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Violence at work: structural and intersectional dimensions

Violência no trabalho: dimensões estruturais e interseccionais

Abstract

Introduction: violence is a historical and sociocultural phenomenon that accompanies humanity since its origin. In work contexts, violence has been the object of renewed attention in recent decades due to the incidence of serious problems affecting workers, such as suicides, criminality, and mental and behavioral disorders. **Objective:** to discuss the structural and intersectional dimensions of work-related violence (WRV). **Methods:** a theoretical reflection based on scientific literature was carried out. **Results:** debates on intersectionality enable us to understand psychosocial risks as a result of workers' interactions with intertwined social processes that refer to power structures, notably cross-cutting relations of class, "race," and gender, without prejudice to the incorporation of other axes of social differentiation that matter to subjects and to the analysis of work. **Conclusion:** WRV cannot be properly understood and faced without the evaluation of its different dimensions, the articulations between them, its plural and intersectional manifestations, and its systemic character in the capitalist mode of production.

Keywords: occupational health; violence at work; work accidents; intersectionality; capitalism.

Resumo

Introdução: a violência é um fenômeno histórico e sociocultural que acompanha a humanidade desde sua origem. Nos contextos de trabalho, a violência tem sido objeto de renovada atenção nas últimas décadas, em razão da incidência de sérios problemas que assolam os trabalhadores, tais como: os suicídios, a criminalidade e os transtornos mentais e comportamentais. **Objetivo:** discutir as dimensões estruturais e interseccionais da violência relacionada ao trabalho (VRT). **Métodos:** foi realizada reflexão teórica assentada na literatura científica. **Resultados:** os debates sobre a interseccionalidade permitem compreender os riscos psicossociais como resultados das interações dos trabalhadores com os imbricados processos sociais, que remetem às estruturas de poder, notadamente às relações transversais de classe, "raça" e gênero, sem prejuízo à incorporação de outros eixos de diferenciação social que importem para os sujeitos e para a análise do trabalho. **Conclusão:** conclui-se que a VRT não pode ser adequadamente compreendida e enfrentada sem o entendimento das suas distintas dimensões, bem como das articulações entre elas, das suas manifestações plurais e interseccionais, além de seu caráter sistêmico no modo de produção capitalista.

Palavras-chave: saúde do trabalhador; violência no trabalho; acidentes de trabalho; interseccionalidade; capitalismo.



Introduction

Violence is a phenomenon that accompanies humanity since its origin¹. It is also an old phenomenon in labor contexts, having received the attention of important thinkers over the last few years. In the 19th century, Karl Marx^{2,3} and Friedrich Engels⁴ showed the systemic nature of the violence operated by the logic of infinite capital accumulation by investigating the capitalist mode of production and its forms of exploitation of the workforce and natural resources. Reflections on work-associated violence can be found in the writings of philosopher Simone Weil⁵, who experienced oppression as a factory worker during the 1930s; in the work of psychiatrist Louis Le Guillant⁶, which embody the psychopathology of work in the 1950s; and in the productions of Heinz Leymann⁷ on mobbing and psycho-terror in the 1990s. These theoretical productions provide valuable insights into the links between violence and work. All this refers to a circumscribed cut in the period of capitalism, without alluding to the slave regime, in which violence manifests itself brutally and explicitly.

In the 1990s, several Brazilian studies on workers' health and on the relation between health and workplace violence investigated repetitive strain injuries; poisoning by pesticides, lead, and mercury; professional dermatosis; pneumoconiosis due to prolonged occupational exposure to silica and asbestos dust; and occupational accidents, especially mutilating and fatal ones^{8,9}. Some studies have also been dedicated to the relation between mental health and work¹⁰.

