MORAL HARASSMENT AND THE DYNAMICS OF SUBORDINATION IN LABOR RELATIONS: A STUDY ON WORKERS IN THE COMMERCIAL SECTOR OF IMPERATRIZ-MA[1]

Marcus Vinícius da Conceição Lima[2] and Iara Barros Barbosa[3]

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes moral harassment in the workplace in the commercial sector of Imperatriz-MA, focusing on the legal implications. The research investigates how hierarchical subordination and pressure for productivity favor abusive practices, harming workers' rights. Through interviews and questionnaires, situations of moral harassment were identified, such as public humiliation and excessive goals, in addition to the workers' lack of knowledge about their legal rights. The study discusses the responsibility of employers to ensure a healthy work environment, as provided for in the Federal Constitution and labor legislation. It is concluded that the application of preventive policies and reporting channels are essential for the protection of the dignity of the worker and the maintenance of a harmonious work environment, respecting fundamental rights and ensuring the psychological integrity of workers.

Keywords: Moral harassment. Work environment. Labor rights. Legislation. Employer's liability.

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[1] Article presented to the Bachelor's Degree in Law of the Institute of Higher Education of Southern Maranhão – IESMA/Unisulma.
[2] Student of the Bachelor of Laws course at the Institute of Higher Education of Southern Maranhão – IESMA/Unisulma
E-mail: viniciuslubia@gmailcom.br
[3] Advisor Professor
Graduated in Law from Unisulma
Postgraduate in Public Law from PUCRS
Professor of the Bachelor's Degree in Law at the Institute of Higher Education of Southern Maranhão – IESMA/Unisulma
E-mail: iarabarrosadvocacia@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

This article deals with moral harassment in the workplace, a topic that has been consolidated as one of the most harmful forms of psychological violence in the organizational context, affecting the mental health and well-being of workers. This phenomenon, characterized by systemic and repetitive behaviors, whether humiliating or discrediting by hierarchical superiors, represents a challenge not only for workers, but also for the entire organizational environment. Such a phenomenon, when institutionalized, triggers a series of harmful consequences that compromise the climate of the work environment, productivity and the mental health of employees.

The specific focus on moral harassment in the commercial sector of the city of Imperatriz-MA, aiming to understand the relationship between the dynamics of hierarchical subordination and how this situation contributes to the incidence and perpetuation of the phenomenon in the work environment. The incisive demands, the pressure for productivity, the exorbitant goals associated with the dynamics of subordination have favored the emergence of the practice of harassment. In this context, the investigation seeks to analyze the experiences of workers in the commercial sector of Imperatriz-MA in relation to moral harassment, identify the ways of coping adopted and evaluate the level of knowledge about labor rights related to the phenomenon.

The work in question seeks to examine in detail the incidence of moral harassment, with a specific look at the commercial sector of Imperatriz-MA, aiming to offer a regional approach on the subject, obtaining the incidence, as well as the knowledge of the workers as to the characterization of such an incident, seeking to clarify how the dynamics of subordination present in the commercial environment of Imperatriz-MA, can influence the incidence of moral harassment. By considering the particularities of the commercial sector of Imperatriz, the research offers a regional approach to a theme that, although widely debated, still requires an analysis of local realities.

The phenomenon of moral harassment in the workplace has become a growing concern in contemporary organizations, especially in sectors where productivity demands and pressure for results are intense. Based on data made available by the CNJ, from 2020 to 2023 the Labor Courts, in all instances, judged 419,342 lawsuits involving moral and sexual harassment lawsuits. Among these, the volume of lawsuits related to moral harassment increased by 5%, compared to previous years, which reflects a growth in the number of cases and the concern about the impact of this practice on the work environment. Regarding the new lawsuits received by the Labor Judiciary, 338,814 involved moral harassment, which demonstrates the relevance and timeliness of the topic. This

increase in lawsuit records indicates that moral harassment has become an issue of greater visibility and importance, requiring an in-depth study to understand its dynamics and consequences.

