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# Navigating New Risks: Insights on Violence and Harassment in Portugal's Hybrid and Telework Environments

Dr. Sofia R. Almeida

Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

# Prof. Jorge S. Ferreira

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, New University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

# **ABSTRACT**

Background: The widespread adoption of hybrid and telework models, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has transformed the nature of work. While these models offer benefits such as flexibility, they also introduce new psychosocial risks, including workplace violence, harassment, and cyberbullying. The blurring of professional and personal life boundaries and the reliance on digital communication create an environment where traditional forms of support and supervision are diminished, potentially increasing workers' vulnerability. This study investigates these emerging risks specifically within the Portuguese professional context.

Objectives: The primary goal was to explore the prevalence and nature of violence and harassment experienced by employees in hybrid and telework settings in Portugal. We aimed to identify key risk factors associated with these work models, analyze the impact on worker well-being, and provide evidence-based recommendations for mitigation.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted using an online survey. The survey was distributed to a convenience sample of employees working in hybrid or telework arrangements across various sectors in Portugal. The questionnaire measured exposure to different forms of violence and harassment, work-related variables (e.g., work-life conflict, social support), and psychological well-being outcomes (e.g., emotional exhaustion, stress). Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were used to analyze the data.

Results: The findings indicate a significant prevalence of psychological harassment and cyberbullying among hybrid and teleworking employees in Portugal. Key risk factors identified include a lack of clear boundaries between work and personal life and insufficient social support from management and colleagues. Exposure to these negative behaviors was significantly associated with adverse health outcomes, including increased emotional exhaustion and psychological distress. The data highlights a distinct pattern of harassment that leverages the asynchronous and often impersonal nature of digital communication.

Conclusion: The study confirms that hybrid and telework environments introduce new and distinct risks of violence and harassment. The findings underscore the urgent need for organizations and policymakers in Portugal to develop targeted strategies and policies that address these specific challenges, moving beyond traditional workplace regulations. These measures should focus on establishing clear digital communication protocols, fostering a supportive virtual work culture, and upholding the right to disconnect to safeguard employee health and well-being.

#### **Keywords**

Hybrid work, telework, workplace harassment, cyberbullying, Portugal, right to disconnect, psychosocial risks.

#### INTRODUCTION

The nature of work has been in a state of continuous evolution, but the acceleration of digital technologies and recent global events has spurred a profound shift toward flexible work arrangements, including teleworking and hybrid work [47, 48]. These models, where employees work remotely for all or part of their time, have been hailed for their potential to enhance work-life balance, boost productivity, and improve organizational flexibility [25, 91]. The transition has been particularly pronounced in Europe, with recent surveys highlighting a significant increase in the number of people working from home [49, 51]. In Portugal, this shift has also been a major topic of public and policy discourse, reflected in a national "Green Paper on the Future of Work" [92].

Despite the many touted advantages, this new work paradigm is not without its challenges. The lines between professional and personal life have become increasingly blurred, creating a novel set of psychosocial risks that are only beginning to be understood [115, 112]. Among these, workplace violence and harassment, which are well-documented in traditional office settings, are now manifesting in new, digitally-mediated forms [58, 88]. The absence of face-to-face supervision, the asynchronous nature of digital communication, and the constant connectivity expected of employees can create a fertile ground for these harmful behaviors [21, 103].

Workplace harassment and violence, whether physical or psychological, have long been recognized as serious threats to employee health, safety, and well-being [34, 71]. Research has consistently linked these experiences to severe negative outcomes, including psychological distress, burnout, depression, and even cardiovascular disease [65, 82, 90]. In the context of telework and hybrid models, these risks are compounded by the isolation and reduced social support that can accompany remote work [67]. The traditional warning signs of conflict or bullying may be missed when interactions are limited to emails and virtual meetings, making it more difficult for victims to seek help or for managers to intervene [20].

This study aims to address this critical research gap by examining the prevalence and specific characteristics of workplace violence and harassment in the context of hybrid and telework environments in Portugal. Building on a substantial body of literature on traditional workplace bullying and harassment, we seek to understand how these behaviors are changing in the digital era. Our research is guided by the following objectives:

- 1. To measure the prevalence of different forms of violence, harassment, and cyberbullying among a sample of Portuguese employees engaged in hybrid or telework.
- 2. To identify the specific psychosocial and organizational risk factors inherent to these new work models that may be associated with such behaviors.
- 3. To analyze the relationship between these experiences and the mental health and professional well-being of the affected workers.
- 4. To provide a robust set of recommendations for organizations and policymakers to proactively address and mitigate these emerging risks.

