consequences.

In terms of human management's involvement, Leymann (1996) and Parés (2006) believe that the organization plays an important role in the prompt resolution of the situation or, on the contrary, in further stigmatizing the victims, by avoiding their responsibility in assisting them. In the majority of the cases investigated, the Human Resources department played a negative role, siding with the boss who exercised power and even directly causing the harassment; it should be noted that in one of the cases, the department's intervention was successful in the sense that it was able to stop the harassment actions, to such an extent that the victim regarded the department as a protective factor, corroborating the theory on the area's critical role in either perpetuating or completely eradicating harassment behaviors.

Organizations cannot abdicate their responsibility for workplace harassment and are urged to take steps to prevent and eliminate it, since, as the study revealed, in more than a few cases, their human resources departments appear to be responsible for acts of harassment (Verona and Santana, 2014, p. 427).

6. Conclusions

Understanding the harassment experiences of the study participants based on characteristics such as the phases they went through allows us to conclude that harassment progression or cessation is heavily influenced by the close environment and the organization's management. Unfortunately, the findings support the theory that viewing the situation as an interpersonal misunderstanding between the parties not only allows the phenomenon to progress, but also has significant negative consequences for the victim, including initial confusion, guilt introjection, and the surrender of his or her coping system.

The role of human resources is critical in addressing these issues by developing prevention and reparation measures for victims, and creating spaces for conflict resolution, all while adhering to ethical, legal, and humanistic principles.

Harassment situations that are not addressed in a timely manner have far-reaching consequences for the victims' physical and mental health. Therefore, the

actions taken by organizations to reduce the risk of psychosocial diseases are extremely urgent. According to various studies conducted by the Escuela Nacional Sindical (National Trade Union School): "globalization processes are significantly affecting both working conditions in the subregion and health conditions. For this reason, as we look to the future, we identify the need to raise awareness of the link between working conditions and health among both employers and employees." (2016, p. 499).

Future lines of research could focus on a more decisive participation of the Human Resources areas to prevent or correct harassment cases. From a quantitative standpoint, it would be possible to work with larger sample sizes, although increasing the number of cases is difficult when conducting research on topics such as the one addressed here, and with a gender perspective. In order to build a broader understanding of the subject, it is also important to address workplace harassment by company type and economic sector.

7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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