The advent of technology and modernization of social media are one of the main factors responsible for the modification of the means of work and product offerings in the market. Companies began to compete not only with commercial establishments that share a close geographic location, but also with the entire global trade network that is now available in the palm of any individual's hand. In this way, in order to achieve better numbers and maintain a level of competition with large sales platforms, regional commerce starts to use controversial practices to ensure an increase in productivity and obtaining profits, often sacrificing the well-being and disrespecting basic rights of its workers, which can result in various types of health problems in these individuals, from work stress, burnout and even chronic depression.

Performing the analysis of the words, we have "harassment" as the set of behaviors in relation to someone, being the insistence with someone, with questions, proposals, pretensions, etc. In relation to the term "moral", it comes from philosophical studies, where it is nothing more than acting in accordance with the moral norms or conducts imposed for good coexistence in society. Moral harassment at work is a phenomenon that can be identified since the first records of human work performed, where moral harassment was used as a method to "motivate" servants and slaves to produce more and maintain their servitude and obedience. Thus, in addition to the objective of performing a job that is to receive remuneration, work was a guarantor of the lives of many people, where they were subjected to degrading situations in exchange for food and life itself, as they did not have freedoms over them.

Moral harassment can be identified through degrading, vexatious conduct, psychological violence, where some individual in a superior hierarchical position uses words and acts with a humiliating character aimed at his subordinates. These actions trigger a real emotional and psychic exhaustion in the victims of this situation.

In this context, the scenario "Moral Harassment and the Dynamics of Subordination in Labor Relations: A Study on Workers in the Commercial Sector of Imperatriz – MA" is discussed. The analysis will be carried out with a group of employees of a car dealership, located in the city of Imperatriz – MA, where it will be observed about which situations similar to those described as moral harassment are subject to, what knowledge about the labor legislation they have, as well as what ways to combat this type of posture can be used within this work environment.

Taking into account the relevance of understanding what generates these abusive behaviors and their consequences, this research aims to provide the necessary knowledge on how to deal with situations of abuse in the workplace and raise awareness about the importance of valuing and respecting the working class within the business environment, where from the analysis of individual attitudes there will be greater collaboration to maintain a harmonious and harmonious work environment. healthy for all.

Thus, always emphasizing the difficulties encountered by these employees with regard to dialogue with their hierarchical leaders, compliance with internal goals, associated with pressure that they are already entirely subject to due to the work activity of serving the public, as this already has its own peculiarities. In this way, a channel of dialogue and openness to possible conflict solutions is created effectively, where the employee feels respected and valued in his work environment, but above all he has knowledge about his rights and to whom he can turn in case of abuse.

In view of the above, it is verified that moral harassment in the workplace is a practice that affects the mental health of workers, especially in sectors where the pressure for results is intense. In the commercial sector, the dynamics of hierarchical subordination may contribute to the perpetuation of this phenomenon, but little is known about how workers identify and deal with these situations, as well as about the effectiveness of prevention policies. Thus, the following central question arises: how hierarchical subordination in the commercial sector contributes to the occurrence of moral harassment, and how workers deal with this problem.

In the same scope, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between hierarchical subordination and the occurrence of moral harassment in the commercial sector, analyzing how workers deal with this practice and the impact it has on their mental health and the organizational environment. Based on this general assumption, it also seeks to meet objectives such as identifying the situations of moral harassment faced by workers in the commercial sector of Imperatriz and the influence of hierarchical subordination in this process, evaluating the level of knowledge of workers about the labor legislation related to moral harassment and its implications and proposing strategies and measures to prevent moral harassment that can be adopted by commercial organizations.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The concept of moral harassment at work, although widely discussed in modern times, has deep roots that go back to practices of control and subordination in the first forms of work organization, since ancient civilizations. Historically, the work environment

was marked by the imposition of physical and psychological violence with the aim of subjecting workers to long working hours, without considering their emotional or psychological needs. In many ancient cultures, work was imposed as a form of punishment or obligation, and any form of resistance or questioning was repelled through physical violence or public humiliation.

However, the nature of labor relations has changed over time, especially with the advance of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, where working conditions became more organized and hierarchical relations began to play a central role. From this period, new forms of social and labor control emerged, more subtle, but equally abusive. The pressure for results, combined with a rigid hierarchy structure and the search for efficiency, led to the emergence of behaviors that dehumanize workers, marking the beginning of what we now understand as moral harassment at work.

