



# Verbal violence in the workplace according to victims' sex—a systematic review of the literature



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## ABSTRACT

Verbal abuse is the most prevalent form of workplace violence. Its impacts on organizations as well as on victims' health are numerous. Several studies have emphasized the need to take into consideration victims' characteristics, in particular sex, to better understand rates of verbal violence in the workplace. Indeed, study results are contradictory, as some show women to be more at risk while others indicate that men would be more exposed. These variations could in part be explained by other factors that influence the prevalence of workplace violence, such as occupational domain and job characteristics. This review of literature thus aimed to describe the prevalence of verbal violence according to sex across occupational domains. Results showed that a majority of studies concluded to no significant sex differences. Among the studies with significant results, men tended to be more at risk than women. However, due to several limitations, it was not possible to draw conclusions as regards specific occupations. Conclusions of this review lead to specific recommendations for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Verbal violence is an important issue in the workplace due to its high occurrence and its multiple implications. This form of violence can refer to “the use of words that are personally insulting such as generally abusive spoken obscenities and foul language, or indicating a lack of respect for the

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dignity and worth of an individual" (Aytac et al., 2011, p. 387). It is the most frequent form of psychological violence observed (Hills & Joyce, 2013; Piquero, Piquero, Craig, & Clipper, 2013). A review of the literature by Hills and Joyce (2013) indicated rates of 10.8% to 92.6%, with a majority of studies (seven out of nine) showing rates of 57.5% or higher.

Due to its prevalence, verbal violence in the workplace has significant organizational and health implications. From an organizational point of view, verbal violence may create a hostile work climate and decrease job satisfaction (Manderino & Berkey, 1997; Tepper, 2000), which can directly cause absenteeism (EFILWC, 2010), turnover (Tepper, 2000), and long-term negative effects (Cook, Green, & Topp, 2001). Sofield and Salmond (2003) reported studies which found turnover to be directly related to factors associated with verbal violence for 16% to 24% of employees who had quit their job. Verbal violence can also indirectly cause loss of productivity and increase work load and errors (Cox, 1987; Sofield & Salmond, 2003).

From a health point of view, verbal violence can generate psychological distress in the same way as physical abuse (Flannery, Hanson, & Penk, 1995). Indeed, victims of verbal violence may suffer from post-traumatic stress reactions, anxiety and depression (Gimeno, Barrientos-Gutierrez, Burau, & Felknor, 2012). Moreover, victims may indirectly suffer from cumulative stress (Antai-Otong, 2001), which can contribute to numerous physical disorders (e.g., hypertension, heart disease).

Furthermore, psychological distress can affect men and women differently. The literature on post-traumatic disorders shows that women are at higher risk compared to men around a 2:1 ratio (Kimerling, Ouimette, & Wolfe, 2002). Concerning anxiety, estimates indicate that women are around 1.4 to 1.8 times more often affected than men during their lifetime (Breslau, Schultz, & Peterson, 1995; McLean, Asnaani, Litz, & Hofmann, 2011; Regier, Narrow, & Rae, 1990). In the same way, women are generally more often found to suffer from depression with ratios from 1.6:1 to 2.3:1 (Blazer, Kessler, McGonagle, & Swartz, 1994; Hagnell & Gräsbeck, 1990; Kessler et al., 2003). Interestingly, risk factors for anxiety and depression are however found to be more often related to work for men (Afifi, 2007). These differential effects thus present challenges for victims' care, given that women seek out and receive more social (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987) and emotional support (Kaukinen, 2002) to cope with psychological issues, whereas men tend more to develop antisocial behaviour and alcohol abuse (Afifi, 2007).

Although verbal violence has been largely understudied until recently (Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003), some individual and situational characteristics such as victims' sex and occupation have been found to interact with its prevalence in some cases. In their reviews on workplace violence, Piquero et al. (2013) as well as Hills and Joyce (2013) emphasized the need to consider victims' sex and occupation, as these characteristics appear to be related to different forms of violence. Indeed, some studies consider women to be the most at risk for verbal violence (Farrell, Bobrowski, & Bobrowski, 2006; Lawoko, Soares, & Nolan, 2004) whereas other studies show that men are at higher risk (Miedema et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2012). Occupational domains should thus be taken into account as it could explain some variations in these results. In this way, a review on exposure to physical violence at work (Guay, Goncalves, & Jarvis, submitted for publication) showed that men were at higher risk according to victimization surveys in various occupational domains. However, it is important to consider specific occupational categories, given that sex differences were observed in some cases (e.g., nurses). Similarly, in a study on a US representative sample, Fisher and Gunnison (2001) found sex differences regarding the nature and extent of physical violence experienced in the workplace, including variations by sectors of activity and according to certain sociodemographic characteristics, which may interact and in fact put women more at risk in certain fields.

## 2. Current focus

Although some studies have shown sex differences in terms of exposure to verbal violence at work, no systematic review of the literature has been conducted on this issue across occupational domains. It would therefore be important to investigate further these aspects in order to gain a clearer picture of this phenomenon. Are there sex differences concerning the prevalence of verbal violence across occupational domains? Are men and women at higher risk in specific occupations? Some elements of answer to these questions would lead to targeted prevention strategies and adapted methods of care, based on the potential differential consequences for women and men.

## 3. Systematic literature review

### 3.1. Methods

A literature search on verbal violence in the workplace was performed in the following databases: Canadian Research Index, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Eric, *Érudit*, Francis, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, MEDLINE, NCJRS, PILOTS, ProQuest Psychology Journals, PsycINFO, Social Sciences Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science. The following search terms were used in appropriate combinations: workplace violence, psychological violence, verbal violence, sex, gender, women, sex or gender roles, sex or gender identities, sex or gender relations, sex or gender differences.

Limits were placed when searching electronic databases with regard to the year of publication (data posterior to 1992), the language of publication (English or French), the type of articles (peer-reviewed only) and excluding the following keywords: harassment, bullying, teenager, youth. Based on title and abstract, a total of 90 articles were evaluated. Twenty-three additional relevant studies were identified from the reference sections of the selected articles. An evaluation grid adapted from Law et al. (1998) combined with the interjudge reliability method was used to select articles to analyze. Inclusion requirements are summarized in Table 1. The total number of studies that met the criteria was 29.

### 3.2. Results

#### 3.2.1. Definitions

There were no common definitions of verbal violence across the selected studies, even though three definitions were each shared by two studies. A majority of studies (20 out of 29) defined verbal violence as the presence of threats, i.e., oral communication menacing

**Table 1**  
Selection criteria.

- 1) Participants were worker victims of or witnesses to violence in their workplace.
- 2) The type of violence studied referred to at least one of the following forms: verbal violence, verbal threats, intimidation.
- 3) The form of violence studied was defined for the participants; when not specified, the questionnaire or examples of the items used were provided allowing to assess this criterion.
- 4) The prevalence of violence was measured based on a clearly indicated reference period.
- 5) The results were analyzed specifically for verbal violence and were not exclusively on violence in general.
- 6) The results were reported separately for women and men, including statistical tests measuring sex differences when performed.
- 7) When the sample was not representative of the parent population, the number of men and women was specified, or the statistical analyses allowed calculating it.
- 8) The minority sex in the study represented no less than 20% of the overall sample, except if the representativity vs. the parent population was explicitly mentioned.
- 9) There were no major methodological biases that could affect the scientific validity of the results.

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