

Irena AVIROVIC BUNDALEVSKA  
Simona ZLATANOVSKA

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## MOBBING AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

### **Abstract:**

*Mobbing, defined as psychological harassment occurring through repeated activities aimed at degrading a worker on various grounds, represents a significant violation of human rights and dignity. It adversely affects physical, mental, and social health while also hindering the professional future of the victim.*

*Sexual harassment in the workplace includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other forms of verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Such behavior results in a hostile work environment, making it challenging for the victim to carry out their job effectively.*

*This paper elucidates the concept of mobbing, particularly focusing on its manifestation as sexual harassment in the workplace. Furthermore, it presents recent statistical data on mobbing worldwide and in our home country. Finally, the paper discusses the results of a 2023 survey on mobbing and workplace sexual harassment awareness in North Macedonia.*

**Keywords:** *mobbing, sexual harassment, workplace, North Macedonia.*

## Introduction

Stress is becoming an increasingly significant problem in the world of work, with mobbing—psychological harassment of employees—emerging as one of the most severe forms of workplace stress. Mobbing often manifests as conflicts, intrigues, and malicious or intentional tricks aimed at harming and undermining individuals. This frequently leads to serious consequences, including health endangerment and the onset of psychological illnesses among employees.

As a new psycho-social risk in the workplace, mobbing highlights the evolving understanding of the right to dignified work. Alongside traditional elements such as the prohibition of forced labor, fair working conditions, and the state's obligation to create conditions for full employment, modern concepts now include the prohibition of workplace discrimination, workplace abuse (mobbing), sexual harassment, and privacy violations at work.

Mobbing in the workplace can result in a disharmonious atmosphere, strong hierarchy, deficiencies in internal communication and information, inappropriate and inadequate behavior of management, poorly defined employee responsibilities and task divisions, as well as overall deficiencies in company management, including the suppression of conflicts (Bartlett and Bartlett, 2011).

Gender-based mobbing—sexual or gender-based harassment—can occur in various relational dynamics, including between women and men, women and women, men and men, and superiors and subordinates within an organization, although this is a form of harassment perpetrated mainly by men against women. This type of mobbing often involves abuse of power in exchange for something, accompanied by demands for submission and obedience.

Despite significant progress in addressing workplace discrimination and harassment through legal frameworks and organizational policies, sexual harassment remains a serious concern across various industries and regions. In recent years, several feminist movements like #MeToo have brought heightened awareness and urgency to addressing sexual harassment, encouraging more victims to speak out and demanding stronger measures to prevent and respond to such behavior. Nonetheless, ongoing efforts are needed to ensure that workplaces are free from harassment and that all employees can work in an environment of mutual respect and safety.

This paper provides a detailed analysis of mobbing as a phenomenon, including sexual harassment in the workplace. Additionally, the paper presents recent statistical data on mobbing worldwide and in our home country and data from a recent study to summarize Macedonian respondents' views on the topic.

## Manifestations of Mobbing and Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

**Mobbing** is defined as a form of psychological harassment, characterized by repeated activities aimed at degrading the worker on various grounds.

Mobbing causes violations of human rights and dignity, harms physical, mental, and social health, and hinders the professional future of the victim (Dobrojević, 2011; Bartlett and Bartlett, 2011). Mobbing, in itself, constitutes harassment aimed at undermining the victim's integrity, professional, social, and sometimes even private functioning, reputation, and dignity through constant criticism and complaints, as well as excessive and persistent control by employers. Perpetrators of this negative phenomenon can include employers, managers, directors, colleagues, or groups of colleagues, and victims can be either individuals or groups of workers (Han, G.-S., 2023; Bartlett and Bartlett, 2011).

Mobbing has existed for decades and has been studied by many scholars. It was first formulated and diagnosed by the Swedish psychologist of German origin, Prof. Dr. Heinz Leymann, making him a global expert on this issue. In the 1960s, Leymann researched hostile behavior among children, naming it "mobbing." Later, in the 1980s, he observed the same behavior among employees in the workplace. Believing this to be a significant social problem, he developed effective methods for preventing mobbing and rehabilitating mobbing victims. He described mobbing as a collective form of bullying in which individuals, through systematic and repeated negative actions, isolate, exclude, or maliciously harass a colleague. His research highlighted the severe psychological and physical consequences of mobbing on victims, which often led to long-term trauma, stress-related illnesses, and in extreme cases, suicide. Leymann discovered that every fourth worker experiences this type of abuse at least once in their career, calculating that 3.5% of the Swedish workforce is continuously affected by mobbing for an average of about fifteen months per individual (Leymann, 1996).

