

THE MOBBING PHENOMENON – MAJOR OBSTACLE FOR WOMEN SEAFARERS’ INSERTION ONBOARD THE MERCHANT SHIPS

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Abstract:

The major obstacles faced by the women seafarers during adjustment or performing stages of their professional insertion onboard the maritime ships are the sexual harassment, discrimination, prejudice but also mobbing. The last one is the most often met factor incumbent to the insertion efforts, getting the most subtle forms and the most volatile shapes of manifestation, getting its importance due to the last decade determinations and researches, especially carried out onboard the maritime ships. The authors, as team members of the MENTORESS project, implemented under Erasmus+ KA2 have developed this study in their aim of describing this shapeless but strong felt phenomenon onboard the ships, seeking to reveal the role of the organization and of its management structures on this issue.

1. Introduction – Organizational Healthy

From a systemic perspective, the term "*optimal health of organizational systems*" is increasingly used, highlighting a number of beneficial factors which fortify it as well as other harmful factors that make it fragile:

- the conditions of the social environment, an environment and a working climate conducive to the achievement of high performance and adequate satisfaction, corroborated with the organizational climate, the role of employee morale, the degree of satisfaction and psychological well-being, plus the influence of organizational culture on behaviours in work environment.

- the impact of phenomena and factors such as stress, discrimination of all kinds (professional, religious, racial), sexual harassment, interpersonal or intragroup conflicts. [Zlate, 2007, p. 626]

A healthy organizational environment is defined by high productivity, a great satisfaction of the employees against the conditions of their work, the existence of securing contexts, a limited number of leaving the workplace, a small number of absences, high yield. [Quick, 1999]

The issues of organizational systems' health, especially of work systems within them, mainly formed by people, work tasks, conditions and constraints of the environment (physical and social) are being joined with medicine, social psychology, psychopathology. [Zlate, 2007, p. 560]. The same author makes a synthesis of the complex and varied concepts involved, grouping them into two main categories:

- those that revolve around the work – of its conditions and constraints – as possible pathogenic sources, which led to the prefiguration of work psycho-pathology which presupposes, above all, the awareness of the causal links between work activity and health or mental illness of the individual; *Dejours* (1987, p. 729) finds the phrase “man’s *psychopathology at work*” more appropriate, showing that the term “*psychopathology*” does not refer to mental pathology, namely to mental illness, but to the study of psychic mechanisms put into operation individually and collectively by the workers.

- those that revolve around organizations, factors and conditions of the organizational environment as a source of psycho-behavioural disorders, which contributed to the appearance of organizational pathology/psychopathology.

Summarizing, *Zlate* (2007, p. 564) states that the notion of organizational pathology/psychopathology can be defined in two distinct ways:

- broadly, designates organizational dysfunctions that create, accelerate and accentuate organizational risks; in this case, although organizations continue to act, sometimes even successfully, they contain disruptive elements that may worsen. This sense can be illustrated with phenomena such as: organizational stress, burnout, workaholism, mobbing. Depending on the extension and intent of expression and manifestation, they severely affect the climate and organizational efficiency.

- in a narrow sense, organizational pathology designates neurotic organizational manifestations that derive from the predominant neurotic style of the leader, in the pathological characteristics (neurotic psycho-behavioural dysfunctions) of the dominant group within the organization, in particular of the leadership group that is distributed throughout the organization. Here, relevant phenomena are: discrimination, stereotypes, bias, sexual harassment.

These aspects of organizational pathology are disadaptive phenomena in exercising leadership in maritime organizational environments that influence not only the personal life of crew members but also their socio-professional life. They affect the working capacity of the crew members regardless of their gender, formal or informal relationships between them or subjective well-being, and, above all, affect their labor efficiency. Over time, the organization transforms itself from a healthy and efficient one into a sick, morbid and totally unproductive one.

