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Kosovo Chronicle 4 – Violence in the workplace

by CRDP

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The problem of workplace violence has generated interest in last month in Kosovo, with two cases having been heavily publicized in media. The media reports have had various connotations, publicizing the mistreatment of employees in the workplace in a privatized company where the employee was attacked by a foreigner with an ashtray, and shedding light in ill-treatment of a civil servant who is also a member of an opposition party in Kosovo parliament. Despite these media approaches, those two cases have raised the need for examining the state infrastructure that should be in place to protect people from violence in the workplace.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines workplace violence as “intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, wrong development or deprivation” (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). Violence in the workplace poses threats to individuals’ personal security, along with economic security. It is damaging in two levels: in the first level, one is exposed to direct violence by their boss, co-workers or third parties. In the second level, it is a systemic violence, in which the economic security of the individual and his/her family is dependent on their response to such violence. Both these levels encompass “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want”. CRDPs meeting with stakeholders revealed that high unemployment gives way to exacerbation of employer/employee power relationship, in which employees are forced to endure abuse of their rights or overlook breaches in contracts to secure their economic sustenance. In this sense, this type of structural violence “... impinges on the basic survival needs of individuals and communities and is thus a source of human insecurity” (Schnabel, 2008).

Two cases of workplace violence have been publicized in the Kosovo media recently. In both cases violence was exerted by the victims’ colleagues. The first victim was working in the recently privatized airport, while the second one works at a public institution.

At the end of June, Fatos Xhelili (then Director of Administration in Limak company, which manages the Prishtina airport), was attacked with an ashtray by Alpaj Dogutepe, the financial director of the same company. The reason for this attack was an e-mail that Mr. Xhelili had sent to the General Director of the airport, in which he complained about the ongoing abuse he was receiving from Dogutepe. In this e-mail, he had explained that in addition to the aggressive behavior, he was threatened numerous times with physical abuse. Mr. Xhelili was consequently fired from his position, with the reason being his “serious disciplinary misbehavior”. According to Zeri Newspaper report, Mr. Xhelili stated that he and his colleagues had been experiencing such abuse from the time the airport’s ownership had been transferred from public ownership to Limak, a Turkish private company. Additionally, he complained that his salary was decreased after this privatization, contrary to the partnership contract between the Government and Airport, which states that the salaries shall not be changed within three years of establishment of this private-public partnership, a period that will end in April 2014 (Veliu, 2013).

In the second case, Ibadete Hyseni, the officer for Gender Equality in Viti Municipality was verbally and physically attacked by the Personnel Manager of the same Municipality. Ms. Hyseni was able to escape the attack due to the intervention of her colleagues. She immediately notified the prosecutors’ office, which had interviewed the witnesses and the case is being processed in the Public Prosecutor’s office in Gjilan. Additionally, Ms. Hyseni has also written a public letter to the Group of Women Deputies in the Kosovo Assembly, asking for their help in raising the voice in the assembly about “such intolerable and unacceptable acts” (Indeksonline, 2013). She further complains that the alleged perpetrator has approached her colleagues, who were also witnesses of the attack with threats about their job security, in case they witnessed against him. Ms. Hyseni continues to work at the same workplace, while the Mayor of Viti has refused to take any action about this occurrence.

To be able to comprehend the context of both events, one should pay attention to structural factors that influenced their occurrences. High unemployment rate, weak enforcement of labor rights and weak rule of law may have been the underlying factors that enabled a workplace environment where these events are possible.



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With 35.1% unemployment rate (Statistics Agency of Kosovo, 2012), the demand for labor in Kosovo gives rise to a highly unbalanced power relationship between the employers and employees. Having in mind that the elasticity of demand for labor is mainly low, the ones that are employed are more likely to comply with breaching of rights and injustices occurring in the workplace.

This situation is only exacerbated by the low capacities that Kosovo institutions have to enforce labor rights. Various reports depict stakeholders of labor institutions as having low capacities to bind employers by rules and regulations in place to protect workers. A SOLIDAR briefing specifies that there is an inadequate number of labor inspectors and not enough institutional support to allow them to adequately perform their job (Hoti, 2011). The Sectorial Strategy of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare admits that this low number of inspectors is not enough to effectively carry out tasks. It mentions that some municipalities lack labor inspectors altogether (Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, 2009). Additionally, the Independent Oversight Board (IOB), a body in charge of resolving disputes of civil servants, also lacks institutional support, which translates in lack of implementation of their decisions. Despite these decisions being compulsory, out of 192 decisions in 2010, employers implemented only 91 (Independent Oversight Board, 2010). All these factors, combined with weak trade unions which lack capacity to exercise their powers, there is room for rights violations and abuse.

In this context, special emphasis should be put to the privatization process in Kosovo, which has had a severe effect on workers rights. According to SOLIDAR report, also recommends that Kosovo Privatization Agency should become more efficient in checking the implementation of provisions deriving from the contracts of privatization, and in taking measures against those who breach the contracts (Hoti, 2011). Overall, the privatization process has led to a loss of jobs in Kosovo, with exact figures never being established. Kosovo trade unions had estimated that the privatization has left around 75,000 workers jobless, without pensions or social assistance. (Knudsen, 2010).

Weak rule of law among others has contributed to public loss of trust in the judiciary. Along with the huge backlog of cases in courts, this deters people from reporting violation of rights. Out of the total number of 217,758 unresolved cases in the course of Kosovo in 2011, around 97.7% or 204,119 are still waiting to be dealt with municipal courts (Hoti, 2011).

This also has a bad effect in further prevention of such cases. If cases of violence would be publicized and the perpetrator punished, this would serve as an example to both those who want to exert violence, but also to those subject to violence to report their grievances. This situation is aggravated by the state at the field, where employees and employers are still not very familiar with the 2010 adopted Labor Law and its implication. With regards to civil service, one of OSCE recommendations to the Independent Oversight Board is to "raise awareness among civil servants of their rights and responsibilities stipulated in the various provisions of the Civil Service Law and implementing regulations, emphasizing the importance of following the requirements and procedures specified in these laws." (OSCE MiK, 2013)

The problem of workplace violence has only recently surfaced in Kosovo public. There have been cases of workplace harassment and safety threats, but none were publicized as much as those mentioned. This does not mean that such cases did not happen before. The European Working Conditions Surveys indicate that the level of violence in EU has slightly increased during 1995-2005, a figure that can be interpreted in the level on awareness and cultural norms in countries and organizations (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2010).

Advocacy in local, national, regional and EU level would help strengthen the infrastructure in place to prevent this kind of violence. Inquiring more into the issue of workplace violence in Kosovo, and further analysis of the two specific cases will enable us to determine perspectives in which we can approach the stakeholders to help alleviate the situation in the field.

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