In addition to his research, Leymann was instrumental in advocating for legislative measures and organizational policies to address workplace harassment and protect employee well-being. He authored numerous influential publications on mobbing, contributing significantly to the field of occupational psychology and human resources management.

Over the last decades, research on this type of behavior has been continuously conducted. The most common forms of mobbing are vertical and horizontal mobbing (Leymann, 1996; Vveinhardt and Włodzimierz 2020): (1) vertical mobbing: occurs when a superior harasses a subordinate, but it can also happen in reverse when lower-ranking workers unite against the boss, expressing disobedience and aggression towards them; (2) horizontal mobbing: shows the abuse of workers in equal positions within a hierarchical organization. Due to feelings of jealousy, envy, and threat, the aggressor tries to eliminate the victim through various mobbing activities if they believe they can advance in their career and reach the desired position at work.

Additionally, there are several categories of behaviors characterizing workplace mobbing or as defined by Bartlett and Bartlett (2011: 247) three overarching types: a) work-related; b) personal and c) physical/threatening. Other

unwanted behaviors at the workplace might include (Bartlett and Bartlett, 2011; Jennifer, Cowie, and Ananiadou, 2003; Kostelić-Martić, 2005):

- Attack on the possibility of adequate communication (occurs when the supervisor or colleague prevents the victim from expressing themselves by immediately interrupting them when they try to speak),
- Attack on the possibility of maintaining social relationships (achieved through the isolation of the victim as no one addresses them, they are not invited to meetings, not included in company events),
- Attack on personal reputation (using ridicule and inventing stories with negative and false content),
- Attack on work performance (manifested through constant criticism, low evaluations, and excessive control. The attitude towards the victim ranges between two extremes: completely taking away work and canceling work tools—known as the “empty chair syndrome,” to overwhelming the victim with work that exceeds their abilities— “work overload syndrome” (Kostelić-Martić A., 2005),
- Attack on the victim’s health (denying the right to annual leave or days off, constant orders for overtime work, unpaid overtime work).

**Sexual harassment** has always existed in the workplace, most often perpetrated by colleagues or superiors. It encompasses any form of unwanted and inappropriate verbal, non-verbal, and physical contact of a sexual nature (McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone, 2012). This harassment is executed through various threats, intimidations, and sexual coercion, involving the constant repetition of inappropriate activities with sexual connotations: improper behavior, casual jokes, inappropriate physical contact, gestures, looks, inappropriate sexual proposals, excessive friendliness, and similar actions. Such sexual behaviors negatively impact the victim’s mental and physical health and ability to work, creating a disturbing, unpleasant, humiliating, and offensive environment. Although it equally can impact men and women, this is a form of harassment perpetrated mainly by men against women (Bularzik and Buhle, 1983, p. 118). According to the International Labour Organization ([www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org)), women who have been more frequently abused tend to have the following characteristics: low socio-economic status, belonging to ethnic minorities, being homosexual, bisexual, transgender women, migrants, women with special needs, and young women.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is not a new phenomenon. It was faced by many female workers in the United States since colonial times. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this problem also crossed ethnic lines, and many working women in the USA misinterpreted sexual harassment in the workplace as racism. However, most of the evidence of sexual harassment before the 1940s concerned single women, as married women entered into

the labor force mainly during and after World War II (Bularzik and Buhle, 1983, p. 119-122).

The reason for sexual harassment is rarely sexual interest; more often, it occurs to reinforce a sense of power or as in Bularzik and Buhle (1983) words “the major function of sexual harassment is to preserve the dominance of patriarchy”. Traditional gender roles and stereotypes about how men and women should behave are replicated in the business world and significantly influence the occurrence of sexual harassment. For example, the entry of women into the labor market and the employment of women in traditionally “male” professions lead to women breaking these traditional roles and stereotypes, and sexual harassment may be used as punishment.

Sexual harassment is a problem that affects all countries, sectors, and professions. However, victims rarely report this form of harassment due to several main reasons: normalization of sexual harassment, lack of awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment, fear of retaliation from colleagues or superiors, lack of an effective reporting mechanism, and stereotypes that blame the victim instead of the perpetrator. Additionally, proving sexual harassment is difficult if there are no witnesses.