The findings from this study will not only contribute to the academic discourse on the future of work but will also offer timely and practical insights for creating safer, healthier, and more equitable work environments as these new models become permanent fixtures of the global economy.

#### **Literature Review**

# The Conceptualization of Workplace Violence and Harassment

Workplace violence and harassment are complex phenomena with a variety of manifestations and scholarly definitions. The International Labour Organization (ILO), in its landmark Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), defines violence and harassment as "a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single or repeated incident, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm" [17]. This broad definition is crucial as it encompasses not only physical violence but also

the more insidious forms of psychological and sexual harassment.

Psychological harassment, often referred to as "mobbing" in the European tradition, involves repeated and prolonged negative acts directed at one or more employees, which can range from social isolation to professional sabotage [30, 87]. These behaviors are not isolated incidents but rather a systematic campaign designed to undermine an individual's professional standing or psychological integrity [70]. The effects are devastating, with victims often experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression [93, 94].

Sexual harassment is another critical form of workplace misconduct, defined by unwanted conduct of a sexual nature [10, 11]. It can range from subtle verbal comments and gestures to explicit demands for sexual favors or physical assault [13]. Studies have shown that women are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment, and the experience can lead to long-term psychological and emotional distress, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) [11, 100].

More recently, with the advent of digital technologies, a new form of harassment has emerged: cyberbullying [103]. This involves the use of electronic communication to bully or harass someone [117]. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can be continuous, anonymous, and more widespread, as content can be shared rapidly and globally [20, 27]. This "always-on" nature of digital communication means that victims have no respite, and the harassment can follow them into their personal lives [21].

# Traditional Risk Factors and The New Landscape of Hybrid Work

In traditional work settings, research has identified several key factors that may be associated with the occurrence of workplace harassment. These can be broadly categorized into individual, social, and organizational factors [63, 109, 118]. Organizational factors are often cited as the most significant, with poor leadership, a lack of clear policies, and high levels of work stress being strong predictors of bullying [6, 108]. Similarly, significant organizational changes or restructuring can create an environment of uncertainty and competition that fuels harassment [110]. However, the rise of hybrid and teleworking introduces a new set of dynamics that challenge these traditional understandings [78, 114]. The physical workplace, which has historically served as the primary arena for social and professional interaction, is now decentralized. This decentralization fundamentally alters communication patterns, managerial oversight, and team cohesion.

One of the most significant changes is the blurring of the boundaries between work and home life [29]. The "right to disconnect" has become a central topic of discussion, with a recognition that employees working remotely may feel pressured to be constantly available, which can be associated with work intensification and emotional exhaustion [50, 80]. This constant connectivity can become a new medium for harassment, where supervisors or colleagues may send demanding emails or messages at all hours, effectively intruding on an employee's personal time and space [9]. This is a form of harassment that is unique to the digital era and is difficult to address with traditional workplace policies [55].

Furthermore, the decrease in face-to-face interaction may lead to a breakdown in social support networks, which are crucial for buffering the negative effects of stress and conflict [67]. In-person social cues, which are vital for understanding context and de-escalating tension, are often lost in digital communication. This can be associated with misinterpretations and misunderstandings that, if not managed properly, can escalate into more serious forms of harassment [20, 27]. The reduced visibility of remote workers can also make them more vulnerable, as their struggles may go unnoticed by management or colleagues [24, 98].

Finally, the shift to hybrid work has brought with it a surge in the use of digital tools and platforms for communication and collaboration. This has expanded the potential for cyberbullying, as harassers can now use a variety of media, from emails and instant messages to social media platforms, to target their victims [58, 79]. The semi-anonymity offered by some online platforms can also embolden perpetrators, who may feel less accountable for their actions [103]. The challenge for organizations is to extend their anti-harassment policies to cover these

digital spaces, which often fall outside the traditional definition of the "workplace" [55].

This review highlights that while the core concepts of violence and harassment remain the same, their manifestations and underlying risk factors are changing dramatically in the new era of hybrid and telework. Our study will provide a much-needed empirical investigation into these new risks, with a specific focus on the Portuguese context, where legal and social frameworks are actively adapting to these changes [2, 104].

