Discrimination and Workplace Harassment (Mobbing) against Women in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to study work environments and the set of contradictions that make up mobbing or group harassment in the post-pandemic. Mobbing or group harassment is one of the problems that afflicts different organizations and institutions; it is a multi-causal phenomenon that occurs in different ways almost everywhere in the world. Mobbing is related to violence at work, it is characterized by the development of hostile behaviors, some open, others veiled. Discrimination is one of its main components. The methodology applied in this study was the qualitative methodology. The findings show that in mobbing, the socio-subjectivities imposed in a work environment prevail. The labor relations that emerged from the post-pandemic are part of said socio-subjectivity. This not only means the subjective formation of the individual, but also the social context in which human beings develop.

Keywords: Mobbing; Discrimination; Work; Health; Post-Pandemic

Abbreviations

SDG: Sustainable Development Goals; WHO: World Health Organization; ILO: International Labor Organization.

Introduction

This article addresses the relationship between discrimination and group harassment (mobbing) towards women in the post-pandemic. The objective is to demonstrate that socio-subjectivities predominate in the application of regulations in labor relations, and this makes it feasible that discrimination and harassment are determining factors in decision-making within institutions or organizers, which limits the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The main interest of this study has focused on work environments and the set of contradictions that make up mobbing or group harassment, which are present in almost all work environments. Mobbing or group harassment is one of the problems that afflict different organizations and institutions; it is a multi-causal phenomenon that occurs in different ways almost everywhere in the world. Mobbing is related to violence at work, and is characterized by the development of hostile behavior, some open, others veiled, as well as discriminatory acts that may initially go unnoticed by a target of harassment, but, over time, the limitations imposed in a work environment become perceived.

Empirical and bibliographic data have shown that hostile behaviors in the workplace are often used as a strategy to eliminate or manipulate individuals who are perceived as a threat to the interests of a person or group. This elimination

can be discreet, without a resignation, through a set of limitations that make work performance difficult so that the affected person makes the decision to resign on their own. In addition, these actions include a restriction of credibility in their professional performance. On the other hand, manipulation can be through friendly speeches to achieve labor exploitation in any of its forms.

Likewise, personal comparison for success and achievements, as well as competition for academic degrees, can lead to intergenerational conflicts. These conflicts often appear between age groups that seek to maintain control using disqualification as a weapon. As can be seen, these are unspeakable discomforts that generate emotions that are not regulated by any regulations but are circumscribed within the scope of personal ethics. This often causes shame. Therefore, whoever is pointed out as a possible harasser will most often deny or justify their behavior [1].

When analyzing the set of human reactions, it is unknown whether bullies have a history of psychiatric illnesses and insensitivity to pain or whether they have developed an exacerbated cruelty that prevents them from being empathetic with others. There are various investigations that have shown psychopathic behaviors in both male and female bullies [2,3]. From my research, even deeper traits have been identified such as discrimination based on ethnic origin, toxic masculinities, and traditional models of being a woman or a man, which reinforce patriarchal supremacy or adopt such supremacies as behavioral models. All the above make up socio-subjectivity, which is built from early experiences from childhood to the daily configuration of unquestioning experience that perpetuates representations of power and the reproduction of violence in any of its forms. Socio-subjectivity is not individual; it implies the interdependence between the personal and the social environment, as well as history itself.

Violence in the workplace varies by gender. In this presentation, we have chosen to focus on working women with different levels of education, given that each case of discrimination and harassment has its own particularities. By systematizing the data, we have been able to analyze the characteristics that comprise it. Likewise, it has been found that the different forms of violence are closely related to organizational policies.

The most common form of workplace violence in Mexico is psychological, which manifests itself through verbal abuse [4]. In addition, intrigue is used as a strategy to achieve different objectives, including the discreet or veiled dismissal of women and men workers. This form of violence also limits productivity as it generates toxic environments that cause suffering in female workers and exacerbate cruelty

in harassers, in addition to triggering other emotional disturbances such as anger, personal comparison, and the desire to stand out above any circumstance. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that the study of the different forms of violence in the work environment allows us to make visible the various manifestations of intimidation and its purposes, as well as the application of forms of control, not only within the workplace, but also outside of it, by power groups.

The methodology used in this work is qualitative and is based on various previous investigations that I have carried out on group harassment (mobbing). Consequently, this text has been developed from a bibliographic review, the analysis of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) and the study of the cases collected in previous and current research. The technique applied was the interview. The questions focused on the behaviors that led the interviewees to experience a process of group harassment and how they realized that they were the target of different forms of violence, not always easy to identify. Several women reported feeling excluded and explained this situation in terms of punishments, as if they were deserved sanctions for some fault or disobedience towards bosses, colleagues or lower-ranking personnel within their employment. In this way, guilt and the fact of being punished were considered inclusion criteria for the interviews, in addition to being working women of legal age who had experienced violence in the workplace.[1]

The question that this work sought to answer is the following: Can workplace discrimination and harassment be eliminated through global policies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)?.

