



FACULTY OF
MANAGEMENT & FINANCE
UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO

Colombo Business Journal
Vol. 01, No. 01 - October 2007 (39-48)

Colombo
Business
Journal

International Journal
of Theory & Practice

Recognizing Violence against Women as an Obstacle to Organizational Peace and Development: A New Vision for an Old Issue

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Abstract

Violence against women takes a variety of forms, extending from domestic abuse to violence in workplace. It is an ancient, universal problem occurring in every culture and social group. However, major traditions of organizational analysis have not devoted significant and explicit concern with gender, sexuality and violence. Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are twofold; to recognize the most frequent types of organizational violence against women and the impact of such organizational violence on their work-lives and thereby the overall performance and peace of the organization. The methodology adopted has been qualitative and based on case study approach, confined to one public sector organization in Sri Lanka. The study shows how complex the issue of gender-based violence in organizations is. It confirmed that organizational violence seriously affects mental health of the working women concerned, which eventually create a deterioration of the work culture, peace and development in the organization.

Keywords: Obstacle; Organizational Development; Organizational Peace; Violence; Women

1. Introduction

Violence against women is an ancient and universal problem occurring in every culture and social system around the world. Such violence moves beyond the immediate threat of bruises and broken bones, but is covertly and overtly linked to the mental health of the victims, impeding their right to participate fully in society. Violence against women and girls is often referred to as "gender-based violence", because it evolves in part from women's subordinate gender status in society. In most cultures, traditional beliefs, norms and social institutions legitimize and, therefore, perpetuate violence against women. The

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use of the term "gender-based violence" provides a new context in which the long-standing phenomenon of violence against women can be examined and understood (UNIFEM, 2002).

In 1993, the United Nations adopted the first international definition of violence against women. The relevant declaration states that violence against women includes:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

The definition offered by Unesco (1999) states that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men (cited in ALRC, 2006).

Thus, men's violence against women is a key determinant of the inequities and inequalities of gender relations that both disempower and impoverish women (UNIFEM, 2002), and is equally ubiquitous in the contexts of family, community and state. It shifts the focus from women as victims to gender and the unequal power relationships between women and men created and maintained by gender stereotypes as the basic underlying cause of violence against women (ibid). According to Ramguttty-Wong (2002), one approach assumes that it is the differences between the sexes that handicap women, who are then perceived as inferior and deficient, and treated differently. Other theories assume that discrimination [violence] in the wider society results in inequities. Consequently, it is evident that above all, men's violence against women is enticed by a culture of hegemonic masculinities and gender stereotypes, resulting in both inequities and inequalities between the two sexes. In a similar vein, the same culture has internalized violence as a part of social norms of the society, reflecting the complexity of the issue.

According to Hearn (1994), the major traditions of organizational analysis have not been characterized by a significant and explicit concern with gender, sexuality and violence. Men are caught up in this web of societal and organizational denial because of their traditional dominance of formal organizations and the historical association of masculinity and rationality, compounded by the dynamics of male psychology (Linstead, 1997). Thus, in recent years, a number of feminist scholars have been drawn to the concept of organizational culture as an heuristic for the study of discriminatory practices in the workplace (Mills, 2002) along with gender-based organizational violence within which gender-based discrimination is prominent. On the other hand, there is a well-developed body of work that document the prevalence and impact of work-related sexual harassment, and establishing it as a legitimate public issue (Hughes & Tadic, 1998), which has largely focused on employer-employee or co-worker relationships. In the US, on the basis of an extended review of studies, Fitzgerald and Shullman (1993) estimate that roughly one of every two American women have experienced workplace sexual harassment at some point in their lives. Thomas and Kitizinger (1994) suggest similar levels in Britain (cited in Hughes and Tadic, 1998). Accordingly, violence against women in their workplaces has turned out to be an everyday phenomenon reaffirming male solidarity and masculine worth in formal male domains, and thus, stands to be a crucial issue of inquiry within academic research.