2. The mobbing phenomenon definition – literature review

The concept of *mobbing* was launched in work and organizational environments by *Heinz Leymann*, Ph.D. in labor psychology, a professor at the University of Stockholm. Aware of the problems of the professional environment, counsellor and psychotherapist in organizational environments, *Leymann* has noticed the existence and action of phenomena such as injustice, denigration, rights violation, psychological harassment, aggression that affect people at work, facts that generate important personal and also organizational level prejudices ranging from simple injury or isolation in the group to suicide. All of these have been reunited under the term *mobbing*. [Zlate, 2007, p. 627-630]

Through *mobbing*, the author does not understand what *Konrad Lorenz* understood, which used the term for the first time (attacks of a smaller group of animals against a single larger animal) or what *Heineman* understood through this term (aggressive behaviours of a small group of children orientated against one child). *Leymann* is closer to the conception of *Dan Olweus* (1993) who studied the phenomena arising in the context of victimizing school children and which he calls by the term of *bullying*. It refers to repeated and long-term negative actions exercised by one or more persons on one or other persons. Negative actions are those that injure, hurt or intimidate another person (schoolchildren) through physical, verbal, gesture or mimic touch. *Leymann* preserves the term *mobbing* for aggressive psychological actions exerted in organizational environments on people at work.

"By mobbing we understand a communicative situation that threatens to cause serious physical and mental harm to the individual. Mobbing is a process of destruction; it is constituted by hostile actions which, taken in isolation, may seem anode, but by constant repetition they have dangerous effects." [Leymann, 1990, p. 26-27]

Only hostile, aggressive situations involving confrontations, moral maltreatments, contempt of personality, emotional harassment or mockery fall into the sphere of mobbing, which are systematically and prolonged, becoming painful and even destructive. So, frequency and repetition over time allow such actions to become destructive in psychological, psycho-somatal and social level, and are considered to be *"psychic terror at work"* with unprecedentedly large personal and organizational effects. Sometimes, *mobbing* is interpersonal, but most often it locates at group level – not only does an individual terrorizes another person or even a whole group, but also the group can terrorize individuals, taken as a stand-alone entity, and by extension, the entire organization, with all its roots of statutes and roles, of hierarchies.

Mobbing is practiced throughout and across the entire organization: descendant, ascendant, horizontal or combined, taking place between colleagues, subordinates, subordinates and their boss, between heads and subordinates, running on an interpersonal level, group and even organizational. [Kovacs, 2008, p. 597]

In order to better understand the essence of *mobbing*, it is necessary to know the behaviours (actions, practices) that the aggressors use in relation to their victims. *Leymann* discovered (during 300 interviews) 45 such behaviours that were classified into five categories:

1. actions aimed for preventing the victim from expressing himself/herself: hierarchical superiors refuse victim's opportunity to express themselves; the victim is constantly interrupted when he/she speaks; colleagues prevent the victim from expressing himself/herself; colleagues scream, offend the victim; the victim's work is criticized; criticizing the victim's private life; the victim is terrorized by phone calls; the victim is verbally threatened; threatening the victim in writing; denial of contact with the victim; ignoring the victim's presence.

2. Actions aimed for victim's isolation: the victim is never spoken; the victim is not allowed to address another person; the victim is assigned a job that removes and isolates him/her from colleagues; colleagues are forbidden to speak with the victim; the physical presence of the victim is denied.

3. actions involving the victim's disregard in front of his/her colleagues: the victim is spoken of evil or slandered; rumours are being reported to the victim; ridiculing the victim; it is claimed that the victim is mentally ill; constraining the victim to attend a psychiatric examination; a victim's infirmity is invented; the actions, the gestures, the voice of the victim are imitated to make it more ridiculous; the political or religious beliefs of the victim are attacked; jokes about the victim's private life; jokes about victim's origin or nationality; the victim is obliged to accept humiliating activities; the unfair and unintentional marking of the victim's work; the victim's decisions are questioned or challenged; aggression of the victim in obscene or insulting terms; sexual harassment of the victim through gestures or suggestions.

4. victim's professional discrepancy: no tasks for the victim to be performed; depriving the victim of any occupation and watching the victim not to find any occupation on his/her own; entrusting unnecessary or absurd tasks; providing activities below the competencies; always assigning new tasks; imposing the execution of humiliating tasks; entrusting tasks that are superior to the victim's qualifications to discredit him/her.

5. compromising the victim's health: entrusting dangerous and harmful tasks to victim's health; physical violence, without aggravating circumstances, as a warning; physical aggression of the victim, without gravity, as a warning; serious physical aggression without restraint; causing inconvenience at home or at work; sexual assault of the victim. [Zlate, 2007, p. 631-633]

The 45 behaviours of the aggressor have a double meaning:

- they manage to better characterize *mobbing* in its vivid expression of current manifestation;
- they could be converted into a *mobbing* measurement instrument by operationalizing the concept.