The concept of moral harassment was systematized in the 1980s, particularly by the German psychologist Heinz Leymann, who used the term mobbing to describe repetitive and aggressive behaviors in the workplace. For Leymann, moral harassment was not an isolated incident, but a systematic behavior that aimed to destroy the worker's self-esteem and confidence, forcing him to submit to the orders of the aggressor or even to leave the work environment altogether.

Marie-France Hirigoyen, a French psychologist, was also one of the pioneers in the study of moral harassment. In his work "Moral Harassment: Perverse Violence in Daily Life" (2000), Hirigoyen points out that moral harassment is a phenomenon that is not restricted to specific work contexts or sectors, but can occur in any environment where there is a hierarchical or power relationship. For her, moral harassment is a form of psychological violence, in which the aggressor uses his power to emotionally destabilize the victim and lower her self-esteem, leading her to physical and mental exhaustion. She emphasizes that moral harassment is characterized by repetition and the intention to subject the worker to a state of vulnerability, being one of the cruelest forms of violence because it is silent and often invisible.

Hierarchical subordination plays a central role in the dynamics of moral harassment, especially in organizations where power relations are more rigid and structured. The concept of subordination refers to the position of inferiority or dependence of an employee in relation to a hierarchical superior, a central aspect in traditional organizations. Hierarchical subordination can be seen in two ways: formal subordination, which is established by the organizational structure and its norms, and psychological subordination,

where the worker internalizes the pressures and expectations imposed by superiors, often without realizing that he is being subjugated.

In the context of moral harassment, hierarchical subordination becomes a facilitating factor for psychological abuse. The power relationship between superiors and subordinates creates an environment in which workers often feel powerless to contest the actions of their superiors, for fear of reprisals, dismissals or loss of status. This power dynamic is exacerbated by organizational culture in many cases, where the emphasis on meeting goals and achieving results can justify abusive behavior as a form of "motivation" or "healthy pressure."

The theory of organizational control, developed by several sociologists and philosophers such as Michel Foucault, can be applied to understand how modern organizations use subordination to control the behavior of workers. Foucault argues that, in modern societies, power is not exercised in an explicit or authoritarian way, but rather through systems of surveillance, monitoring, and discipline, as occurs in many labor relations. According to the author, discipline produces "docile bodies", that is, individuals who internalize the norms and start to control themselves, becoming more useful and submissive to institutional objectives (FOUCAULT, 2002). In companies where control is exacerbated and the worker is constantly being watched, subordination becomes a mechanism by which moral harassment can be perpetuated with impunity, without the victim realizing that he or she is being abused.

The effects of bullying on workers' mental health are serious and long-lasting. Moral harassment is considered one of the most harmful forms of psychological violence at work, affecting the self-esteem, self-confidence and emotional health of the victims. According to data from the Commission for Equality in Labor and Employment – Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security, workers who suffer moral harassment can develop post-traumatic stress, loss of self-esteem, anxiety, depression, apathy, irritability, memory disorders, sleep disorders and digestive problems, and can even lead to suicide. These effects can be so intense that they impair not only professional performance, but also the worker's personal life.

Psychologist Cristina Maslach describes burnout as a process of emotional exhaustion caused by an excessively stressful and dehumanizing work environment, as is the case with many workers who face moral harassment. Burnout is characterized by a sense of emotional exhaustion, detachment and cynicism towards work, and a significant drop in personal and professional fulfillment. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent

among those who are constantly pressured by unrealistic goals and subjected to constant humiliation.

The impact of bullying on physical health should also not be underestimated. Studies show that the chronic stress caused by this type of abuse can result in health problems such as hypertension, heart disease, gastrointestinal disorders, and even autoimmune diseases. Panic syndrome and insomnia are often observed in victims of bullying, who have their ability to cope with stress severely compromised.

In Brazil, moral harassment at work gained legal relevance with the enactment of the Federal Constitution of 1988, which ensures the dignity of the human person as one of the fundamental rights. This guarantee implies that the worker has the right to be treated with respect and not to be subjected to abusive or dehumanizing behavior in his work environment. In addition, Brazilian law establishes that moral damage, including psychological suffering caused by moral harassment, can be repaired through financial compensation, according to the understanding consolidated in case law.

