"Workplace Aggression: Psycho-social Dimensions of Aggression and Aggressor, and Counter Measures"

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Abstract :

In the 21st century, with the rise of rapid technological and social developments, liberal norms, human rights etc., the scopes of engagement and advancement have seen new heights at individual and organizational level. And the chances of violence have also crept into these levels as the modern human beings are engaged almost one third of a day in their socio-professional spheres. Closer observations reveal, these socio-professional areas are not always positive and conducive mainly because of individual opportunism and profit, and the organizational pressure of catering beyond its capability. What it results in is workplace aggression, a grave phenomenon to be explored further. Various factors bring about workplace aggression, which may arise from a socio-organizational perspective or from a psycho-individual perspective. Moreover, there are types of aggressors – organizational insiders and organizational outsiders (LeBlanc & Barling, 2015) with their distinctive motives. Moreover, where the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) perceives the notion of aggression from the victim's perspective, the social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012), especially gender stereotypes, contribute to the perspectives of women victims. Studies show that though women are not more susceptible than men to workplace aggression, they are more emotive and sensitive about it and hence more vulnerable (Webster et al., 2018).

This study aims explore the nature of workplace aggression and aggressor. It also critically analyses the psycho-social bases of workplace aggression against women. Besides, it reflects upon the

organizational and legal policies available for women to counter such atrocities. It would help bridging the gap for a safe, conducive and productive working environment. The study also illuminates on the dire need for the enrichment of such literature in the Indian context with suggestions for further research.

Key words: workplace aggression, aggressor, violence, gender, organisational culture.

Introduction

Organizations, whether government, public or private, has its own role in catering the various needs of the society. According to the theory of organizational environment, for an organization to work harmoniously and productively, a healthy atmosphere is a minimum requirement; and both government and organizational policies strive their best to ensure it. But the growing competition, undue work pressure, corruption, favouritism, exploitation, lack of infrastructure, improper management system, preference to personal gains, personal health etc has given rise to many unwelcome situations within an organization, and workplace aggression is one of them.

Workplace aggression, in simple terms, refers to any unwelcome event in a working environment that threatens the well-being of an employee and affects the organisational effectiveness. It is an adverse situation or experience within the workplace which is caused by a single or a group of people, and as a result poses a threat to the individual/s and productivity. Besides, it indirectly impacts on the external bodies related with the organization. Recent studies have noticed the gravity and emergence of this problem globally with concerns related to economy, society, health etc. Moreover, the matter of acute concern is the degree of aggression and its escalating nature (Murphy & O'Leary 1989). Aggression may vary from simple verbal abuses, exploitation, manipulation to serious physical events, violence, sexual assaults and even life-threatening situations. Where mere verbal incidents only reflect upon an individual's mental and emotional health, physical assaults and escalations altogether disrupts the community apart from the individual.

Reasons for such incidents vary on a large scale ranging from psychological grounds to social, economic and organisational interests. Some of these are direct and some of them are indirect which make the preventive measures difficult. Politics, power and influence tactics also adds to these conditions to worsen the situation (Judge & Bretz, 1994). Moreover, considering the gender perspective, aggression finds newer dimensions as it remains no more constrained within the aggressor but upon the appraisal of the victim of the situation and to the social interpretation of 'stereotypes' (Heilman, 2001) and social role theory (Eagly, 1987).

`As a counter measure, there are certain organisational policies and mechanisms that intend to prevent, reduce aggression and stop its repetition. These mechanisms operate both on personal and organisational level from counselling, mental support to sanctions, complaint committees and managerial leadership strategies. Besides, there are government laws to protect citizen rights and employee harassment. In case of women protection, there are separate provisions almost in every area. Other government and non-government organisations too have come forward to help the victims and to ensure justice. Even in the United Nations (UN) special convention was made to protect victims specially women and their empowerment.

This study aims to explore the nuances of aggression from different perspectives, especially on the types, levels, intensity. It also differentiates between stress, aggression, violence, abuse, sexual harassment and explains its escalating nature. Theories like social role theory, social capital theory, transactional theory of stress, gender stereotypes also open up new dimensions of interpretation in these situations both from the viewpoint of the victim, the assaulter and the organisation. There are also different types of aggressors within and outside the workplace with their different motives which might be psychological, social, political, personal, organizational, power-related issues or something else like justice perception. And all these amalgamate in individual agony, loss of productivity and resources, disruption of organisational environment and culture and ultimately suffering of the stakeholders. This study also notes different strategies and policies to prevent aggression at different levels and the legal and redressal options available for the victims to seek justice.