### **Statistical Indicators and Legal Framework of Mobbing and Sexual Harassment in the Workplace**

The statistics on workplace sexual harassment worldwide are quite alarming. Specifically, data for the United States in 2023 indicates that only 25% of workplace sexual harassment victims reported it to a superior or management, while 38% of women stated they had experienced sexual harassment at their workplace. Concerning gender-based sexual harassment, the statistics show that 1 in 3 women under the age of 35 have been sexually harassed at work, and 7 out of 10 women with special needs have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. Additionally, approximately 75% of workplace sexual harassment cases remain unreported; 63% of women did not file a complaint, and 79% of men chose not to share their harassment experience with anyone. These figures are directly linked to the fact that 55% of victims in the U.S. reported experiencing some form of retaliation after speaking out about sexual harassment (BusinessDIT, *Alarming Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Statistics*, 15/05/2024)

According to the Fourth European Working Conditions Survey by EUROFOUND, 2 percent of European workers report experiencing sexual harassment, with women reporting such incidents three times more often than men. The highest rates are found in the Czech Republic (10 percent), Norway (7 percent), Turkey, Croatia (6 percent), Denmark, Sweden, Lithuania, and the UK (5 percent). Conversely, in southern European countries like Italy, Spain, Malta, and Cyprus, reported cases are below 1 percent, indicating minimal occurrence (Süral and Kiliçoğlu, 2011).

In many Asian countries, although sexual harassment is not a new social phenomenon, it only began to attract the attention of researchers and society in the 1990s. For example, in Japan, the term “sexual harassment” was not recognized until the late 1980s. It was only in the 1990s that the Japanese government began to address the issue by increasing awareness among employers and incorporating sexual harassment into legislation. Despite these efforts, statistics indicate that companies have made only modest progress in reducing instances of sexual harassment (Huen, 2007: 818-819).

Sexual harassment has been a significant issue in Western countries for quite some time, particularly in the United States, which has pioneered the establishment of related laws. However, it remains a relatively recent subject of study in North Macedonia and the region in general (Süral and Kiliçoğlu, 2011).

In North Macedonia, only 48 complaints of workplace mobbing were filed during 2023, with 33 in the public sector and only 15 in the private sector. These numbers suggest that workplace mobbing or harassment exists but is rarely reported (Вечер, *Тажно е што во Македонија има само две постапки за мобинг*, 23/02/2023). This data confirms that victims of mobbing sexual harassment in the workplace rarely initiate legal action, and the focus often shifts to what the victim did and whether provoked the situation, according to non-governmental organizations dealing with this issue. On the other hand, the problem is also that legal proceedings are lengthy and expensive.

Regarding the legal framework in the Republic of North Macedonia, workplace mobbing is regulated under the Labor Relations Law (LRL) and the Law on Protection from Harassment in the Workplace (LPHW). Mobbing, characterized by attacks on a person’s honor and reputation and elements of insult and violation of fundamental human rights, is not explicitly criminalized under the Criminal Code (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia No. 19, March 30, 2004 - consolidated text), particularly in the chapter on Criminal Offenses Against Labor Relations (Law on Protection from Harassment in the Workplace, 2013; 2015).

The LRL defines harassment as any unwanted behavior aimed at violating the dignity of a job candidate or employee, causing fear, or creating a hostile, humiliating, or offensive environment. Sexual harassment falls under this definition if the behavior is sexual in nature. Amendments to the LRL in 2009 introduced Article 9-a, prohibiting psychological harassment (mobbing) in the workplace, specifying that such behavior must occur frequently over at least six months. However, this regulation has proven inadequate, resulting in a weak practice of positive judgments establishing mobbing (Labor Relations Law, 2009).

The LPHW outlines the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of employers and employees regarding the prevention of psychological and sexual harassment at work, measures and procedures for protection, and related issues. Its primary goal is to prevent mobbing and provide quicker and more

effective protection while mitigating its consequences (Law on Protection from Harassment in the Workplace, art. 2, 2013; 2015).

The LPHW's definition of mobbing includes continuous and systematic psychological harassment that violates an employee's dignity, integrity, reputation, and honor. Unlike the LRL, it does not specify a minimum duration for the behavior, leading to legal uncertainty about protection before the six months. Interpreting the LPHW as taking precedence over the LRL suggests that the six-month period is not mandatory for obtaining protection. The LPHW also adds that mobbing can harm physical and mental health, professional future, job security, and workplace stability (Law on Protection from Harassment in the Workplace, 2013; 2015), .

The specific law provides two procedures for mobbing protection: a preliminary procedure with the employer and a judicial protection procedure, which are independent and can be pursued concurrently.