Contextual Framework: Post-Pandemic and Employment

The issue of work is contemplated in the SDGs, specifically in relation to decent work, economic growth, workers' human rights and the prevention of violence. The SDG objectives regarding the issue of work will be understood if a multidisciplinary analysis is carried out on the differences that permeate work environments. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the socio-subjectivity of the adults who participate in these spaces and who design labor policies. Although girls should not be involved in the workplace, in many societies they are educated in work from an early age, mainly through the care of younger siblings and domestic chores. Child labor has been present throughout

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1   Out of a total of 65 women interviewed, only 45 were selected. The average age was 18 to 45 years old; 12 of them with a technical school level and 28 with a bachelor's degree and five with a master's degree; only five of them have a PhD, including three master's students. The institutions where they work, and study belong to the State.

human history and has played an important role in the accumulation of wealth.

In various societies, girls' work has been valued in different ways, and practices of selling girls and women persist. Since childhood, society has constructed a conception of work and gender roles, which influences the way in which individuals, whether employees or employers, perceive and assume it. Men and women, with different gender identities, shape their vision of work not only based on their early experiences, but also based on the context in which they operate. For some women, work is an inherent part of their life, although they are aware that they will not always be valued in the same way as men, given that these ideas were learned from an early stage of life [5]. However, many women consider work to be essential for their autonomy, as is academic training, which is perceived as an investment in the future.

The term post-pandemic refers to the period following the acute phase of a pandemic, in this case, that of COVID-19. This concept not only encompasses the gradual return to normality, but also the lasting changes and new realities that have arisen because of the global health crisis.

We learn from pandemics. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic raised concerns for both the World Health Organization (WHO) and governments around the world, who were already aware of the potential health risks resulting from climate change [6-10]. It also worried citizens, who were at risk of contracting SARS-CoV-2.

Changes were evident in all social sectors. New forms of employment were consolidated, such as the use of platforms for home delivery, although without clear regulations for both employees and employers. The latter took advantage of digital platforms, driven by the increase in broadband infrastructures and the expansion of personal devices (smartphones, tablets, etc.). Digitalization has grown in the last decade and, even more so, in the last year after the outbreak of the pandemic. The use of data and digital applications is generating a profound change for companies, workers and consumers [11-13].

Crisis at work, such as job losses, increased with the pandemic, forcing men and women to seek new forms of work, such as selling products on their own. Self-employment was the alternative that many people took to cope with debts and financial commitments during the lockdown in 2020. The reconfiguration of work based on staying at home, considered a safe place both to live and to work, showed that, for many women and girls, the home was not a safe space either. Domestic violence increased, as did assaults in virtual environments during work meetings.

Care work, historically assigned to women, fell even more heavily on them, which represented a setback of more than 10 years in progress towards their autonomy, according to Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [14]. In Mexico, as in other parts of Latin America, many women had to decide between maintaining a salaried job to contribute to the family economy or dedicating themselves to caring for their children, family members and home while the confinement lasted. However, once the pandemic was over, they had to join the labor market at an older age and with greater limitations, which accentuated the social inequality of women. Social inequality has been present in the workplace, with differences in salaries, positions, and hierarchies, but it was exacerbated by the 2020 pandemic. Currently, for certain workers, working from home with teleworking and having social security and belonging to a union is not the same as being a worker without benefits, despite being employed by an institution or company. An example is "trusted" workers, who are not unionized, can be fired at any time, and lack labor protection. In addition, they often perform tasks that should be performed by those who have a full-time job or a permanent position.

During the pandemic, trusted workers in Mexico faced the demand for multiple tasks without a set schedule and with numerous responsibilities. The lack of definition of tasks in the workplace fosters an environment prone to abuse and harassment. For this reason, many workers are stressed and have come to experience various health problems, such as anxiety disorders, irritability and insomnia.

Sustainability and Mobbing

To achieve sustainable development, it is essential to pay attention to the relationships established in work environments. One of the aspects of the 2030 agenda states that: "To achieve sustainable economic development, societies must create the necessary conditions for people to access quality jobs, stimulating the economy without harming the environment. There will also have to be job opportunities for the entire working-age population, with decent working conditions". This statement, which is part of a civilizing process, is necessary for everyday working life. However, when analyzing the data on the work reality of Latin American countries and their particularities, this objective seems like a utopia. As Enrique Leff [8] rightly points out, sustainability cannot be achieved by extrapolating the natural and social processes generated by the dominant economic and instrumental rationality. An ecological conscience is not enough; the social construction of an environmental rationality is necessary. According to the same author, environmental rationality is a utopia that shapes new existential meanings, which implies a redefinition of history from the limits and potentialities of

the human condition, nature and culture. In other words, changes occur even during the crisis.