With the economic, social, and technological changes that impact the world of work, the issue of mental health gains greater relevance, often alongside the issue of multiple violences at work. Sociocultural transformations make acts of violence, once naturalized and trivialized, morally unacceptable¹, simultaneously widening the theoretical understanding of violence at work, which starts to incorporate a broader set of situations. In the 21st century, psychological violence comes to the fore in research on the phenomenon of moral harassment in work contexts¹¹⁻¹³, noting its deleterious effects on workers' mental health. The notion of moral harassment translates into an "umbrella" concept, enabling the working class to name and denounce a malaise that previously seemed unmentionable. Lastly, interest in the issue of violence in the workplace is reinvigorated due to the incidence of other serious problems that plague workers, such as suicides¹⁴, violent crimes¹⁵⁻¹⁷, and mental and behavioral disorders, especially depression¹⁸, post-traumatic stress¹⁹, and burnout syndrome²⁰. These daily episodes of violence in the workplace have, therefore, demanded more refined analyses.

Given this situation, it is important to realize that workers experience situations marked by biological, chemical, physical, and psychosocial risks. Furthermore, it is interesting to consider that these conditions are articulated in the trajectory of workers by economic, political, and socio-cultural processes, configuring collective and, concomitantly, unique work experiences. Elucidating these relations is a difficult task that entails challenges relating both to theoretical-methodological approaches and the current socio-political context, disputed between different political-ideological spectrums, in which, on the one hand, we find an attempt to deny and hide the violence linked to work (and, above all, to the capitalist mode of production), and on the other hand, a struggle that aims to unveil and confront ethnic-racial, gender, and class violence perpetrated against workers.

We defend the perspective that violence, illness, and health at work are sensitive to "race", gender, or class. Briefly clarifying these three concepts, we highlight the quotation marks used in "race" since this term lacks scientific support when dealing with the human species²¹. However, the use of this notion as a sociological category is justified because social relations daily reproduce economic and social inequalities for Black people and privileges for white people. Regarding the concept of gender, we follow historian Joan Scott²² to analytically (rather than just descriptively) highlight the sociocultural constructions related to the ways of being of different genders. Thus, we observe the expectations, norms, and roles determined throughout history by culture and society—rather than only by biological characteristics—concerning them. Finally, based on Marx and Engels², the concept of class divides the capitalist society into two main and antagonistic classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The study we propose, therefore, has a sensitive approach to these axes of

social differentiation present in power structures, which demand an ability to capture the different intersecting logics of violence and its effects.

In this line of argument, we reflect on violence at and within work, moving toward a conceptual broadening to bring together the different expressions of violence under the concept of work-related violence. Furthermore, it enables us to perceive violence not only as a product but as a way of reproducing the logic and processes of domination and exploitation that underlie capitalist, racist, and patriarchal society.

Work-related violence and its dimensions

As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), violence is “an intentional use of force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either causes or has a high likelihood of causing injury, death, psychic damage, developmental alterations or deprivation” (p. 5)²³. For Minayo and Souza²⁴, violence manifests itself in actions that may be perpetrated by “individuals, groups, classes, nations that cause the death of other human beings or affect their physical, moral, mental or spiritual integrity” (p. 514). Violence neither limits itself to individual acts nor to situations with fatal outcomes, and its undeniable seriousness demands a wider understanding that incorporates different dimensions and consequences.

The phenomenon of violence has claimed worldwide attention and in its various dimensions and forms of expression has spread throughout the social fabric while constituting itself as part of it, severely impacting people’s lives— particularly that of workers—as a public health problem^{16,23}. The International Labor Organization (ILO) warns that events such as stress and violence at work significantly affect workers’ health, requiring nations to “deal with psychosocial risks and put into practice more adequate prevention measures”²⁵ (p. 8).

This is a very current theme. In 2019, the ILO published Convention no. 190 and Recommendation no. 206 on “Violence and Harassment,” deeming these concepts as unacceptable and intolerable practices and behaviors in the labor context, with signatory countries having to adopt policies, measures, and strategies to face and prevent them²⁶.

Regarding work contexts, Santos Júnior and Dias²⁷ note a tendency to distinguish work violence from violence in the work environment (workplace violence). These two different notions can serve to understand the violence in the work context. For these authors, the approach to work violence refers to violence “that plagues workers when they are subjected to unhealthy and/or unsafe working conditions and environments, that is, violence that originates in the mode of production and organization of work, the work process, and that causes discomfort, suffering, exhaustion, fatigue, illness, and even death”²⁷ (p. 42). On the other hand, violence in the work environment (workplace violence) refers to “violent behavior, practiced by a person or a group of people, whether external to work (burglars, for example), internal (co-workers or people who have personal relationship with the victim), or people who have any relationship with the work (clients and patients)”²⁷ (p. 42).

