



Harassing Horrible Bosses

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Abstract: It is said that people do not leave companies but managers. It's true that a significant amount of attrition is due to harassment in organisation. And harassment can be defined as belittling or threatening behaviour towards employees or a group of employees. Almost 50 % of employees have been harassed at some point in their career by supervisor or co-worker. Surprisingly harassment at work place is not studied adequately in management literature. This paper proposes punishment for harassing horrible bosses.

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I. Introduction

Horrible Bosses is a 2011 Hollywood movie where three employees who are harassed by their respective bosses in three different organisations decide to take revenge by murdering them. Of course this is a work of art. And while life sometimes imitates art often it is other way round, with art drawing inspiration from life.

Though art tends to exaggerate, there is some truth in art – literature, paintings, movies So while murdering harassing bosses is unheard of, employees do shout back at bosses if not beat them, and very likely look for alternative employment.

Now it is rather paradoxical that a movie might have considered it worthwhile to explore the topic of horrible bosses, businesses and even academic institutions have not given adequate importance to the issue of horrible bosses.

What is Harassment?

Just to be sure we are discussing harassment at workplace. And we are entirely excluding sexual harassment. Though sexual harassment is extremely important that is such an urgent issue as to merit an entirely different study altogether.

Workplace harassment is the belittling or threatening behaviour directed at an individual or group of workers. Overbearing supervision, constant criticism and blocking promotion are considered aspects of work harassment.

The prevalence of sexual harassment at work is high. Studies by US Merit protection board show that almost 33% of women faced sexual comments, 25% unwanted touching and 15% pressurized on dates. It should be obvious that sexual harassment cannot be ignored. If this paper ignores sexual harassment completely than that is because that would over shadow non sexual harassment which is the theme of this study.

However this paper does not ignore physical violence at work place. This includes physical attacks and that includes pushing, shoving and fist fights. Unlike physical harassment emotional harassment is hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviour such as false accusations of mistakes, intimidation, shouting, insults and harsh criticisms.

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, harassment can include offensive jokes, name calling, physical assaults, threats, intimidation, ridicule, mockery, insults, put downs, and interference with work performance.

Mostly harassment is between a superior and an inferior. However sometimes it is between coworkers. Power harassment is when superior

- a. Makes unreasonable demand of work
- b. Threatening with severe punishments
- c. Insulting verbally
- d. Unnecessary criticism
- e. Delaying salary/promotion

Harassment is illegal and there are laws against harassment. Offensive conduct may include jokes, slurs, epithets, name calling, physical assaults, threats, intimidation, insults, mockery, put down, offensive objects and interference with work performance for it to be illegal.

How prevalent is harassment

Harassment is more common than you think. However it is not being addressed adequately. In fact if you search for harassment on Internet you are more likely to find articles, papers, and blogs on sexual harassment. Of course sexual harassment is important enough to be discussed. But non sexual harassment is painful as well but accepted and condoned.

Sexual harassment is very common. Here are some broad statistics as surveyed by AllVoices in USA in 2021

1. 44% have experienced harassment
2. 34% have left job due to harassment
3. 50% have reported harassment
4. 85% are more likely to report harassment anonymously
5. 72% believe that their organisations want harassment reported

The type of harassment reported were

1. Personal harassment(48%)
2. Discriminatory harassment(43%)
3. Online harassment(40%)
4. Physical Harassment(39%)
5. Sexual Harassment(39%)
6. Psychological Harassment(37%)
7. Abuse of Power(35%)
8. Microaggressions(29%)
9. Socioeconomic harassment(26%)
10. Racism(30%)

Harassment comes from managers as well as coworkers

1. 38% experienced harassment from managers
2. 37% experienced harassment from coworkers
3. 26% experienced harassment from coworkers/managers

People have left jobs due to harassment

34% have left jobs due to harassment

26% have not left jobs due to harassment

40% did not experience harassment needing job change

A 2019 survey by Monster.com revealed that 90% have reported harassment at work place 40% by coworkers and 50% by superiors.

A Survey by HR Acuity found that 46% fear retaliation and 39% believe that their issues will not be addressed.

ILO-Lloyd's Register Foundation Gallup survey conducted study by asking 74000 workers in 121 countries.

And here are results

23% of people have experienced some kind of harassment at work

18% experienced psychological violence

9% experienced physical violence

6% have experienced sexual harassment

Harassment usually is not discussed for several reasons

1. 55% believed it was waste of time
2. 45% were fearful for reputation
3. 43% thought procedures were unclear
4. 43% lacked trust
5. 41% believed people would find about it
6. 33% feared punishment

Workplace Bullying Institute conducts surveys on bullying every year. Its 2021 report has shocking results

13% of Americans are being bullied currently at workplace

17% of Americans have been bullied in past at workplace

19% of Americans have witnessed workplace bullying

65% of bullying is by bosses

21% of bullying is by co workers

14% of bullying is bottoms up

67% of bullies are male and 58% of their targets are males

33% of bullies are female and 65% of their targets are females

90% of Americans support a law to prevent work place bullying

Employers justify bullying by various responses

1. Bullying is necessary to be competitive
2. It does not have serious impact
3. It does not happen here
4. It is routine way of doing business
5. Bullying managers must be defended.

Survey by Author

The author commissioned a survey by a market research agency among professionals and industry stalwarts that showed that 100% of professionals believed that horrible bosses who harass must be punished. Equally almost two third of industry stalwarts believed that horrible bosses who harass must be punished.