Aggression and its Nature

People often interpret aggression as bullying, mental torture, injustice, psychological attacks, abuse, incivility, harassment and many more; but the common ground is the intentionality and outcome which vary in degree in situations. Robinson & Bennett (1995) refers to aggression as a socially hostile behaviour that threats the norms and well-being of an organization. It may be directed to an individual or the organization. Neuman and Baron (2005) go further in adding that the intended targets of aggression are motivated to avoid such acts. But to limit aggression on an organization level only would be a mistake as a single individual working independently may come across aggression. Here, it must be noted that aggression may be caused by the people within the organization (often referred to as insider-initiated) or by people outside the organization (often referred to as outsider-initiated).

The concept of workplace aggression came into existence in the amalgamation of different concepts. As early as in 1961, American psychologist Arnold Herbert Buss propounded the concept of workplace aggression regarding the areas of 'projective techniques, psychopathology, psychosomatics, prejudice, and development'. He also elaborated his work in studying aggressive responses and reactions in a

laboratory setting, measures and theories of aggression and finally about the developmental and social aspects of aggression. He also categorised aggression in three different forms: physical–verbal, active–passive, and direct–indirect. Later, Neuman & Baron (1998) makes the distinction between workplace aggression and workplace violence by specifying that where the first is a broad all-encompassing term and purely resides to psychological and behavioural exertions of expression, the latter is extreme and entirely physical. Violence often comes in the forms of physical attacks, injuries, homicides etc. They also talk about three dimensions of workplace aggression in the ascending order of intensity: expressions of hostility, obstructionism, and overt aggression. Situational or psychological factors not always directly result in aggression but they form a basis for an extreme exertion starting from minor expressions such as disrespect, intimidation towards major issues like physical assaults.

Perpetrators of aggression can be categorized into two main categories viz. organizational insider and organizational outsider, and LeBlanc & Barling (2004) refers to them as 'outsider-initiated' and 'insider-initiated' aggression. The point of distinction between these two categories is that the outsider-initiated aggressor is not a part of the organization, but the insider is. Moreover, insider- initiated aggression are generally less dramatic, physical and lethal. And according to the relationship of the perpetrator with the victim, they categorize aggression into four types: Type I where the offender has no legitimate relationship with the organization, Type II where the offender has a legitimate relationship with the organization but not an employee, Type III where the assailant is an employee within the organization and Type IV where the assailant has some type of relationship with an employee but not with the organization. Here, a related concept, Picket Line Violence, must be noted which is a systematic form of expression against an organizational injustice, and is generally non-destructive and non-lethal.

Some researchers (e.g., Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999) opine that aggression is a form of retaliatory behaviour supposedly to restore justice in an unfair situation, especially a reaction to a situation. There are definite provocations, cues which are instrumental in predicting aggression, and thereby the targets of aggression are specific in certain situations. These predictors have unambiguous bases behind them and a close analysis opens up multiple interpretations (Bies and Tripp, 2005).

Justice perception also accounts for aggression in the workplace. A single norm, policy, work ethics, conduct of a fellow employee may appear to an individual to be unjust and uncompromisable, and it gives vent to unpleasant threat to another individual. By this stance, aggression can be said to be retaliatory where the perpetrator has a sense of moral confidence in threatening other individual. On the other hand, it may be one-sided where the perpetrator expresses his personal angst on a co-worker who has nothing to do with the reason of his/her discomfiture.

From a legal perspective, workplace violence as a part of aggression is a crime where a violent act is committed against a person who is performing his/her professional duties and thereby endangers the health and safety of the professional/s. These crimes vary in intensity according to the nature of the act; it may range from less serious crimes like verbal harassment, stalking, abuse to more serious crimes like assault, molestation, rape, homicide etc.; and all these needs legal attention.