Despite this distinction, Santos Júnior and Dias²⁷ point out that such a conceptual division is only didactic because “if workers are being attacked in their workplaces (workplace violence), we can admit that working conditions allow this fact to happen, that is, workplace violence is one of the possible forms of work violence”²⁷ (p. 42). This assertion agrees with Oliveira and Nunes¹⁶, who defend the use of the concept “work-related violence” as a notion that can bring together the plurality and heterogeneity of work-associated violence situations.

From the perspective of public health, Minayo²⁸ didactically proposed the division of types of violence into three categories: (1) structural violence, (2) resistance violence (or behavioral violence), and (3) delinquency violence. Despite this division, violence must be examined under a framework of structural

violence rooted in organized and institutionalized social foundations, as is the case of “economic, cultural, and political systems that lead to the oppression of groups, classes, nations, and individuals who are denied achievements in society, making them more vulnerable than others to suffering and death”²⁸ (p. 8).

With the broadening of our theoretical perspective and the incorporation of the structural, institutional, and behavioral dimensions of violence, we conceive work-related violence as:

- Unhealthy, precarious, and degrading conditions engendered by work that can affect workers’ health and safety due to legal and labor relations, material and environmental conditions, and/or ways of managing and organizing work, in which precariousness imposes biological, physical, chemical, and psychosocial constraints and risks on workers’ lives, often, causing accidents, suffering, and illnesses related to work activities;
- Situations of unemployment that mark the deprivation of the social right to work and that affect workers’ subsistence, subjectivity, feelings of usefulness and personal value, and mental health;
- Violence perpetrated against workers by people belonging—or not (clients, service users, etc.)—to organizations and labor collectives. The harmful effects of violent crime have received the attention of research on mental health and work, which correlates psychopathologies such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder with violence in the work environment. However, we stress that the violence related to such psychopathologies comes not only from agents external to work but also from individuals belonging to organizations or labor collectives committed (or not) to hierarchically superior functions. Moral and sexual harassment and racism exemplify this type of violence and have important relations with structural violence;
- Violence practiced by workers against individuals in society, service clients or users, hierarchical superiors, and work colleagues can have an intricate relation with the structural and institutional dimensions of violence. Let us remember that, in the 1960s, Le Guillant⁶ analyzes the barbaric crime committed by domestic workers (known as the “Papin sisters”) against their employers in 1933 in France. Without discarding the subjective factors linked to the history and personalities of the perpetrators of that atrocity, the author highlights important points in the relation between the crime and the “domestic condition,” highlighting the need for a more in-depth reading of violence that can articulate psychological and social aspects;
- The ways of managing and organizing work engendering the processes that intensify and expand working hours and accentuate workers’ exclusion and humiliation by adopting practices and discourses that harm their health. These management mechanisms based on the logic of intercapitalist competition (mediated by digital information and communication technologies) have intensely changed the temporality of life. They increasingly convert the time of existence into time devoted to the reproduction of capital and urge subjects to convulsive and uninterrupted activities, spreading the idea that they are “free” to act. Such models are based on the “violence of positivity” and the “logic of coercive freedom”²⁹ and degrade interpersonal relationships at work, provoking and intensifying rivalries, fragmenting the working classes, undermining solidarity, and producing pathogenic loneliness¹⁴ and clinical pictures of exhaustion and depression. Practices and discourses based on the listed values and capitalist and neoliberal violence affect workers, making them responsible for their respective performances, in flagrant absence of reflection on real working conditions and on the persistent scarcity of resources available to workers to respond to work requirements. Therefore, they consist of practices configuring harmful motivational chants that should be read as symbolic and psychopolitical devices capable of damaging workers’ mental health since they mobilize subjectivity in favor of production to the detriment of health.

Labor Counter-Reforms have worsened the above factors, as in Brazil by Laws no. 13,467 and no. 13,429, sanctioned in 2017 by Temer’s Government, which deepened the “private regulation of work patterns,”³⁰

generalized outsourcing, and accentuated disparities in the relation between capital and labor. Such labor counter-reforms engender legal and labor conditions that worsen precariousness and social vulnerability, which workers experienced as conditions that generate oppression and injustice.