Leymann has built such tool, not yet validated, called LIPT (*Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorization*), which stood at the base of epidemiological studies.

In a larger plan, aggressive behaviours suggest the degree of gravity of *mobbing*. If it is caused by one or two of these behaviours, it could be less serious than if it is caused by more of them, possibly associated with each other. Critical criteria for identifying *mobbing* are defined by their frequency and duration of manifestation. *Leymann* has determined that such aggressive actions can only be considered mobbing-specific if they occur more than once a week over a period of more than 6 months as a threshold value.

The paradigm of mobbing, once launched, has come into the field of interest of researchers, under various names: bullying, harassment, workplace persecution, psycho terror, victimization, emotional abuse, psychological violence, moral harassment or interpersonal conflict.

3. The mobbing evolution and upgrowth stages onboard the ships

The evolution in time of mobbing was conceived by *Leymann* in 4 phases:

1. The first phase consists of a series of **critical incidents**: opinion divergences, conflicts, struggle for power, some of which are solved by themselves, but others that degenerates into mobbing.

2. The second phase is characterized by the **increased frequency of hostile behaviours**, with the probability of multiplying practices and even the number of aggressors. At this stage there is a gradual installation of mobbing, the psychic balance of the victim begins to shake, the symptoms of stress and anxiety start to appear, the self-confidence decreases.

3. The third phase consist of **management acknowledgment** of the events and then attitudes manifestation ranging from non-involvement to leaving tensions to perpetuate the victim's attitude of condemnation; or the intervention occurs too late when the situation can no longer be controlled. Sometimes, mobbing can become a legal case and the victim's possibilities to defend himself/herself diminish further.

4. The fourth phase is the most traumatic and involves **stigmatization, social isolation** or even the removal of the victim from the workplace, which diminishes his/her chances of joining other organizations in other workplaces. The chances for the victim to be incorrectly diagnosed are high because there is a possibility that his/her story may not be believed or, because of commodity, the triggering social events are not investigated; examples of incorrect diagnosis: paranoia, maniac depression, character disorder. (*Leymann*, 1996) [*Kovacs*, 2008, p. 599] Of course, this step may be missing. In most cases, the victim leaves the organization discreetly, the management lacking a genuine feedback and not knowing the true reasons for employee's leaving, which perpetuates the ignorance regarding harassment and amplifies its negative consequences. [*Dinu*, 2005]

Two features of this process must be retained:

- this is the typical evolution of *mobbing*, when no one intervenes to defuse explosive situations; on the contrary, harassment and persecution are practiced until the "*liquidation*" of the victim.

- such an evolution is not at all inevitable, on the contrary, it is enough to want it and it could take another turn. [Zlate, p. 635]

Causes that define such a complex phenomenon as *mobbing*:

- the appearance of mobbing is usually preceded by a conflict situation. It is interesting to find out what are the reasons that transform the conflict into a mobbing process. It should be noted that there is a wide range of prejudices that argue that the main cause of mobbing would be a specific type of personality/character of the victim. Numerous medical representatives refuse to admit that reactions or stress symptoms originate in the social structure of the group in which the victim of mobbing evolves.

- a number of researchers have undertaken impressive analyses trying to provide a firm answer to the issue of mobbing causality, but the existence of a certain type of individual prone to become the target of mobbing could not be confirmed in the research on employed persons.

- all cases of mobbing follow a systematic and double stereotyped process: social and psychological. The personality theories that guide the interpretative scenarios of the various social actors involved in the knowledge of mobbing do not have consistency and validity and sometimes they are not even credible. For example, it cannot be explained, by calling on the personality theories, why young employees are more often victims of mobbing, as no serious theory admits the radical transformation of personality with age. On the contrary, personality structures remain constant during life, without reserving surprises that can explain the power of differently affecting mobbing in relation to the two categories (young and elderly). Another argument against theories that involves the personality structure as a factor of mobbing is brought by clinic psychologists who show that post-traumatic stress disorder which frequently occurs in mobbing victims generates a series of major changes in personality. This indicates mobbing as a cause of major mental disorders and changes. [Zlate, p. 636-639]

Therefore, if the personality type of the victim is not intrinsically involved in the determination of mobbing, what would be the relevant explanatory factors? Research has shown that, in essence, the process of social marking and systematic destruction of the victim of mobbing is a **management problem**. Among the subjective factors that lead to the appearance of mobbing can be included the "*psychological labour contract*", which is in fact a subjective addition to the formal employment contract.