From the extensive body of literature available, it is understandable that men's violence against women in organizations has grown to be an important line of query, necessitating problematization of the issue. Thus, this paper carries dual objectives; First, to recognize the most frequent types of organizational violence inflicted upon working women and, second, to identify and analyze the impact of such violence on their work-lives and thereby the overall performance and peace of the organization.

2. Methodology

This study was based on a public sector organization in Sri Lanka. In order to realize the objectives identified in the paper, the methodology adopted in the study is qualitative and based upon case study approach. Surveys guided by a structured questionnaire was used to gather primary data from a representative sample of working women in the organization with regard to the meaning of gender-based violence, its nature (job-related/personal), effects and impact (job-related/personal), and the responses of women to such violent actions (direct/indirect and individual/institutional). Informal discussions were conducted as a supplementary source of data to elucidate the findings of the study, and the sample was narrowed down from the population using random sampling method. The study involved a considerable rate of rejection and evasion probably due to its nature and scope, since one may see mere participation in the survey as threatening to her career. Thus, given the limited number of interviews with the interviewees, this paper is relatively more illustrative than generalizable, yet presents a new viewpoint to an old, but extremely sensitive issue.

3. Analysis of the Case Study and Discussion of the Findings

This section presents a brief overview on the personal profile of the respondents; thereafter the nature of organizational violence against working women is analyzed in detail.

3.1 Personal Profile of the Respondents

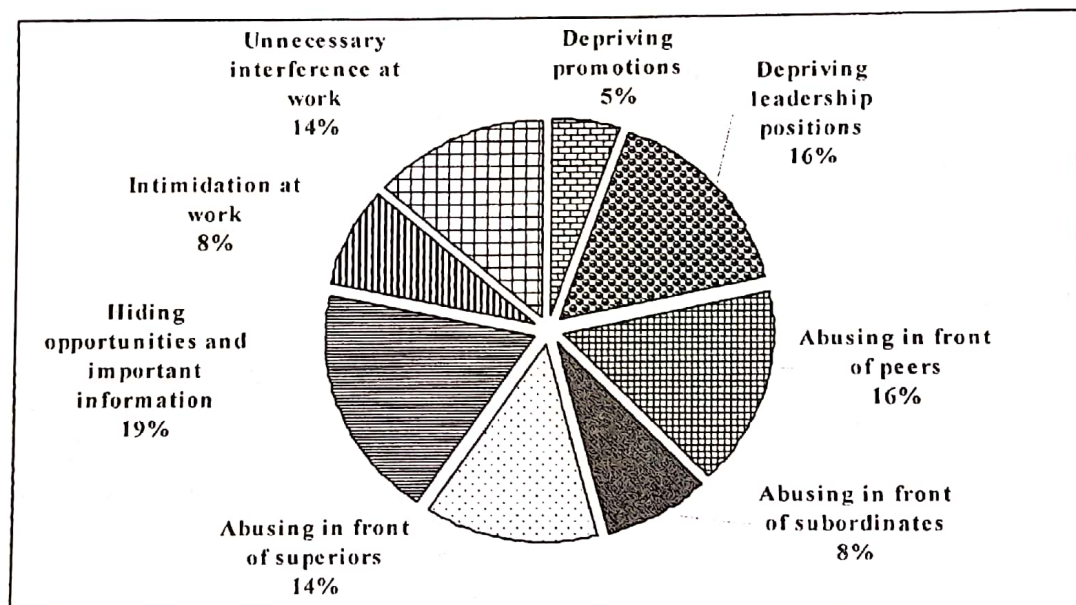
According to the survey, the personal identification data of the respondents revealed that majority of them were in the age cohort of 31 to 35 years, and were married. As they were selected from a public sector organization representing both executive and non-executive staff, the level of education was characterized by a clear variation between the two categories extending from GCE/Advanced Level qualification to master's degree. Accordingly, 20% had only GCE/Advanced Level certificate, 30% had bachelor's degree, 10% had postgraduate diploma and the rest (40%), which is the majority, had master's degree. The average work experience of the respondents was 6 to 10 years.