Episodes of structural and intersectional violence in work contexts

What do contemporary investigations show about work-related violence? How do these studies broaden and deepen knowledge on the subject? Finally, how do they improve practices and public policies to protect workers' health and safety? Below, we detail some fragments that can lead to important reflections on these themes.

In a study on the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in work contexts¹⁹, we analyzed the case of a security guard affected by this disorder after witnessing the suicide of a co-worker and then being fired from a surveillance company. In addition to the suffering resulting from these situations, the security guard reported having suffered other forms of violence throughout her professional career. Having worked in a Judiciary Forum, she claims to have often faced verbal aggression from the public, especially when having to demand for people to obey the rules. She positions herself to understand such situations, although this violence hurt her emotionally. The worst, however, happened when institution employees discriminated against her. In one of these situations, described by the security guard, she faced racism perpetrated by a magistrate's assistant:

The director at the time [...], he gave a written order, right?... He sent an official letter saying that, after 6:00 p.m., it was expressly forbidden for anyone to enter [the building] and if a security guard would let anyone in, they would be laid off... then she [the magistrate's assistant] wanted a visitor to enter. [...] She said I was from the slave quarters... she is like that, tall, blonde, pretty, a judge's assistant. I believe that a judge's assistant is a well-mannered person, right? At the very least, I expected politeness, [but she said] "I don't want to talk to you, because you're from the slave quarters." What did she call me? I'm Black, but I like my color... They said I carried myself properly. [...] So this was one of the facts that shook me a lot... I started to suffer a lot... the fact that she called me Black, said that I worked in the slave quarters...¹⁹ (p. 178-9).

This perpetrated act of violence not only simply shows the magistrate's assistant's "lack of manners" but also her presumption of the guard's inferiority and a supposed naturalness of the exploitation and oppression of this worker since this Black woman belongs to a socioeconomic class with lower purchasing power and asset concentration. The magistrate's assistant—a white woman with greater purchasing power—immediately connected all this information by alluding to a "slave quarters", the servitude regime, and the violence of the period of enslavement.

Another study, conducted with workers who produced fireworks in the municipality of Santo Antônio do Monte, in the state of Minas Gerais³¹, reported cases of sexual harassment. Taking advantage of their hierarchical positions, some supervisors perpetrate such violence against white and Black women belonging to the independent working classes:

Another thing that is terrible here too is that women need to start reporting, it is sexual harassment. I've already been a victim of sexual harassment here. Seriously, a certain supervisor [...], I began working and he took advantage of the fact that we're new [...] So, they put pressure on the person inside the shed right there. They arrive... and replace saying "good morning" to begin touching you and the hand on your shoulder goes to your waist and from the waist they want to put it lower... Your hands are dirty with material, and you ask [him] stop and the person does not stop. [You say] "Hands off me!" [And he replies] "No, what is it?" "You're angry today, what's wrong? Calm down. I'm telling you." [You say] "I'm working, excuse me". Then they don't stop and put pressure on you. [...] Once I was alone inside the shed, then he came in and tried to grab me, and he's insistent, he doesn't see that you've already rejected him, that you've already said 'you don't want to,' but he's insistent. I'm ashamed to even say it but since it's just between us here... a co-worker said [at his request] like this: if you don't give it to him, he'll lay you off, if you don't give it to him, he'll fire you³¹ (p. 143).

Both situations allude to expressions of work-related violence and are linked to different dimensions of this phenomenon. They not only result from character problems or behavioral deviations, but also constitute structural violence, rooted in the structures of patriarchy, racism, and the capitalist mode of production that continue to engender oppression with the flagrant omission and/or connivance from organizations. The reported episodes show a colonial mentality of the employers and/or clients of these services, whose behaviors—influenced by class elitism, racism, and sexism—express the features of a society based on the legacy of the enslavement regime, the patriarchal hierarchy, and class antagonism. In the situations above, racial and gender violence not only add to the power exercised by capitalist management over work, but also reinforce it. Analyses of workers' health and coping with violence must consider such aspects.