Employees and employer feed personal expectations whose disappointment is bitter. Three main factors can be distinguished:

a. Organization of work

Validation support has been taken from occupational health research that tracked psychosomatic issues in relation to certain stressors (causes). These causes would be specific to both psychosomatic issues

and mobbing, which itself is a psychosomatic problem generator. Significant correlations have been found between well-defined work situations and the occurrence of psychosomatic diseases. Such situations, commonly encountered, are mainly represented by:

- a. quantitative overloading of the job;
- b. qualitative sub-load;
- c. lack of clear rules and delimitations, interference of attributions.

It can be said that because of stressful situations, all work situations generate potentially conflicts, which in turn, through degeneration, can lead to an increased risks of mobbing.

b. Design of tasks - source of mobbing

Excessive operationalization of work has led to its impoverishment, becoming so stressful by its monotony and sub-intellectual character. Labour medicine has also found at this level significant correlations between monotony and certain psychosomatic disorders. In such working conditions, mobbing is most often a **mobbing of boredom/monotony/ subsistence**. The explanation lies in the fact that the aggressor usually chooses a colleague as a target only to occupy his/her spirit/mind to eliminate the unpleasant sensation of mental mood.

c. Coordination and employee control/direction - another cause of mobbing

There are a number of hierarchical superiors that, though surprisingly, through conscious behaviour, reduce employee performance. How is this possible? The answer sends us to the analysis of some style notes sometimes inappropriate in the manifestation/exercise of the statutory prerogatives of the leader in question. Most of them consider that organization management are immutable, and when the weakness of this organization manifests itself, they prefer to use force to reduce the tensions that have arisen instead of revising the structure and organization of work. The stiffening of style is in an anachronistic report with modern scientific suggestions in managerial literature. It addresses the human dimension of the organization, insisting on the necessity of a permanent, creative dialogue that allows the rapid discovery of problems and especially the design of the right solutions based on the experience of the workgroup. In essence, the manager/leader's inability to manage conflicts (translated through conflict neglect, his biased involvement in conflict, denial of conflict) is a ramp for launching mobbing at a group/organizational level. [Adams, 1992, p. 638]

These three factors (organization, design and coordination of work/activity) will condition the social capacity of the working group. It is necessary to take into account and actively integrate the elements of psychological specificity of the considered group, in order to prevent the emergence of negative behaviours that could degenerate into conflict/mobbing. Social groups differ greatly in terms of their specificity: some find their balance more easily when there is polarization, increased homogeneity of members' attitudes and opinions. However, they become quickly sensitive to attitudinal dispersion tendencies, exerting coercive

pressure, which makes the individual in question to conform or to exclude himself/herself, becoming a "scapegoat". Self-exclusion, especially psychologically, is the result of the violation of group rules, especially informal ones. In this sense, mobbing appears most often as a break in the emotional balance of the group and as rebalancing is a managerial attribution, the emergence of mobbing illustrates the existence of deficiencies in the very "cortex" of the organization. The inability to jointly seek a solution to work problems and to consider other points of view is a crack in emphasizing the personalization of the conflict and the development of mobbing.

Considered by nature, the effects of mobbing affect 3 large perspectives:

a. Psycho-individual plan: mobbing directly affects the victim's psychophysical integrity with the following effects:

- anxiety, generalized anxiety with panic attack, obsessive-compulsive symptomatology, phobia;
- post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS): intense, cumulative damage with intrusive recurrent ideation;
- behavioural disorders: anorexia, bulimia, alcoholism, drug addiction, hetero-aggressivity;
- loss of motivation for professional activity;
- decreasing satisfaction, performance;
- early retirement;
- impairment of adaptability, socio-emotional balance, self-esteem, disinclination, socio-professional alienation.