3.2 Nature of Organizational Violence against Working Women

While the economic success of a country has spurred a movement for greater competitiveness in the global markets, it is surprising to note that the well-worn slogan 'people are our most important asset' has not embraced the gender issue (Ramguttty-Wong, 2002). Violence involving men and women, wherein women are usually the victims and which arises from unequal power relationships between men and women, can take a myriad of forms arraying from subtle verbal innuendoes to inappropriate physical contact (see Hughes & Tadic, 1998). Hence, female employees who were surveyed in the study were inquired about a range of potential behaviours of violence under the two broad categories – job-related and personal. However, many respondents were unaware of the dynamics of gender-based organizational violence, or were rather *reluctant* to *identify* and *reveal* certain incidents as violence that they have undergone. Of note, is the fact that many women surveyed in previous studies were reluctant to identify various incidents as 'harassment' [violence] *per se* (Hughes & Tadic, 1998). This tendency has been noted by researchers in relation to employer and co-worker harassment (Gutek & Koss, 1993; Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994; Ring, 1994). As Gutek and Koss (1993) observe, "[a] woman who is harassed may be unsure at first if what she is experiencing really is harassment" (cited in Hughes & Tadic, 1998). No doubt this is due to the very pervasiveness of sexualized exchanges between women and men in everyday

life, which operates to minimize and discount sexual harassment as a ‘problem’ at all (Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994).

Accordingly, one respondent has perceived gender-based organizational violence only as *discrimination*, while another has perceived the same as, ‘*someone who is working with you is purposely trying to create an uncomfortable working environment, either physically (E.g. touching) or mentally (E.g. abusing)*’. In the words of another female employee, gender-based organizational violence is, “*depriving opportunities, and mental and physical harassments due to gender*”. Based on the rough definitions attributed by the respondents to the subject, it was understandable that majority of them were satisfactorily clear about the meaning of gender-based violence in organizations, and have been more or less persecuted by the same. Thus, regarding job-related violence, the study exposed the following findings:



Source: Survey Data, 2006

Figure 01: Types of Job-related Organizational Violence and Exposure

As illustrated in Figure 01, the most omnipresent types of job-related organizational violence by male employers/employees were hiding opportunities and important information (19%), depriving leadership positions (16%), abusing in front of peers (16%), abusing in front of superiors and unnecessary interference at work (14% each), intimidation at work (8%), abusing in front of subordinates (8%), and depriving promotions (5%). Organizational culture is generally written about as if it were gender neutral [However], the gendered nature of organizational culture is demonstrated by a multitude of differences and differentiations predicated on gender, for instance, job segregation, pay, promotion, and status (Wilson, 2001; cited in Mills, 2002).

On one hand, what one needs to understand is that, in practice, these different forms of violence may come about collectively. Moreover, these behaviours may occur at a single point, or may comprise an ongoing series of acts by the same individual (Hughes & Tadic, 1998). On the other hand, the incidents of job-related violence reflect a divergence from one individual to another. For one, it could be something that can be dealt with individually and for another, it could be an act, which is extreme and requires the