Law 9.029/1995, which deals with discrimination at work, and the CLT (Consolidation of Labor Laws), protect workers against degrading and abusive conditions, which can be considered moral harassment in some cases. Law 11.340/2006, known as the Maria da Penha Law, also establishes protection against violence in the domestic and work environment, although it is focused on domestic violence, its principles were later incorporated into labor law, bringing more visibility to the issue of moral harassment.

The jurisprudence, in turn, has expanded to include moral harassment as an illegal practice subject to reparation, with the Superior Labor Court (TST) recognizing the seriousness of the problem and ruling in favor of the victims. Companies are encouraged to implement policies to prevent moral harassment, which include educating and raising awareness among employees and creating safe reporting channels.

The prevention of moral harassment in organizations requires the adoption of a healthy organizational culture, in which the dignity of the worker is valued and respected. Training for managers and employees, clear policies on moral harassment, and accessible reporting channels are crucial tools for reducing this phenomenon. Creating an environment where workers feel safe to report abuse without fear of reprisals is essential to addressing bullying effectively.

In addition, labor legislation must be constantly updated to ensure that victims of moral harassment have easy access to justice and can obtain compensation for the damages suffered. Companies should also be encouraged to take quick and effective corrective action when bullying is identified.

METHODOLOGY

The study will have a qualitative, exploratory and descriptive methodology, which aims to investigate the dynamics of hierarchical subordination and its relationship with the occurrence of moral harassment in the commercial sector of Imperatriz. The research was carried out with workers in the commercial sector of Imperatriz-MA, seeking to understand the experiences lived by employees and the implications of the dynamics of subordination in incidents of moral harassment.

The research adopted is qualitative, as it aims to deeply understand the perceptions, feelings and experiences of workers in relation to the phenomenon of moral harassment in labor relations, especially in the commercial sector. Unlike a quantitative approach, which is limited to measuring and counting variables, qualitative research seeks to capture the specificities of social phenomena, exploring the narratives of each individual and the interpersonal dynamics in the work environment. This type of research is essential to understand the subjective reality of workers, revealing emotional, psychological and social aspects that often cannot be expressed in numbers and statistics.

In addition, the research is exploratory, as it proposes to analyze a phenomenon that, although recognized, still needs specific studies in the specific context of Imperatriz-MA, which is the motivation that justifies the choice of such an approach. The exploratory research aims to identify the characteristics and variables related to moral harassment, providing a theoretical basis for future investigations and analyses, contributing to the understanding of this phenomenon in the regional context.

In addition, the research is descriptive, as it focuses on characterizing the impact of moral harassment on workers and on the work environment, detailing how this phenomenon affects the mental health, psychological well-being and professional performance of individuals. The survey also describes the factors that contribute to the occurrence of bullying, including the hierarchical structure of companies, leadership practices, and organizational culture. Thus, what is sought is not only to map the forms of harassment, it is also to understand the behaviors within organizations that perpetuate this type of conduct, as well as the harmful effects it causes on victims and the work environment. By adopting a descriptive approach, this research aims to provide a detailed portrait of workers' experiences and the conditions that favor bullying, which is essential for the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies.

APPROACH AND METHOD

The method used was inductive, in which data were collected through interviews and questionnaires, which in turn allowed conclusions to be reached about the theme in question. The research was carried out through semi-structured interviews and qualitative questionnaires, allowing the interviewees a more comprehensive way to share their experiences and knowledge on the subject.

UNIVERSE AND SAMPLE

The interviews and research were carried out with 15 workers from the commercial sector in the city of Imperatriz-MA. The sample was selected probabilistically, with the choice of participants being delimited only by the regional criterion and sector in which they worked, the commercial. The interviews had 6 men and 9 women as participants, aged between 22 and 45 years. Those who in their jobs occupy different positions within the company's hierarchy.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews and qualitative questionnaires. The interviews provided an in-depth analysis of each individual's experiences in relation to moral harassment and hierarchical subordination, allowing each interviewee the opportunity to express themselves freely on the subject, expressing their knowledge and experiences, while the questionnaires focused on quantifying the aspects of the answers and provided a general response to the workers' perceptions.