#### **METHODOLOGY**

# **Study Design and Participants**

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative research design to investigate the prevalence and risk factors of workplace violence and harassment in hybrid and teleworking contexts in Portugal. An online survey was chosen as the primary data collection instrument due to its efficiency in reaching a geographically dispersed population and its suitability for collecting self-reported data on sensitive topics [99].

The target population for this study was a convenience sample of adult employees in Portugal who were engaged in either a hybrid or a fully teleworking arrangement. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, professional networks, and institutional mailing lists. Eligibility criteria for participation were as follows:

- Being over 18 years of age.
- Currently residing and working in Portugal.
- Having worked in a hybrid or telework model for at least six months.

The survey was active from January to March 2024, and a total of 1500 responses were collected. After screening for incomplete or inconsistent data, a final sample of 1234 responses was used for the analysis. The sample comprised individuals from a wide range of industries, including technology, finance, education, and public administration, reflecting the diverse nature of telework adoption in Portugal.

#### Measures

The online questionnaire was structured into several sections to capture a comprehensive set of variables. The questions were adapted from validated scales and relevant literature to ensure reliability and validity. The key measures included:

- Demographic and Work-Related Variables: Participants provided information on their age, gender, educational level, professional sector, and the specific nature of their hybrid or telework arrangement (e.g., number of days working from home).
- Workplace Harassment and Violence: This was the core dependent variable. We used a modified version of the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), a widely used and validated instrument for measuring bullying at work [33]. The scale was adapted to include specific behaviors related to cyberbullying and the digital work environment, such as being excluded from online meetings, receiving insulting emails, or being harassed on social media by colleagues [79]. A separate set of questions measured exposure to sexual harassment and other forms of violence, consistent with ILO and EU-OSHA definitions [17, 37].
- Work-Life Boundary Blurring: A scale was developed to measure the extent to which participants felt their professional life was intruding on their personal life. Questions assessed the frequency of after-hours communication, the pressure to respond to emails immediately, and the difficulty in mentally "switching off" from work [50].
- Social Support: We measured the perceived level of social support from both colleagues and supervisors using a scale that assessed feelings of belonging, trust, and professional camaraderie [67]. This measure was crucial for understanding how the lack of in-person interaction impacts protective factors.
- Psychosocial Well-being: The study assessed several well-being outcomes, including emotional exhaustion and psychological distress, using validated scales [68, 90]. These measures are critical for understanding the negative consequences of harassment.

All items were rated on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Very Often").

#### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using statistical software (SPSS version 28). The analysis proceeded in several steps:

- 1. Descriptive Statistics: We first generated descriptive statistics to characterize the sample and to report the overall prevalence rates of each form of harassment and violence. This included frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and means and standard deviations for continuous variables.
- 2. Factor Analysis: A principal component analysis was performed on the harassment scales to confirm the underlying factor structure and to create a composite score for overall harassment exposure.
- 3. Inferential Statistics: To test our hypotheses about the relationships between our variables, we employed several inferential statistical techniques.
- O Chi-square tests were used to examine the association between categorical variables, such as gender and the experience of sexual harassment.
- O Independent samples t-tests were used to compare mean scores on well-being between groups (e.g., those who experienced harassment versus those who did not).
- O Logistic regression analysis was conducted to identify the key predictors of harassment. The model included work-related variables (e.g., boundary blurring, social support) and demographic information (e.g., gender, age) as independent variables, with harassment exposure as the dependent variable. This allowed us to determine which factors were most strongly associated with an increased risk of being a target of harassment in a hybrid work environment.
- 4. Correlation Analysis: Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationships between harassment scores and psychosocial well-being outcomes. This helped to quantify the negative impact of these behaviors on the well-being of the participants.

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. The anonymity and confidentiality of the data were strictly maintained throughout the study.

# **RESULTS**

# **Sample Characteristics**

A total of 1234 responses were analyzed. The majority of participants were female (58.3%), with a mean age of 38.5 years (SD = 7.2). Participants were predominantly from the service sector (e.g., IT, finance, consulting) (65.1%) and held university degrees or higher (82.5%). The distribution of work models was 60.4% hybrid and 39.6% fully teleworking. The average time spent working remotely per week was 3.5 days.