The goals of the 2030 agenda represent ideals for building global societies from a Western policy perspective, but they do not necessarily reflect the Latin American reality. The conditions for job creation in this region are unique, and the organizational culture that currently predominates in several countries, including Mexico, in both the public and private sectors remains marked by precariousness. Mercedes Zúñiga [15] defines this precariousness as "the flexible organization of the uses of labor within a logic of constant competition and management of work through stress".

Furthermore, conditions in work environments do not always encourage the construction of harmonious interpersonal relationships. Complex interactions are woven, influenced by socio-subjective constructions crossed by racism, xenophobia and gender discrimination, as well as by intergenerational conflicts that lack regulation within institutions, especially those sustained by clientelism. Likewise, there are divisions between those who have demonstrable academic degrees and those who do not. On the other hand, gender violence in the workplace is also related to the educational level: the higher the academic training of women, the greater the violence they may experience in these environments.

The significance of work for women is diverse; however, it is usually linked to family care. For example, many women spend their income on financially helping their elderly parents or educating their children. Despite having double work shifts, they continue to do household chores when they return home. Although middle- and upper-class women do not face the same economic concerns, they must also be careful with their investments and their jobs since they can be removed more easily due to the way they are viewed [16].

Organizational policies have favored the construction of contradictory dynamics that, in many cases, lead to violent work environments (International Labor Organization, 2016). Group harassment (mobbing) is part of this problem. The various work environments are permeated by a set of behaviors and attitudes that affect both men and women. Therefore, the fulfillment of the objectives of the 2030 agenda represents a challenge, since it is prevented by the particularities that correspond to a socio-subjective dimension constructed ancestrally [17].

Not all people who enter the workplace face the same problems, such as harassment, which can manifest itself individually or in groups. The dynamics that develop within workspaces are marked by the hierarchical relationships established in organizations. Both men and women configure

jobs according to the socio-subjective construction they have made of their expectations.

Current work phenomena require study to make visible the contradictory representations that shape human relations in everyday life. In addition, these dynamics exacerbate the deterioration of the health of women and men both in the short and long term [18].

The lack of normative knowledge (protocols, regulations) encourages the application of socially learned knowledge, which is manifested in the socio-subjectivity of individuals. That is, personal criteria and group interests are what guide decisions and actions within work environments, and not from a position based on human rights and the right to decent work. When the personal criteria of bosses or colleagues are imposed without considering regulations, social punishments are generated that can lead to mobbing or group harassment. In this sense, although society changes, certain phenomena seem to remain unchanged over time and history. One of them is social punishment, understood as a form of control that has existed in all societies. Punishment occurs when what is socially accepted is not complied with because there is panoptic surveillance in social groups [19,20].

Results: Mobbing and the SDGs

Mobbing, understood as a process of harassment and intimidation, which also involves a set of torturous acts in various circumstances, is a phenomenon closely related to workplace discrimination. Workplace harassment has particularities that affect both women and men. Undoubtedly, gender, as a category of analysis, allows us to understand the social mandates on how women and men should behave in different areas, including the workplace. In this sense, in the workplace there are also forms of leadership by men or women that address the way women bosses or those who occupy any position or position in the workplace perform. This allows us to understand the different behaviors that develop due to unidentified and unresolved conflicts. For example, in some work environments, if a woman in a management position is not perceived as strict, her authority may be questioned, and her orders or requests may not be considered. In turn, some female bosses tend to demand more from women than from men. These behaviors reflect the existence of stereotypes about how women and men should act based on their hierarchy, even normalizing being strict, rude and harassing people. Mobbing is a form of hostile communication that seeks to exclude workers, rather than promote negotiation and collaboration within an institution or organization.

When group bullying is promoted or tolerated by the same authority, it is usually because those who hold power

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seek to maintain absolute control in the work environment; often driven by the desire for success. These types of people show little interest in conflict resolution and do not know how to discern the contradictions generated in everyday life, nor do they respect labor and human rights, prevailing a subjective logic constructed since childhood and reaffirmed by their environment, in addition to their reality at the time they hold a position, which leads to an abuse of power [21,22].

The term Mobbing can be translated as group harassment at work, although we know that this translation does not exhaust its meaning and there is no word in Spanish that describes and transcribes it from English with the meaning of "group harassment". The term mobbing is an Anglicism from the English language, which denotes mass aggression. In Mexico and Latin America, it is translated as group siege, moral harassment, emotional lynching and psychological violence at work. In the literature on mobbing, it has been shown that the set of repetitive conducts and behaviors that seek to hurt, overshadow, intimidate or denigrate a target are those that make up group harassment and such behaviors can occur in work environments or anywhere else [23].