Preliminary Procedure for Protection from Workplace Harassment with the Employer (Law on Protection from Harassment in the Workplace, art. 17, 2013; 2015):

- Initiated by the employee's written request to the harasser, indicating that the behavior is inappropriate, unacceptable, and unwanted, and warning of potential legal action if it continues.

Judicial Protection Procedure from Workplace Harassment (Law on Protection from Harassment in the Workplace, art. 31, 2013; 2015):

- Employees dissatisfied with the employer's protection outcome can file a lawsuit. These disputes are treated as labor disputes, following the Law on Civil Procedure.
- The lawsuit can seek (Law on Protection from Harassment in the Workplace, art. 32, 2013; 2015):
  - \* Determination of harassment,
  - \* Prohibition of harassment or its repetition,
  - \* Actions to eliminate harassment consequences,
  - \* Compensation for material and non-material damage caused by harassment.

### **Research: Perceptions of Workplace Harassment among Employees in the Republic of North Macedonia**

To gain a clearer picture of mobbing as an everyday occurrence in the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as gender-based or sexual harassment in the workplace, we conducted an online survey with 58 respondents (employed women and men). The survey aimed to address questions assessing whether respondents have experienced workplace harassment, its prevalence, and whether gender plays a role. The survey was distributed online, using the snowball

sampling method. Despite the anonymity of the survey, the sensitive nature of the topic likely contributed to the limited number of respondents.

We consider that including hypotheses will help guide further analysis and interpretation of the survey data to provide a clearer understanding of the dynamics of workplace harassment in the Republic of North Macedonia. To better understand mobbing as an everyday occurrence in the Republic of North Macedonia and gender-based or sexual harassment in the workplace, we proposed the following hypotheses for the online survey:

Hypothesis 1: Gender Differences in Harassment Experience - Women are more likely to experience workplace harassment compared to men.

Hypothesis 2: Age and Harassment Experience - Younger employees are more likely to notice or experience workplace harassment compared to older employees.

Hypothesis 3: Role of Colleagues vs. Superiors in Harassment - Workplace harassment is more frequently perpetrated by colleagues than by superiors.

Hypothesis 4: Psychological Harassment Prevalence - Psychological harassment is the most common type of workplace harassment experienced by employees.

Hypothesis 5: Gender of Harassment Perpetrators - Men are more likely to be perpetrators of sexual harassment compared to women.

Regarding the demographic data of the respondents, 34,4% were male, while 65,5% were female. The majority of respondents (48,3%) were aged 18-29, 31% were aged 30-44, and 20,6% were over 45 years old.

When asked, "Have you noticed or experienced harassment at the workplace?", the majority (72,4%) responded positively. In addition, 82,7% of respondents stated they had witnessed workplace harassment, with 22 respondents indicating it occurred very often, and 22 sometimes. This high percentage of witnesses suggests that harassment is not an isolated issue but rather a widespread problem affecting many employees in our country. Respondents indicated that mobbing at the workplace was most frequently perpetrated by a colleague (26 respondents), while 20 respondents indicated that the harassment was committed by a superior. This finding underscores the complexity of workplace dynamics, where harassment can come from various levels within the organization, complicating efforts to address and mitigate these behaviors. Some research even suggests that perpetrators of workplace bullying can become targets themselves (Vranjes, 2022).

In terms of the type of harassment, the majority (72,4%) indicated they most often faced psychological harassment, six respondents faced physical harassment, and none reported sexual harassment at the workplace. This distribution suggests that psychological harassment is the most pervasive form of mistreatment in the workplace, which can include behaviors such as intimidation, humiliation, and verbal abuse. The absence of reported sexual harassment could indicate either a lower prevalence or potential underreporting due



to stigma or fear of repercussions (Freedman-Weiss et al., 2019). In response to the hypothetical question of how respondents would deal with workplace harassment, the majority (24) stated they would report the incident to their superiors, 18 would report it to the appropriate institution, 14 would confront the harasser, four would physically confront the harasser, and four would leave the job. These results indicate a reliance on internal reporting mechanisms and a belief in the organization's responsibility to address such issues. Interestingly, 14 respondents mentioned they would confront the harasser directly, suggesting a somewhat proactive and assertive approach to dealing with harassment. These responses underscore the importance of effective and accessible reporting mechanisms within organizations, as well as the need for comprehensive support systems for victims.