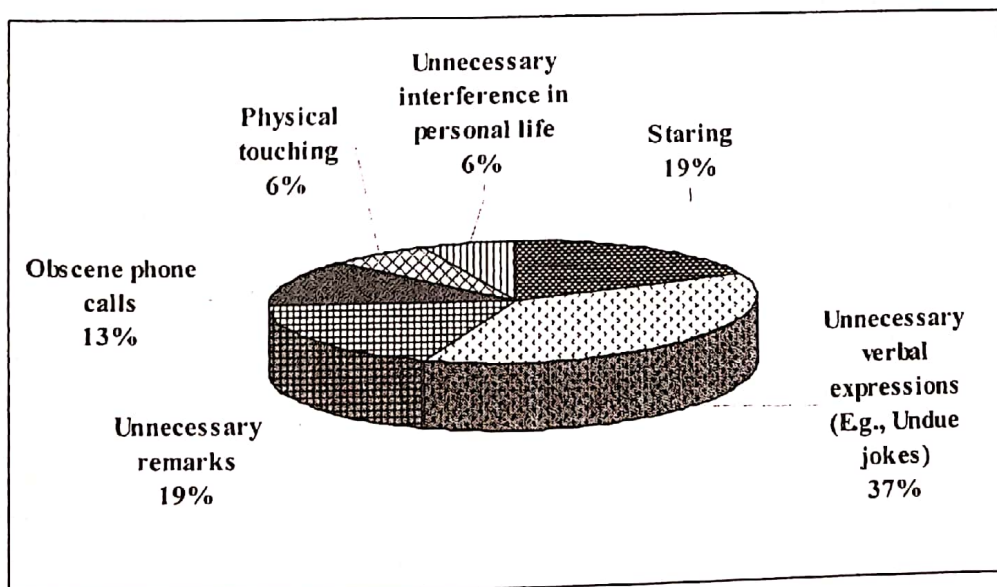
involvement of a third party; formal or informal harassment takes different forms in different cultures and organizational contexts and may well be interpreted and responded to differently by women from different social backgrounds (Brant & Too, 1994; Dellinger & Williams, 2002; Gruber, 1998; Lee, 2001; cited in Handy, 2006). Consequently, one interviewee expressed her experience with regard to the above as:

My former boss was a very unreasonable person. He always wanted to forcefully control the staff, particularly those who seem to be easily controllable. Therefore, female employees were constantly harassed by him and I was in particular. He continuously harassed me, and one time, he threw a letter at my face in front of other staff members. I was so embarrassed and angry, and complained about it to our section head. But, he did not take any action against him....

As revealed through the data collected, it was surprising as well as disappointing to note that job-related violence towards female employees stems not only from male counterparts, but also from the same gender itself in organizations, however, to a relatively lesser degree. Hence, the study reveals that in the current organizational setting, violence against women is not only masculinized, but feminized, which is an heuristic for the study of 'feminism Vs feminism' as a cause of gender-based violence in organizations. Nonetheless, it was found that though, job-related violence is directed largely towards female employees, male employees are not free from being victimized by the same, yet, to a lesser extent. One female employee put forward her viewpoint regarding the latter in the following manner:

Job-related violence for male workers is not an unusual practice in Sri Lanka. But, it is comparatively more evident for female workers from males since most organizations are governed by patriarchal values. I feel males are afraid of female invasion of their spheres.... Anyhow, what I really worry about is that sometimes female employees are harassed by their own gender....

The study found that problematization of this issue in organizational context is rather difficult since the respondents were unclear as to what gender-based personal violence is and unsure whether they have



Source: Survey Data, 2006

Figure 02: Types of Personal Violence in Organizations and Exposure

actually been subjects of this misconduct. According to Hughes and Tadic (1998), behaviours are harassment when they feel 'inappropriate' or 'uncomfortable', when they begin to cross 'one's personal space'. Consequently, in view of personal violence, the survey disclosed the followings:

As indicated in Figure 02, of the types of personal violence experienced, 37% of the respondents reported unnecessary or unwanted verbal expressions (E.g., undue jokes) as the most common form of violence, and staring and unnecessary remarks (E.g., obscene comments about their bodies) were recognized as mediocre (19% each). Far less common incidents reported by the women were obscene phone calls (13%), physical touching and unnecessary interference in personal life (6% each) during the survey. There is a wide-spread consensus in the literature that sexualized male behaviour in organizations is often a means of exerting power over female workers and serves two main functions. Firstly, it reaffirms male solidarity and masculine worth in situations where the working conditions are alienating and men are objectively vulnerable as a class of workers. Secondly, it helps to prevent the encroachment by women into all male domains and to protect male labor market dominance from female incursion (Cockburn, 1991; Wilson and Thompson, 2001; cited in Handy, 2006). In a similar vein, a respondent of the survey put forward her personal experience as summarized below:

Several times I was subject to personal violence in the form of sexual harassment, particularly by one male superior. He was like my father to me. He continuously harassed me by obscene remarks, phone calls and the like. One time when no one was in the office, he tried to touch me saying unnecessary things....