The effects are highly destructive, affecting this plan being sufficient for a socioprofessional disability of the individual.

b. At the level of the workgroup and organizational group, mobbing translates into effects such as:

- degradation of professional relationships;
- impairing/degrading the quality of communication;
- lack of genuine mutual engagement and support;
- absenteeism;
- staff fluctuations;
- frequent sick leave;
- destructuring, asynergy.

Of course, all of this, translated into money or profit, is costly for the organization.

c. At the societal level, the effects of mobbing could be considered of second order because they are extensions of the previous effects, mediated by the plans corresponding to their manifestation. Therefore, mobbing is not only an individual, professional, organizational but also a social one, as it ultimately affects

social equilibrium. On the one hand, the individual's ability to maintain and develop natural relationships with family, social group, social institutions is altered and on the other hand, through its protection institutions, the society has to pay extra for longer or shorter periods of unemployment, for psychosocial rehabilitation programs, to restore its own balance. [Zlate, 2007, pp. 639-640]

4. Operational measures to overcome the onboard mobbing

There are a number of specific measures to counteract mobbing, but when it comes to selecting appropriate methods/measures, it is necessary to know the actual stage of mobbing, as following:

a. Prevention

- one of the most desirable forms that should be practiced, as mobbing once installed is hard to assume that it will not leave psychological damage. In order to protect employees' work capacity, it is necessary to establish rules and procedures to prevent the escalation of conflict into dangerous situations. Sometimes it is almost enough if the employer proclaims that the escalation of any conflict seriously damages organization's interests and that top management considers prevention as an important rule.

- another measure within the perimeter of prevention actions is the establishment of educational programs addressed to managers/leaders in particular. The training aims the formation of capacities to identify potential conflict-generating sources and, above all, the formation of solving skills when they have emerged. In addition, it is necessary to have clear procedures and rules for intervention when a conflict reaches critical odds.

- the series of preventive actions includes early managerial interventions. In order to intervene promptly, the manager must be able to "*read*" the first signs of development in the mobbing process. Top management must designate one or more individuals within the organization where employees in danger can call for advice. The authority should be delegated to these people so that their intervention is effective.

Preventing mobbing in the organization involves checking company issues, monitoring their dynamics and formulating ethical and behavioural norms.

b. Reconciliation of parties through a mediator specialist in this mobbing process. The mediation process is similar, almost symmetrical to that instituted in the context of organizational interpersonal conflicts.

c. Vocational rehabilitation. When the mobbing process has been installed, fact which is verified by its frequency and persistence, there are certain pieces of labor law that oblige the management to take notice and to design programs with individual addressability for the protection and psychosocial-professional rehabilitation of the victim's. In essence, it is intended to prevent employee stigmatization, preservation of reputation and previous skills.

d. Victim legal rehabilitation – a method used when all the other failed. In this situation, mobbing takes the form of a dispute solved according to the civil law methodology. [Zlate, 2007, p.641-642]

5. Conclusions

Women seafarers represent a strategic human resource in seafaring that can resolve the problem of world seafarers' shortage. Diversity is the range of values, attitudes, cultural perspectives, beliefs, ethnic background, sexual orientation, skills, knowledge and life experiences of the individuals making up any given group of people, and the on-shore maritime industry can benefit from the presence of women.

The final remarks drawn from the carried study, can conclude that maritime education and training institutions have to explain to the young cadets all the merits of maritime profession and to show the possibility for them to look for emotional attractiveness and achievement of their professional dreams by choosing to pursue a maritime seagoing profession, even male of women. The candidates should be aware of the following issues, as part of their prior training:

- **organizational dysfunctions** and **psycho-behavioural disturbances** that can be found onboard ships refers to *stress, burnout, workaholism, mobbing, discrimination, stereotyping, bias* and *sexual harassment* – they should be conscious that these aspects influence not only the personal life of crew members but also their socio-professional life;

- organization of work, conceiving tasks, coordination and controlling employees compose the social capacity of the crew and if breaking the **emotional balance could provoke mobbing**, especially in gender perspective;

- when working within multicultural crews, as onboard team member, it is necessary **to care about preventing prejudice and stereotype onboard ships**, and team leaders should always take attitudes derived from the "*cultural wheel*" concept;

- sexual harassment irrespective of what, how and against whom, should be perceived as always being **against the law**.

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