Work-related violence shows an intersection of social markers of difference that can reproduce and accentuate social stereotypes and engender processes of humiliation and exclusion in power relations. The references to the guard's skin color and the "slave quarters" are by no means fortuitous. Equally, it is not chance that exposes women to sexual harassment in work contexts, but the predominance of sociocultural characteristics based on a patriarchal hierarchy and the political-economic vectors of capitalism aimed at controlling the workforce. In this context, the subjugation of female workers goes beyond work activities, presupposing subordination to hierarchical commands that often use coercion to obtain advantages.

Thus, work-related violence, illness, and health are mindful of "race," gender, class, and other social markers of difference. If this is true, intersectional analysis offers relevant contributions to Occupational Health.

The incorporation of intersectionality in Occupational Health

The intersectional reading defended in this study resembles the propositions of Kimberlé Crenshaw³², Heleieth Saffioti³³, Angela Davis³⁴⁻³⁶, Danièle Kergoat³⁷, Patricia Hill Collins, and Sirma Bilge³⁸. Thus, we understand that intersectionality investigates "how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life"³⁸ (p. 15). It constitutes an analytical tool that "views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age—among others—as interrelated and mutually shaping one another"³⁸ (p. 15-6).

However, in a materialist proposition, we should indicate that social relations must be understood as "consubstantial," forming a "knot that cannot be untied at the level of social practices, but only from the perspective of sociological analysis"³⁷ (p. 94) and as "coextensive" because, as they develop, "social relations of class, gender and 'race' reproduce and co-produce each other mutually"³⁷ (p. 94). Thus, in our understanding, rather than a question of choosing one struggle over others, it consists of recognizing how different struggles—anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-sexist—are connected³⁶. According to philosopher Angela Davis³⁴:

Of course, class is important. It is necessary to understand that class informs race. But race also informs class. And gender informs the class. Race is the way a class is lived. In the same way that gender is the way race is lived. We need to reflect a lot to understand the intersections between "race," class, and gender, in order to realize that among these categories there are relationships that are mutual and others that are crossed. No one can assume the primacy of one category over the others.

Thus highlighting the understanding that multiple axes of social differentiation operate interdependently. Despite the use of the term "categories," intersections should not be thought of as static notions of gender, "race," and class but as dynamic and historical power relations, i.e., categories cannot be dissociated "from the social relations within which they were constructed"³⁷ (p. 98). From the angle of materialism, "these relations—gender, 'race,' class—are relations of production. In them, exploitation, domination and oppression intersect"³⁷ (p. 99). Thus, we agree with Saffioti's statement about the fact that capitalism operates a "symbiosis" between the domination-exploitation systems represented by class, patriarchy, and racism³³.

Intersectionality offers, in our opinion, a more accurate perception of violence (especially work-related violence) and a more integrated and refined understanding of health and illness processes at work. According to Collins and Bilge³⁸, “Rather than seeing people as a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass of individuals, intersectionality provides a framework for explaining how categories of race, class, gender, age, and citizenship status, among others, position people differently in the world. Some groups are especially vulnerable to changes in the global economy, whereas others benefit disproportionately from them.”³⁸ (p. 33).

Work routines in Brazil are marked by situations that require a structural and intersectional analysis: the enslavement of Black women, held captive for decades; violence against domestic and app delivery workers; gender and/or transphobic violence against female and/or transgender parliamentarians; violence against rural workers, migrants, or refugees; the violence suffered and perpetrated by workers in the security forces; among others.

Thus, we must consider class, gender, “race,” and other markers of difference. Subalternity and the lack of resources under capitalism lead workers from certain social classes to become more subject to accepting degrading and precarious working conditions and being exposed to health and safety risks. The patriarchal and sexist culture strikes violent blows against working women, of which sexual harassment is but one example. Structural racism makes people inferior based on physical characteristics and skin color, distinguishing those who have access to rights and privileges from those who are considered of lesser worth, an aspect synthesized in the verses of the song “A Carne” [“Meat”], by Seu Jorge, Marcelo Yuca, and Wilson Capellette, sung by Elza Soares: “The cheapest meat on the market is Black meat”³⁹.