The perception of a subject as a threat can be a trigger for mobbing. This is clearly observed in highly competitive work environments such as academic environments, where salaries and scholarships are at stake. When a man or woman is perceived as a threat in their workplace, they usually experience some type of harassment. If this phenomenon becomes collective, it becomes a social punishment that implies a sanction. Although it is difficult to resolve, it can be addressed with information about current regulations and possible sanctions, or through agreements that allow for conflict resolution. In addition, it is essential to have a support group to share negative experiences in the workplace.

Social punishment is a consequence of mobbing and is part of the group harassment and bullying characteristic of this phenomenon. Not only those who want to harass participate, but also those who do so without an explicit reason, although deep down they may express a deeper discomfort that they prefer not to name out of shame or loyalty to the harassers. People harass out of loyalty to the aggressors and obtain a benefit from this attitude, in addition to the satisfaction of exercising power over others, without being aware of the consequences of their actions.

Harassment and abuse against women often have a sexual connotation, which can lead to social punishment when they refuse to accept a request for love or sex. Even when the harassment is not sexual in nature, the attacks almost always include references to the female body, such as mockery about her height, size, age or facial features such as moles or the size of her nose. It is common for some men to try to attract the attention of women through mockery or ridicule, while others seek to protect them from sexual harassment. In societies of Mesoamerican origin and during the colonial period, social behaviors were consolidated that can still be present in collective subjectivity. For example, problems with women were solved through marriage and it was observed that harassed or abused women married the men who mistreated them. Courtship was used to get married and formalize a relationship in the colonial period [24]. The transgression of women could be used to unleash wars or to create alliances, as Levi Strauss [25] points out [26-42].

Although subjectivities have changed over time, behaviors like those of past times persist, such as following, harassment, sarcastic behavior and verbal aggression towards women with the purpose of getting their attention. These behaviors are still observed in work environments, evidencing the permanence of sociocultural patterns from the past. Several women interviewed mentioned having been persecuted in their workplaces. When they complained, they were subjected to mockery, jokes and group harassment or mobbing. In many cases, harassment of women is covered up with jokes and "albures". An albur (plural: *albures)* is a word play in Mexican Spanish that involves a double entendre.

Both in the past and in the present, these behaviors persist because the aggressors feel they have the power to act without being punished. For some men, laughing, mocking, and exposing women's personal lives are considered "naughty" acts of masculinity and, therefore, socially acceptable. Telling stories, whether real or fictional, about a woman's personal or love life without her consent is a violation of her privacy. The explicit description of a woman's love life, way of dressing, and lifestyle are part of her public display and constitute a social punishment. of her personal life and therefore is part of social punishment. The purpose is to discredit her socially, generating the perception that she does not deserve recognition. The problem is aggravated in small towns or in housing units where everyone knows each other. In these contexts, coworkers are neighbors or friends. In contrast, in large cities, people interact only during work hours and know little about each other's lives.

Final Considerations

The post-pandemic has transformed employment relationships, allowing for teleworking and new forms of digital interaction. For many women, this has meant an opportunity to balance their work and personal lives, but it has also exposed new forms of discrimination and harassment.

Regarding the question that guided this work: Can workplace discrimination and harassment be eliminated through global policies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? We are currently experiencing a period of social change in which work experiences are being reconfigured, especially in this post-pandemic context. However, factors such as sustainability, group harassment and intersubjectivity make the transition to the work models contemplated in the SDGs difficult.

Socio-subjectivity in the workplace can be modified if managers and employees are provided with information on human rights, diversity and gender perspectives, instead of basing their behavior solely on family experiences or lessons learned from childhood. The women interviewed reported having experienced different types of violence throughout their professional careers. All were victims of mobbing for refusing to accept advances or tacit proposals and for refusing to be complicit in attacks against other women. Most preferred to remain silent so as not to lose their jobs, while some defended themselves and made fun of their harassers, which earned them even more severe punishments. It is crucial to eradicate violence in the workplace, as it creates collateral damage, allowing aggressive behavior to perpetuate and reproduce itself among workers. Mobbing is one of the most devastating experiences reported by workers, as it not only affects economic stability due to the possible loss of employment, but also harms health, interpersonal relationships and productivity, which has a negative impact on both workers and companies.

In summary, social punishment, like workplace harassment, is a manifestation of an authoritarian social system. In this case, it is a response to the capitalist and patriarchal structure of our time. Its mechanism lies in exaggerating certain characteristics of a woman to stigmatize her, until the entire social group believes in these descriptions, no matter how far removed they are from reality.

Achieving the SDGs in the short term is a challenge. These goals can serve as a model to follow for building more just and inclusive societies. As work environments and their internal contradictions are studied, it will be possible to move towards more equitable and equal working conditions.

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