Another interviewee revealed her 'bad memories' of personal violence in her workplace as:

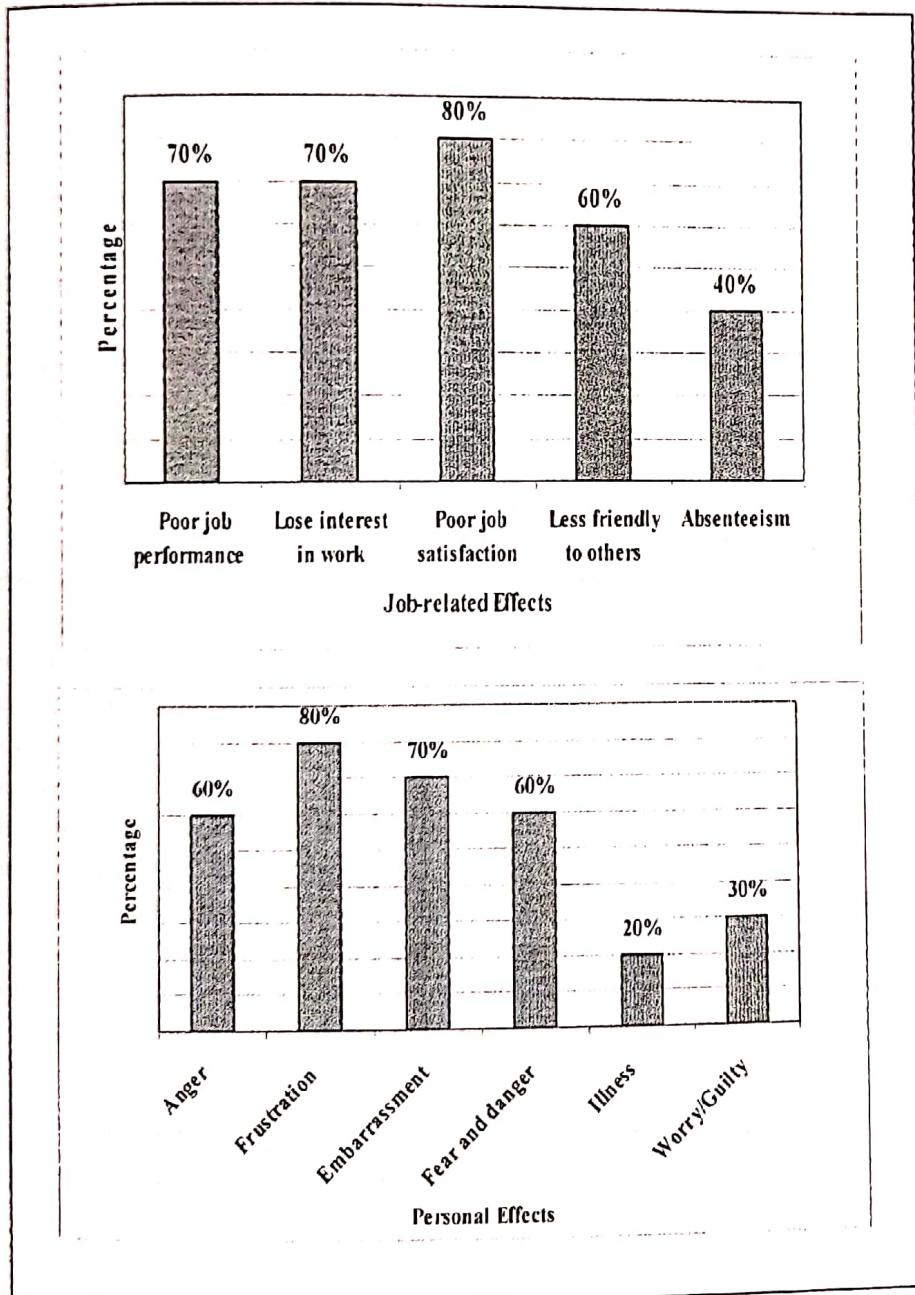
My boss used to call me to his room all the time. First, I did not feel anything fishy about it. Later, he started keeping me in his room for long hours, and even after office hours saying that he needs my help for his work. While working, he used to stare at me, and even made unnecessary remarks on and off. I was so disgusted, but could not do anything....