Impact of Harassment

Harassment can be tough on body and exacerbate physical conditions like high blood pressure or lead to sleep disturbance. Repeated harassment leads to poor emotional, mental and physical health outcomes. Over time harassment can lead to depression, anxiety or symptoms related to mental health problems.

Experiencing bullying can cause physical and psychological health problems including high blood pressure, mood changes, panic attacks and ulcers.

Bullied workers cannot perform their jobs to the best of their ability. Performance issues include inability to work or concentrate, loss of self esteem, trouble making decisions, lower productivity.

There is a positive correlation between work place harassment and alcoholism. Furthermore people who experience harassment show PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Besides these people who experience work place harassment show anxiety and nervousness.

Harassment, can be demoralize employees. This in turn leads to high psychological stress which fosters poor employee health, lower productivity, increases absenteeism and attrition. Harassment at work creates low self-esteem, isolation, insomnia, headaches and loss of self-confidence.

Harassment increases chance of psychological injury such as post traumatic stress disorder, depression, bipolar disorder etc.

Exposure to bullying can harm a person's health and well being both physically and emotionally throughout the whole body. For example WBI, states that stress related diseases and health complications from prolonged exposure to the stressors of bullying include:

- a. Anxiety
- b. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- c. Fibromyalgia
- d. Irritable Bowel Disease
- e. Hypertension
- f. Neurological Structural Changes to create the stressed brain
- g. Panic Attacks
- h. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- i. Skin Disorders

Clearly harassment is not imaginary but real with significant adverse impact on person's well being and health. Needless to say harassment will impact productivity of an organisation besides increasing attrition.

Hence harassment has to be taken seriously by organisation if it has to ensure well being of employee and improve performance of organisation.

Very Little is being done about Harassment.

While there are several laws about sexual harassment, there is very little legal recourse for non-sexual harassment.

Even in United States there are very few laws specifically for work place harassment. Of course one has recourse to several laws such as

- a. The equal pay act 1963
- b. Civil rights act preventing discrimination 1964
- c. Age discrimination act 1967

But truly these are not laws related to workplace discrimination directly, but general laws which can be applied against very few specific cases. At any rate these laws do not cover the entire gamut of experiences covered under work place harassment.

Even in India there are few laws specifically regarding work place harassment. Of course there are constitutional laws about equality, but there are very few laws on work place harassment.

Indeed most of the literature or even actions in corporate world or laws of nations are related to sexual harassment and not other forms of harassment.

Of course sexual harassment is tremendously important. The reason this paper almost entirely ignores sexual harassment is because this paper intends to focus on other kinds of harassment which are equally important.

Unfortunately very few studies, very few organisations, very few laws, very few corporates, very few NGOs focus on non-sexual harassment of insults and threats that are equally damaging.

Suffice it to say that work place harassment that affects at least 15% of population at any point in time is entirely neglected in corporate world, academic studies, government laws, civil society action and media attention.

Lot more needs to be done about work place harassment

No doubt too little is being done about work place harassment. But it is never too late to do a lot more about work place harassment.

And while the author does not claim to be an expert in finding solutions to end work place harassment, some suggestions based on studies can be made.

Firstly tackling work place harassment has to be a multi-pronged approach and has to be approached through various angles.

Firstly laws have to be enacted at governmental level to tackle work place harassment. Laws are always enacted based on exigencies. For instance in India there is the Information Technology law that has come to effect in view of profusion of Internet and Computers. Similarly government of the nations of world should take initiative in this regard to enact work place harassment laws. Herein, International Labour Organisation has a major role to play.

Secondly Academic Organisations should introduce courses regarding work place harassment. This is not ridiculous. After all Management and Business Schools have courses on Ethics and Morality. So introducing courses on Work Place Harassment is very reasonable idea. Of course not all students will take courses on Work Place Harassment. But the few students who take courses on work place harassment can bring sufficient change in corporate world.

Thirdly Media is a powerful pillar of society. Hence it is incumbent on media to highlight issues of work place harassment. No doubt media does yeoman service by pointing out the issues of sexual harassment. But media seems to entirely ignore the issues of work place harassment. This is an issue that needs public gaze.

Fourthly Civil Society needs to take action to bring to attention issues of work place harassment. Civil society is often a thought leader in various issues related to environment, education, healthcare, and gender rights, childcare. No doubt civil society is active on sexual harassment. However the attention of civil society towards work place harassment is feeble and meagre. Civil society needs to do lot more to draw societal attention towards work place harassment.

Finally and most importantly, as they say last but the least, Corporates must institute practices to tackle work place harassment.

This may include

1. Work Place Harassment Policies
2. 360 degree appraisal of superiors by employees
3. Punishing perpetrators of work place harassment, if required by termination of services.

Unless a few corporates, take the lead this will not catch up in the entire corporate world.

So only a multipronged approach can be effective in tackling work place harassment. Each agent is important and none can be inactive in tackling work place harassment.

II. Conclusion

Work place harassment is very common. While sexual harassment has received necessary attention and action, work place harassment is neglected. Work place harassment has adverse impact on individual's mental and physical wellbeing, it also has detrimental effect on corporate performance. Unfortunately very little is being done to tackle work place harassment at governmental level, corporate level or at civil society level. Hence tackling work place harassment required urgent action at civil society level, media level, corporate level, governmental level and finally academic level. Work place harassment is too important an issue to be ignored.

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