Intersectionality favors the recognition and reading of workers’ experiences and a praxis supported by the consideration of multiple, interrelated, and simultaneous forms of oppression. The experiences lived by workers in their work context, rather than being dissociated from “race,” class, and gender relations, are constitutive of power relations and constituted as means of oppression. The processes of subjectivation, health, and illness are unable to be read homogeneously and abstractly, separate from the social relations on which they are based.

Instead of sterilizing notions of suffering and psychic illness—which tends to homogenize unique experiences, ignore sociocultural aspects that constitute suffering, and hide structural violence—intersectionality leads to the understanding of the uniqueness of subjective experiences in their constitutive and interpenetrated dimensions.

We understand that intersectional analysis enables the fight for health at work in a way that goes beyond compartmentalized actions, sometimes directed to problems arising from working conditions, sometimes to racial or gender violence, often taken as “individual” or “human relations” issues. Actions to prevent illnesses, promote health, and transform work realities must simultaneously address the structures, processes, and social relations of “race,” gender, and class. Such social markers of difference are translated as flows linked to workers’ trajectories and experiences and, therefore, to their ways of living, getting sick, and dying at work.

Moral harassment, configured as work-related violence, for example, requires identifying the oppression resulting from class relations¹³ and, without relegating them to a secondary plane, contemplating their different axes of social differentiation. The same can be said about sexual harassment at work, which is determined by gender, “race,” and class relations. As Davis³⁵ reminds us: “Having already established their economic domination over their female subordinates, employers, managers and foremen may attempt to assert this authority in sexual terms.” (p. 201).

Debates on intersectionality allow us to understand psychosocial risks as a result of workers’ interactions with intertwined social processes that refer to power structures—notably, cross-cutting class, “race,” and gender relations—without prejudice to the incorporation of other axes of social differentiation that matter to subjects and the analysis of work.

Intersectional thinking, in our view, can be in line with the Marx perspective that refutes the “speculative conception of subjectivity,” stating that the ontological basis of the social being is its real-life process and that the “human essence” ineluctably leads us to the set of social relations⁴⁰. Intersectional analysis can, moreover, be combined with the perspective of psychopathology at work founded by Louis Le Guillant⁶, which makes relevant contributions to the study of illness processes at work. Among them, the rescue of the “human drama,” with its “emotional connotation,” and the principle that the subject and environment configure an “indissoluble” historical and dialectical unit, is a “fundamental law, which cannot escape the normal or sick psyche, nor the entire patient”⁶ (p. 41).

Final considerations

Work-related violence causes suffering, illness, deprivation, disability, maiming, and death. The characterization and confrontation of this problem must consider the interrelations between its structural and intersectional dimensions. Otherwise, the phenomenon will be recurrently interpreted in a biased way, being reduced to events classified as fortuitous and resulting only from individuals’ psychopathological deviations—a perspective that fails to analyze and cope with violence.

We maintain that work-related violence cannot be properly understood and faced without understanding its different dimensions, articulations, plural and intersectional manifestations, and systemic character in capitalism. “Race,” gender, class, and other social markers of difference must be considered in their interrelations so analyses and practices can move forward. Capitalist exploitation, racism, and patriarchal hierarchy must be faced as an unavoidable task of the present time, in theory and practice, making it necessary for Occupational Health to assume an intersectional position.

Finally, even if violence is part of human history and has not been created by capitalism, this system fails to eliminate it. On the contrary, we found the production of different forms of violence, including those related to work, as well as the continuous reproduction of dominant ideological forms that operate to hide the contradictions engendered by the logic of capital and the dominance of the bourgeoisie over workers. Such disagreements are often presented to society in a disguised way as if they were the inescapable result of history and individual merits or, even, the fruits of chance and unavoidable demands of progress.

Thus, when facing work-related violence, we must also consider, as a horizon, overcoming the capitalist mode of production. After all, as Saffioti states, “Capitalism is incompatible with social equality. Not to mention the problem of social classes, the cornerstone of capitalism, this socioeconomic system also does not admit equality between different races and between different sex categories”³³ (p. 40).

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