Regarding victims, an almost equal number of respondents (48,2%) believe that both men and women equally experience workplace harassment, 44,8% of respondents believe the victims are primarily women, and only 6 believe the victims are predominantly men. The results of our survey are contrary to the broader societal understanding that women, historically and statistically, tend to face higher rates of certain types of harassment, such as sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. This result does not confirm our final hypothesis on the gender of harassment perpetrators as an almost equal number of respondents believe that both men and women equally experience workplace harassment, it suggests a perception that harassment is not predominantly gender-specific. The outcome of this question might be linked to the small number of respondents included in the survey or might be a recognition of the widespread nature of the problem in our country, highlighting the importance of addressing it as a universal workplace issue.

Concerning the remaining four hypotheses of our study they were generally confirmed. The first hypothesis regarding gender differences in harassment experience was confirmed, based on the fact that the majority of respondents believe that the victims of workplace harassment are primarily women. When we analyze the results from the first and fifth hypotheses, we observe that our respondents perceive women as the most likely targets of workplace harassment, while both men and women are seen as potential perpetrators. The second hypothesis regarding age and harassment experience was also partially confirmed since the majority of respondents to our survey are aged 18-29, which might suggest a greater awareness or experience of workplace harassment within this age group.

26 respondents indicated that harassment was most frequently perpetrated by a colleague, compared to 20 respondents who indicated it was committed by a superior. This data confirms only partially our third hypothesis regarding the role of colleagues vs. superiors in harassment. Although colleagues were identified as the primary perpetrators more often than superiors, as mentioned before in the text, the significant number of reports involving superiors, highlights that harassment can occur at various levels within an organization.

Our fourth hypothesis on Psychological Harassment Prevalence was confirmed as 42 respondents indicated they most often faced psychological harassment, while only six respondents faced physical harassment, and none reported sexual harassment.

Overall, our research confirms several of our hypotheses and highlights the importance of addressing workplace harassment as a universal issue that affects employees regardless of their position within the organization. The findings emphasize the need for effective, accessible reporting mechanisms and comprehensive support systems to protect and support victims. Additionally, fostering a workplace culture that discourages all forms of harassment and promotes respect and inclusion is crucial for mitigating these issues and improving the overall work environment in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample size to provide an even clearer understanding of the dynamics of workplace harassment in North Macedonia. This would help in developing more targeted and effective interventions to combat harassment in the workplace.

### **Conclusion:**

Based on the information presented in this paper, workplace harassment, including mobbing and sexual harassment, is a pervasive issue with significant implications for individuals, organizations, and society at large.

Workplace harassment manifests in various forms, such as constant ridicule, belittlement, humiliating tasks, and verbal abuse, all of which can severely impact the victim's cognitive, affective, and behavioral well-being. The consequences extend beyond the individual to affect organizational performance and societal norms.

Mobbing, in particular, has profound effects, often leading victims to leave their jobs, resulting in losses both personally and economically for organizations. This loss of valuable human resources hinders organizational progress and diminishes the overall quality of the workforce.

Despite the enactment of laws like the Law on Protection from Harassment at the Workplace in the Republic of North Macedonia, which aims to prevent mobbing and provide quicker protection, there remains insufficient attention and resources dedicated to prevention by state institutions and social organizations. This gap underscores the ongoing need for enhanced awareness, proactive measures, and robust legal frameworks to combat workplace harassment effectively.

Sexual harassment, while distinct from mobbing, also warrants significant concern. It disproportionately affects women, particularly those from vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities. The legal and social frameworks addressing sexual harassment need continual refinement and reinforcement to ensure comprehensive protection for all individuals in the workplace.

Our study on Perceptions of Workplace Harassment among Employees in the Republic of North Macedonia underscores the critical need to address workplace harassment universally, impacting employees regardless of their organizational position. The research highlights the importance of accessible reporting mechanisms and robust support systems to safeguard victims effectively. Additionally, fostering a workplace culture that rejects all forms of harassment and promotes respect and inclusivity is essential for addressing these issues and enhancing the overall work environment in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Future research could benefit from expanding the sample size and diversity to gain a more comprehensive understanding of workplace harassment dynamics in North Macedonia. This approach would facilitate the development of targeted interventions that are more effective in combating harassment in the workplace.

In conclusion, addressing workplace harassment requires a multifaceted approach involving legal protections, organizational policies, and cultural shifts toward fostering respectful and inclusive work environments. By prioritizing prevention, education, and support for victims, societies can mitigate the negative impacts of harassment and promote healthier, more equitable workplaces for everyone.

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