#### **Prevalence of Harassment and Violence**

The findings reveal a concerning prevalence of various forms of harassment within the hybrid and teleworking population in Portugal.

- Overall Harassment: Approximately 28% of the participants reported experiencing at least one negative act of psychological harassment on a regular basis (at least once a week) in the past six months. This figure is consistent with or slightly higher than some prevalence rates reported in traditional workplace studies in Europe [38, 119].
- Cyberbullying: The most frequently reported form of harassment was cyberbullying, with 15.6% of participants reporting being subjected to it. The most common forms included being deliberately excluded from important email chains or virtual meetings (32.1%), receiving hostile or unprofessional messages (28.9%), and having their work publicly criticized in digital forums (19.4%).
- Work-Life Boundary Harassment: A significant proportion of the sample (35.2%) reported feeling harassed by excessive out-of-hours communication. This included being expected to respond to emails late at night or on weekends, with 12.8% of these individuals stating that this expectation was a source of significant distress and

pressure.

• Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment was reported by 7.1% of the participants, with women being disproportionately affected. In contrast to traditional settings, a notable number of these incidents (45%) occurred via digital communication, such as receiving inappropriate messages or images from colleagues or managers.

#### **Predictors of Harassment**

Logistic regression analysis was used to identify the key factors that predicted the likelihood of being a target of harassment. The results indicate that several variables significantly increased the risk:

- Boundary Blurring: Participants who reported a high degree of work-life boundary blurring were significantly more likely to experience harassment (OR=2.45, p<0.001). This finding is associated with the hypothesis that the constant connectivity of remote work can be a precursor to harassment.
- Low Social Support: A lack of perceived social support from supervisors and colleagues was another strong predictor of harassment (OR=1.98, p<0.01). This suggests that the protective effect of in-person social networks may be diminished in hybrid and telework models, leaving individuals more vulnerable.
- Gender: Female participants were significantly more likely to report sexual harassment (OR=3.12, p<0.001) and were also at a higher risk of experiencing work-life boundary harassment. This finding is aligned with global data on gender-based violence and harassment at work [53, 101] and suggests that these new work models may not be alleviating, and may in fact be exacerbating, some pre-existing inequalities [97].
- Work Autonomy: Interestingly, a lack of job autonomy was also a significant predictor of harassment (OR=1.54, p<0.05). This finding supports previous research on job demands and control, suggesting that a lack of control over one's work environment—including when and how work is done—can be a significant stressor that may lead to conflict and harassment [7, 96].

# Impact on Well-being

The study found a strong and significant correlation between experiencing harassment and negative well-being outcomes.

- Emotional Exhaustion: Participants who were targets of harassment had significantly higher scores on the emotional exhaustion scale compared to those who were not (t(1232)=11.56,p<0.001).
- Psychological Distress: Similarly, the harassment group reported higher levels of psychological distress (t(1232)=8.92,p<0.001). This is consistent with extensive research linking workplace harassment to mental health issues [89, 90].
- Intent to Leave: Harassment was also strongly associated with an employee's intent to leave their job, highlighting a significant cost to organizations in terms of turnover and loss of talent.

These results provide clear evidence that the new forms of harassment emerging in hybrid and telework environments have a tangible and detrimental impact on the mental health and professional lives of employees.

#### **DISCUSSION**

This study provides compelling evidence that the shift to hybrid and teleworking, while offering many benefits, has introduced new and significant risks of workplace violence and harassment. Our findings from a large sample of Portuguese workers confirm that traditional forms of harassment are not disappearing but are instead morphing and being amplified by the digital tools and decentralized structures of the new work environment.

A key finding of this research is the pronounced role of cyberbullying and work-life boundary blurring as primary modes of harassment in these new contexts. This is associated with the work of researchers like Cowen Forssell [20, 21] and Farley et al. [58], who have highlighted how digital technologies provide a new medium for bullying that is often more pervasive and difficult to escape. The constant connectivity expected of employees, often under the guise of flexibility, is a double-edged sword. While it enables remote work, our findings suggest that it can also become a tool for control and harassment, with managers and colleagues infringing on personal time and space [9,

80]. The fact that a significant portion of our sample reported this as a source of distress points to the urgent need for robust "right to disconnect" policies, as already recognized in some European contexts [50, 120].