Psychological, Social and other Dimensions of Aggression

Aggressors of workplace aggression does not intend their exertions out of void as researchers opine that they have their own reasons behind it. Numerous factors come at play when their motives are analysed, be it an insider-initiated aggression or an outsider-initiated aggression, be it an aggression towards an individual or an organization. Webster et al. (2018) tries to access these factors analysing the social role theory together with the transactional theory of stress. They find that society and organizations assume a sex-differentiated 'political' role and gender-typed behaviours from their employees and this results in stress for the women more than men. To support their stand, they reside to the concept of 'negative affect activation' which is characterized by feelings of stress, sadness, fear etc. Both the genders are equally susceptible to aggression but the self-appraisal to an uncomfortable situation is more negative for women than for men; as women are more emotive and burdened with the assumptions of gender stereotypes, their threat appraisal leads to negative affect activation and results in stress. They propose that women respond differently and their threat-appraisals are more severe than men. Thus, though exposure remains the same, psychologically for women greater stress resorts to greater experience of aggression.

Whether aggression is target specific or not is a matter of grave concern to understand the predictors of aggression. Hershcovis et al. (2007) focus only on insider-initiated aggression and discuss two issues – the variables predicting aggression and whether aggression is target specific. They differentiate between the situational and individual predictors which help us to analyse the type of aggression and its motives. Trait anger, sex and negative affectation are the leading factors within individual predictors which calls for the psychological dimension. Where the trait anger presents the psychological issues of the aggressors, negative affectation exhibits the sensitive and reactive nature of victim and his/her degree of vulnerability. People with higher negative affectivity have the higher proclivity towards the feeling of being aggressed. Though men are often seen to be more aggressive in nature, it appears that there is no significant relation between sex and aggression. Situational predictors such as distributive and procedural injustice, interpersonal conflict, situational constraints, job dissatisfaction also holds the ground for aggression as all these factors affect the organizational climate and culture of an individual. Generally, these factors pose a threat to the aggressor's well-being and his/her job profile

and most of them are directed towards the supervisor or the head of the organisation. Moreover, situational factors are not exclusive of the individual factors and only both factors determine the target and the intensity.

Another area of interest is the sense of job security and consumption of alcohol of the aggressor. Greenberg & Barling (1999) in their study find that people who are not confident of their position in the organization are insecure and in constant self-imposed threat of losing their jobs. In addition, consumption of alcohol also tolls for their mental health. In a similar study by LeBlanc & Barling (2004) considers two individual variables – alcohol consumption and 'hostile attributional bias' (inference from an another's intent to be hostile) and two organizational variables – overcontrolling supervision and injustice. Alcohol consumption directly affects the aggressor's perception of injustice and job security. These, together with overcontrolling supervision leads to aggression mainly towards the supervisor. This, in turn, reduces commitment towards the organization. On the other hand, outsider-initiated aggression is not related to these types of emotional or psychological health, rather some form of organizational injustice perceived by the related persons.

Breaking the common myths of a stereotyped 'typical' concept of an aggressor, Barling et al. (2009), in their elaborate study, considers numerous factors in profiling the bases of aggression and an aggressor. They posit that age, gender, race, socio-economic variables have no correlation with aggression but mere abstract conceptual attributions of common mass under varied situations and hold no ground whatsoever. But situational colocation has a positive correlation and indicates that higher the time spent between the perpetrator and the target higher is the chances of the predictor variables to result in some kind of aggression. Moreover, negative affect and low self-esteem of the victim also counts for the sense of being aggressed in certain situations. Other factors like trait anger and negative personality increases the chances of aggression as these aspects are directly related to the psychology and mental health of the aggressor. Personal history with aggression, whether as an aggressor or as a victim, has a positive correlation with aggression. Usually, as a perpetrator if a person is not checked with proper measures, he/she may develop a sense of confidence in such acts. On the other hand, people often take a victim for granted if the victim fails to resist such threats. In both the cases, the chances of repetition increases.

Apart from the individual/s level, researchers find organizational mismanagements too as a source of aggression, which indirectly influences person/s to exhaust their unwelcome behaviours. Johnson et al. (2018), borrowing from Bourdieu's social capital theory, argues that though aggression occurs irrespective of the community, evidence could be found of a 'spillover' from a local aggressive community. They also find a positive relation between frequency of aggression and inaction against

complaints at the organisational level, resulting in a perception of aggression as a systematic failure rather than simple random acts. In addition, often organisational level of employee engagement plays a significant role in such situations; lack of management and failure to engagement of the employees to a proper task also adds up to the psychological and physical discomfiture which in turn cause aggression.