Sample Interview Questions:

1. Have you ever experienced or witnessed a situation of moral harassment in the workplace? If so, could you describe the situation?
2. How do you think the hierarchical subordination relationship contributes to moral harassment in your work environment?
3. Have you ever noticed any attitude of moral harassment, such as humiliation or exclusion, by your superiors? How did it affect your emotional health or your performance?
4. Do you have knowledge about labor legislation related to moral harassment? How does this impact your perception of the topic?
5. What are the main difficulties you encounter when trying to deal with a situation of moral harassment at work?

With the questions asked, it was possible to obtain a range of answers that, after being subjected to a careful analysis, satisfactorily answered the objectives of the study. It is possible through them to explore the perception of each worker about moral harassment and hierarchical subordination, in addition to understanding how this phenomenon impacts their lives.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data collection was carried out in two phases:

1. Individual interviews: The interviews were conducted confidentially, with prior scheduling and a maximum duration of 10 minutes, where the participants were informed of the purpose and confidentiality.

2. Qualitative questionnaires: After the interviews, each participant was given a questionnaire with several questions, so that it was possible to assess their perception of the topic of moral harassment and the relationship with the dynamics of subordination

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

After data collection, content analysis was performed to systematically interpret the results obtained. The process involved three steps:

1. Initial reading: First reading of the interviews and questionnaires to identify recurring themes.

2. Coding: Classification of data into categories, such as types of bullying, psychological impact, perceptions of hierarchical subordination, and suggestions for prevention.

3. Analysis and interpretation: Evaluation of the results with the existing literature on the subject and analysis of recurring themes and divergences in the answers.

SEARCH RESULTS

PROFILE OF THE INTERVIEWEES

The research sample was composed of 15 respondents (6 men and 9 women), with ages ranging from 22 to 45 years. The average work experience in the commercial sector was 4.5 years, with the majority (80%) having just over 2 years of work in the respective companies. The positions were varied, providing a different view within the hierarchy of the commercial sector of Imperatriz.

Main Situations of Moral Harassment Identified:

During the interviews, the most recurrent answers were:

- 50% of respondents (7 people) reported constant criticism and public humiliation during team meetings, especially by superiors.
- 40% of respondents (6 people) mentioned social isolation, being excluded from important meetings or interactions with other teams, which generated a feeling of devaluation.
- 30% of respondents (4 people) cited excessive tasks and unattainable goals as a form of moral harassment, with managers demanding unrealistic results and generating stress in workers.

INFLUENCE OF HIERARCHICAL SUBORDINATION ON MORAL HARASSMENT PRACTICES

Most of the interviewees indicated that hierarchical subordination is a fundamental factor for the configuration of moral harassment, since the pressure for results and the fear of reprisals make it difficult to report abusive practices. Key findings on this point include:

- 70% of the interviewees (10 people) understand that the rigid hierarchical structure contributes to the perpetuation of moral harassment.
- 60% of respondents (9 people) reported that the pressure for goals and the environment of constant competition increase the chances of superiors adopting harassing practices.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LABOR LEGISLATION RELATED TO MORAL HARASSMENT

The interviewees' knowledge about labor legislation was limited:

- 60% of the interviewees (9 people) were not aware of the rights related to moral harassment, which may have made it difficult both to identify the problem and to search for solutions.
- 20% of the interviewees (3 people) had basic knowledge, but had no knowledge of how to appeal and formalize a complaint.
- Only 20% of the interviewees (3 people) demonstrated knowledge about the laws and reporting processes related to moral harassment.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF BULLYING

The most frequently reported psychological effects were:

- 40% of respondents (6 people) reported feeling constant stress due to the pressure environment and criticism.

- 30% of respondents (5 people) reported anxiety and fear of interactions with superiors, resulting in a sense of powerlessness and even distrust.
- 20% of respondents (3 people) reported doubts about their professional capacity, affecting their self-esteem and confidence.