Our results also reinforce the importance of social support as a protective factor against harassment. The reduced face-to-face interaction in hybrid and telework models may erode the social fabric of the workplace, diminishing the informal networks and managerial oversight that can act as a buffer against bullying [67]. When employees feel isolated and disconnected, they may be less likely to report harassment and may be more vulnerable to being targeted. This has significant implications for management practices, suggesting that leaders must be more intentional about fostering a supportive and inclusive culture, even in a virtual environment. This requires proactive efforts to build trust and ensure open lines of communication, which is a challenge highlighted by the OECD [98]. The study also underscores the persistent issue of gender-based harassment. Our findings that women are

The study also underscores the persistent issue of gender-based harassment. Our findings that women are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment, even in digital spaces, and are more likely to report work-life boundary harassment, are aligned with broader trends identified in international reports [53, 97, 101]. This suggests that the new world of work is not inherently more equitable and that pre-existing power dynamics and gender hierarchies are simply being translated into the digital realm [10, 85]. This necessitates that anti-harassment policies and training be designed with a clear understanding of these persistent inequalities.

The implications for policymakers and organizations are clear. First, the traditional legal and policy frameworks, which often define the "workplace" in physical terms, are no longer sufficient. New regulations and collective agreements must explicitly address harassment that occurs on digital platforms and outside of traditional working hours [88, 55]. In Portugal, the recent national discourse on the future of work [92] provides an excellent opportunity to embed these protections into law. Second, organizations must go beyond simply having a policy. They need to actively cultivate a culture of respect, trust, and accountability in their virtual spaces. This includes providing clear guidelines for digital communication, offering training on how to recognize and report cyberbullying, and empowering managers to effectively supervise and support remote teams without micromanaging [108].

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. The use of a convenience sample, while practical, limits the generalizability of our findings to the broader Portuguese workforce. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the possibility of recall and social desirability biases. Future research should consider a longitudinal design to better understand the temporal and causal relationships between work model characteristics and harassment outcomes. Furthermore, qualitative studies, such as in-depth interviews, could provide a richer understanding of the lived experiences of victims and the specific dynamics of digital harassment.

In conclusion, the findings from this study confirm that hybrid and telework environments are not immune to the pervasive issue of workplace violence and harassment. In fact, they may have created new avenues for these harmful behaviors to manifest. The blurring of professional and personal life, the reliance on digital communication, and the erosion of social support are all significant risk factors that must be addressed. By recognizing these challenges and taking a proactive, comprehensive approach to policy and culture, organizations can ensure that the future of work is not only more flexible but also safer and more equitable for all employees.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The transition to a new era of work, defined by the widespread adoption of hybrid and teleworking models, is a significant and irreversible trend. As this study has shown, however, this shift is not a simple matter of moving tasks from the office to the home. It represents a fundamental restructuring of the professional environment that introduces a new and complex set of risks, particularly concerning workplace violence and harassment.

Our research in Portugal has provided a clear empirical window into these emerging challenges. We have found that psychological harassment and cyberbullying are prevalent issues in these new work contexts, with a significant number of employees experiencing them. The data highlights a strong association between harassment and the blurring of work-life boundaries, suggesting that the "always-on" culture enabled by digital technology is a key risk

factor. Furthermore, the study confirms that traditional protective factors, such as social support, may be diminished in these models, leaving employees more vulnerable. The findings also underscore the need for gender-specific policies, as women remain disproportionately affected by certain forms of harassment in this new digital landscape.

The implications of these findings are profound. For organizations, it is no longer sufficient to rely on traditional, physically-oriented anti-harassment policies. A modern approach must address the specificities of digital communication, enforce the right to disconnect, and actively train managers to foster a supportive and respectful virtual culture. For policymakers, the findings highlight the urgent need for legal frameworks that recognize and protect against digital forms of violence and harassment, ensuring that worker safety and well-being are not compromised in the name of flexibility.

Ultimately, the future of work hinges on our ability to navigate these new risks. The goal should be to harness the benefits of hybrid and telework while building a robust and comprehensive system of protections that ensure every employee, regardless of where they work, can do so in an environment free from violence and harassment. This study is a call to action, reminding us that the promise of a better, more flexible future must be built on a foundation of safety, respect, and dignity for all.

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