At some point in their working lives, over half of Canadian women had been harassed by a co-worker, and nearly 40% by an employer (Johnson, 1994; cited in Hughes and Tadic, 1998). However, in contrast to the findings of these Western studies as acknowledged by the extensive literature available, the women who were surveyed did not recognize 'male co-workers' as a cause of personal violence in their organizations, but rather the employers. Neither female employers nor co-workers were identified as perpetrators of personal violence in the workplace, for which the answer is closely tied with the socio-cultural background of the country.

A final issue of importance concerns the nature of gender-based violence against women in their workplaces. That is, there is a clear segregation of such violence based upon women's rank or category in the organization. For women who were ranked as *executive staff*, the prevalence of gender-based violence was largely *job-related*, while for those who were tilted as *non-executive*, it was mostly *personal*. Accordingly, women who are professionally more vulnerable have a greater tendency to be subject to personal violence in organizations that largely takes form of sexual harassment. Thus, what one needs to recognize is that in organizations, gender-based violence is not only a *product* of masculine worth, but masculinity coupled with authority in male domains that protect, promote and strengthen patriarchy.

3.3 Impact of Gender-based Organizational Violence on Working-lives of Women and Overall Performance and Peace of the Organization

Given the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in organizations, it is important to explore the effects of such acts upon women and their working lives. According to Hughes and Tadic (1998), when asked about the impact of such incidents, the women surveyed noted a variety of effects. Since, the study recognized a range of potential behaviours of gender-based violence under two broad categories – job-related and personal, the resulting effects accompany the same primary division, for which the interviewers responded as illustrated in Figure 03.



Source: Survey Data, 2006

Figure 03: Job-related and Personal Effects of Gender-based Organizational Violence

The figure illustrates that the most pervasive job-related effects were poor job satisfaction (80%), poor job performance and interest in work (70% each), and being less friendly to others (60%), while relatively less common was absenteeism (40%). Resulting from these effects, the women surveyed underscored how these job-related effects collectively make it difficult to perform well on their jobs. One female employee expressed herself as follows:

As I jointed this job, I really wanted to perform the duties to my level best. But, things did not work as expected because I was subject to many types of violence like depriving opportunities by my superiors. Now I have lost interest in my job, and don't want to do well as in the early days...

Violence against women is a major health concern (WHO, 2000). Research on psychological trauma documents that threats against life and body in a generally violent context with verbal humiliation and degradation results in persistent mental harm (Foy, 1992; cited in ALRC, 2006). Thus, beyond the job-related impacts of organizational violence, are the personal consequences upon employed women – 80% reported frustration, 70% embarrassment, 60% anger, fear and danger, 30% worry/guilty and 20% illness (E.g., headaches) – as regular impacts. These responses – especially the more common ones such as embarrassment, anger, fear, and illness – suggest many parallels between the experience of co-worker and employer sexual harassment (Hughes and Tadic, 1998). Similarly, the study found that there exists a *two-way effect* between job-related and personal impacts of organizational violence on female employees. For instance, on one hand, a worker who is frustrated may lose job satisfaction, and on the other hand, one who has lost job satisfaction may suffer from the feeling of frustration.