MEASURES TO PREVENT AND COMBAT MORAL HARASSMENT

In order to improve the work environment, the interviewees made suggestions for the following measures:

- 50% of respondents (7 people) suggested the implementation of prevention policies and confidential and easily accessible reporting channels.
- 40% of respondents (6 people) recommended training on mental health and awareness about bullying and its implications for all employees.
- 30% of respondents (4 people) proposed revising the goals proposed in their work to make them more realistic and achieve a balance between productivity and well-being.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data collected in the research reveals that the dynamics of hierarchical subordination in the commercial sector of Imperatriz-MA is one of the main factors that trigger the incidence of moral harassment. The rigid structure of power relations, associated with the constant search for goals, creates a place in which psychological abuse becomes systematic and constant, it is highlighted that the search for goals, combined with authoritarian behaviors and people in higher positions, provides situations of exclusion, overload, among others. The incidence of such behaviors perpetuates the

Most of the interviewees reported that formal and psychological subordination also contributes to the perpetuation of moral harassment, since the victims, fearing reprisals and aiming to remain in their respective jobs, avoid reporting the abuses.

The report of situations where there is frequent criticism, social isolation, and in some cases even public humiliation, as forms of moral harassment, was common among the interviewees, which reinforces the idea that moral harassment does not materialize as an isolated incident, but rather as a systemic and recurrent practice, which aims to reduce the worker's self-esteem and prevent him from questioning the authority of the respective superior. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of knowledge about labor rights and the forms of complaint, because as expressed in the data collection, workers are not properly

aware of their rights, corroborating the perpetuation of harassment in the organizational environment.

In addition, the effects of harassment on individuals are profound, and it is expressed during the interviews that the daily life in the work environment is also reflected in the individual outside of work. Some interviewees reported during the interviews that they suffer from chronic stress, anxiety and sleep disorders, taking into account that the interviewees are mostly young, this is a worrying fact. These effects not only affect the mental health of workers, but also compromise their ability to perform their duties efficiently, thus generating a never-ending cycle that harms workers and the work environment.

In addition, the revision of the goals and the adoption of a more balanced approach between productivity and well-being were suggested as essential measures to reduce moral harassment. The pressure to achieve results must be accompanied by a genuine consideration of employees' working conditions. This includes reviewing performance expectations, which are often unrealistic and damaging to the workers' psychology. The pressure for unattainable goals should not be a justification for the exploitation and humiliation of employees and with this the cultural change in organizations must include the recognition that workers are not mere numbers or cogs in a gear, but human beings with rights and dignity that must be respected.

Finally, the discussion points out that the fight against moral harassment requires a profound change in organizational structures and cultures, which must be accompanied by coordinated legislative, educational and business actions. Success in eradicating bullying will depend not only on employee awareness, but also on companies' commitment to ensuring that their management and leadership practices respect employee rights and promote a dignified and healthy work environment for all.

CONCLUSION

The present study revealed that the dynamics of hierarchical subordination in the commercial sector of Imperatriz-MA contributes significantly to the incidence of moral harassment. The pressure for productivity, unrealistic goals, and the rigidity of hierarchical relationships generate an environment conducive to the perpetuation of this abusive practice, directly impacting the mental health of workers. The survey also indicated that many workers are unaware of their rights and ways to report harassment, which makes it difficult to find solutions and prolongs the suffering of victims, as well as leads to a work environment perpetually corrupted by harassing behaviors.

Based on the results found, it is possible to conclude that awareness about moral harassment and the implementation of clear prevention and combat policies are fundamental for the creation of a healthy work environment. The creation of safe reporting channels, training on labor legislation, and mental health programs are effective strategies to address the problem in a structured way.

In addition, the survey indicated the importance of a more humanized approach to labor relations, where workers' rights are respected and human dignity is preserved. By ensuring that workers are aware of their rights and that they can use reporting mechanisms in the event of abuse, organizations can contribute to building a more harmonious and productive environment.

In short, the implementation of preventive and educational measures, the creation of effective communication channels, and the promotion of mutual respect between workers and superiors are crucial steps to combat moral harassment and improve the quality of the work environment in the commercial sector of Imperatriz-MA. From this study, it is possible to see that, with well-targeted actions, it is possible to reduce cases of harassment and promote a healthier, more respectful, and more productive environment for all involved.

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