Sexual Harassment at workplace

Aggression as a broad term encompasses a wide range of notions of threats, and sexual harassment is one of them. But it reckons special attention for its severity and seriousness. Sexual harassment refers to any unwelcome activity involving sexuality whether for favour or by force that ultimately affects the working condition of an individual and interfere with his/her performance. As per data published by Ministry of Women and Child Development, 371 cases of workplace harassments were registered in 2014, and it increased a havoc 54% by 2017 with registered cases of 570. And according to government data presented in the Lok Sabha on July 27, 2018 and December 15, 2017, a total number of 2,535 cases of workplace sexual harassment against women have been reported in the last four years till July 27, 2018.

In 2016 the Indian National Bar Association conducted a survey on 6047 participants and 45 victims and the report titled *Garima, Sexual Harassment at Workplace* (2017) records the nature of sexual harassment on both sexes at workplace. Within the victims, the ratio of male and female stands at 22:78; but the most shocking fact is that out of all areas, a surprising 45.2% harassment is reported in the education, lecturing and teaching sector (within 91.11% responses) and only 31.1% complaints were made to the proper authorities. Within the participants, 21.4% reported that they have once been exposed to unwelcome events like sexual comments, jokes, gestures and 26% reported that they have faced such incidents more than once. 10.5% were forced once and 5.3% were forced more than once to do something sexual within their workplace. The worst part, as per the review, is that speaking of sexual harassment is considered a taboo by the society; but still a huge number of the masses are coming forward to protest and prevent it.

The sportspersons too face a huge number off sexual harassments even at the national level. In a Rajya Sabha session on 03.02.2020 (question no. 158), the Minister of State for Youth Affairs and Sports answers that there have been 23 cases of sexual harassment in the last three years within Sports Authority of India (SAI). And the total number surmounts to 45 in the last 10years, according to *The Indian Express.* The report says that though the SAI has not officially answered, the former director-general reveals that even the sportspersons do not lodge all complaints, rather sometimes withdraw or

change them fearing any reverse impact on their career and as a result authorities face difficulties in taking actions.

Sharma and Patidar (2024) argues of gender equality in the area of sexual harassment. They find that men too are equally susceptible to it and such cases are being reported in recent years. To them, men face 'numerous additional obstacles' of social ridicule and stereotypes regarding the masculinity of men. But there are few redressal systems available in India for men.

Organizational and Legal Policies against Aggression

Authorities and organizations worldwide have come upon various strategies and policy measures to counter aggression at workplace. From the perspective of a victim of stress who has a high threat appraisal, greater focus should be given on work environment and discouraging non-sanctioned political behaviour rather than corrective measures, as in such cases the victims often fail to express themselves. Moreover, proper communication by the leaders and managers brings in a healthy working culture, ensures well-being and transparency and act as a primary prevention technique. Manipulation can also be mitigated if there is transparency among the employees and employers (Webster et al., 2018).

From an organizational perspective, instead of considering an individual for aggression, it should be considered as an organisation deficiency (O'Neil & Hopkins, 2015). Communication strategies and information on the scope, progression and expectations of the employees can also curb the chances of aggression (Sabattini & Dinolfo, 2010). Ford & et al. (2016) find that formation of Employee Assistance Programs are highly effective in handling anger of the aggressor by channelling it in a proper healthy way instead of an exertion or outburst in aggression. Such programs would also help probable victims to handle any adverse situation by talking or taking other means or by simply avoiding the probable aggressor.

Other organizational policies such as zero tolerance, penalties, sanctions, termination etc. are induced in a post-aggression situation. A zero tolerance policy ensures that a person of authority is subject to the rules of the organisation and he/she cannot impose discretion or change culpability irrespective of his/her personal repute, history or power. Researchers have found that strong actions taken against the aggressors reduces chances of recurrence in organizations (Cortina and Magley, 2003; Dupré and Barling, 2006). Other preventive measures like restrictions on carrying weapons, health certificates before engagement are also adopted. Moreover, training programmes and support system (e.g. emotional, psychological) are also seen to have a positive effect in case of insider-initiated aggression (LeBlanc & Barling, 2004).