According to Gutek and Koss (1993), from research on employer and co-worker sexual harassment, we know that women's responses range from the *individual* to *institutional*, and the *direct* to *indirect* women rarely 'tell the harasser to stop' but instead "are more likely to ignore the harassment, joke about it, or evade the harasser [especially] when the harassment is mild" (cited in Hughes & Tadic, 1998). Correspondingly, drawn on the survey data, an overwhelming majority of women have dealt with the situation in individual and indirect ways (90%), though they are the least effective. By far the most common responses are *individual* and *indirect*. *Direct* responses, however, were extremely rare, as is the case in employer and co-worker harassment, with there being only a few cases where women directly told harasser to stop (Hughes & Tadic, 1998). Despite the fact that women being harassed suffer both job-oriented and personal effects, their reluctance to initiate either institutional or direct actions against the violator stems from three main grounds; *first*, unwillingness to complain for fear of worsening their working environment (see Thomaso, 1989; cited in Handy, 2006), *second*, socio-cultural values and beliefs that perpetuate the concealment and denial of such harassments by women (E.g., due to shame) and *third*, social norms that normalize gender-based violence or harassment as a legacy in male-chauvinist society. Thus, the attitudes of female employees towards the latter can be summarized as,

It is dangerous to complain about our male superiors, and the wise advice that we can give is, 'keep yourself silent'. You should try to avoid those types of people [harassers] as much as you can. However, violence against women is an everyday, every-minute practice. When we use public transportation, walk on roads, etc, every woman, whether young or old, experiences men's violence in diverse forms.

It is understandable that gender-based violence in organizations mounts as a major impediment towards organizational development, informally assuring the achievement of certain elements of organizational life (E.g., male solidarity) at the expense of others (E.g., sexual harassment). As explicated,

such violence invariably deteriorates the rapport between the two sexes, creating hostility, antipathy and suspicion as a result of the shocking experiences undergone by the victims; female employees. Women facing employer or co-worker sexual harassment may experience deteriorating workplace relationships (Gutek and Koss, 1993; cited in Hughes and Tadic, 1998). Thus, the incidents of gender-based organizational violence and their consequential impacts upon female employees impose a *gendered obstacle* against organizational peace and thereby development, increasingly recognizing a no longer deferred, or deniable issue in a world of masculinity.

4. Conclusion

Violence is a fundamental dimension of human poverty. Yet, men's 'natural aggression' is often invoked as a defining characteristic of an essential gender difference and as an explanation for gendered hierarchical arrangements in the political and economic contexts of richer and poorer countries alike (UNIFEM, 2002). In paraphrase, power disparity between women and men and the masculine culture are considered as the major sources of this gender-based violence in organizations, and is closely connected with both physical and mental health of women. The study found that in organizations, violence against women is largely directed in terms of emotional rather than physical harassment by the male counterparts, however, much of the violence that occur remain hidden and unreported, leading to repetitions by the violator. From the two types of gender-based organizational violence; *job-related* and *personal*, women are more *open* with *job-related violence*, which is quite the reverse for *personal* violence. Thus, organizational violence in connection to women remains blurred rather than highlighted, making problematization and contextualization of the issue difficult. Thus, an understanding of gender 'requires sensitivity to contextualization' (John, 1994; cited in Mills, 2002). Placing men's violence in a historical and cultural context helps overcome the naturalizing of men's violence, or what might be called the 'masculinizing of violence' (UNIFEM, 2002).

The ensuing effects of men's violence against women that threads through organizations (*job-related and personal*) pose a greater threat against organizational peace and development, as such violence creates impaired organizational relationships between the two genders. Thus, any attempt initiated towards stopping such acts of violence, it is increasingly recommended that the focus of attention needs to be largely directed towards men. Instead of just focusing on each case of violence or on individual men's acts of violence against women, the entire culture that creates male roles and identities – defined as 'masculinity' – needs to be analyzed and challenged (ibid). Thus, both men and women need to reconsider long-standing ideas about what is acceptable and what is not in a society characterized by deep-rooted gendered inequalities that stand as a barrier to change. It is only such intriguing attitudes that can shed light on the issue, paving a uniquely epoch-making era – in other words - a new vision to an old, yet extremely sensitive and condoned issue: *violence against women*.

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