Johnson et al. (2018) finds that job engagement for the employees has an indirect relationship with the frequency of acts of aggression. Though few studies find otherwise, job-engagement is a panacea to prevent repetition of aggression. They find that employees in organizations with higher frequency of aggression are aware of a systematic failure as a reason. Proactive management in successfully engaging the employees and taking systematic action are the means to reduce repetition of aggressive events.

At the international platform, there are certain provisions that legally deal with atrocities and discrimination with the employees. In the USA, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) investigates for the employees against discrimination, offences, unjust treatments and acts as mediators to reconcile between the parties for faster remedy. Alternatively, they clarify the victims right to sue, initiate investigation against the employer, inquire the compliance policies in case of litigation. An another, Tribal Employment Rights Offices (TEROs), fights for the rights and against discrimination for the American Indians enforcing Indian/Native employment preference laws. In the UN General Assembly in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted, an international treaty that ensures the rights and equalities of women. Similarly, the United Kingdom has Equality Act, 2010 which ensures equal treatment to its citizens. This international legal instrument helps to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all areas across countries.

In India, the first breakthrough was seen in the Vishakha Guidelines, promulgated by the Supreme Court in 1997 against sexual harassment at workplace. Later, it was modified into Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 which provides a detailed definition of sexual harassment, rights of a complainant, procedure of filing a complaint and guidance on settlement of the complaint. It ensures that organizations in India must form Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) policies to protect women from sexual harassment by incorporating training and orientation programmes among the employers and employees including third-party workers. It mandates to form Internal Committee Complaint (ICC) and Local Committee Complaint (LCC) cells, grievance mechanism, timeframe etc for a quick and smooth operation. Apart from this, certain laws in Indian Penal Code (IPC) like Article 14, Article 19, Article 21, helpline system like Women Helpline (WHL) Scheme, complaint system like SHe-Box are also there for women for redressal. But the actual matter of concern is not about getting justice or support after an aggressive incident, rather ensuring a healthy, productive, stress-free working environment for the employees.

Discussion

Aggression, violence has always been existing in the history of human beings, but it is a serious threat to civilisation and social order to witness it in a modern civilised society, especially in a social working environment where people aim to serve and induce productivity. The modern work culture and environment is an emerging notion and workplace aggression is further a new concept on which we have insufficient knowledge. But it is certain that victims and onlookers of workplace aggression bear a sense of negativity which substantiate into negative outcomes for the organisation ((Barling et al., 2001). They also lose their trust and reliability and disengage themselves physically and psychologically. As per the various reasons of aggression, apart from individual circumstances, a higher frequency or repetition calls for organisational drawbacks and systematic failures. There are only a few studies reflecting upon the organisational flaws.

Though counter-measures are numerous for prevention and delivering justice, there still remains a question of its reliability and effectiveness (LeBlanc & Barling, 2015). Further studies may be conducted on the effectiveness of such measures. Owing to social stigma and taboo, evidence shows that in most of the cases victims tend to overlook such incidents and often are scared of seeking justice, and it is only the other witness who are bold enough to come up with such reports (*Garima, Sexual Harassment at Workplace,* 2017). This makes a proper investigation or survey more difficult to achieve.

There are also wider scopes of research in case of justice perception or retaliatory aggression from the aggressor's perspective. A false sense of justice is a far strong motif in causing such incidents. Studies might reflect upon some valuable insights considering the age variable both in case of the victim and the perpetrator, as the modern lifestyle, moral concerns, alcohol consumption wreck a havoc on the younger generations.

The final and perhaps the most vital matter of interest is role of sex and its attributes. Apart from social stereotyping, there are other issues like trait anger, self-appraisal and negative affect activation all of which apparently vary in case of each sex. Though researchers agree on women being the more exploited and victimised sex, men too fall victim to aggression. Worse is the fact that there are less studies and support system for men. However, there is no denying the fact that workplace aggression and organizational culture go hand in hand, each affecting and influencing the other by its own positive or negative status. And both these phenomena primarily revolve around working condition and mental health of the employees.

Conflict of Interest

This is to state that the contents of this study, whether in whole or part, has not been submitted prior to this and therefore, has not been published or presented anywhere else. No financial or monetary help or sponsorship is received for publication of this paper. The researchers hold neither any scope of personal or professional benefit of any kind nor any influence or judgment in conducting this study. The study does not support or disapprove any political stance or beliefs. The entire part of the study is original.

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