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Preventing workplace violence and threats among professional cleaners – how not to be in the ‘wrong place at the wrong time’

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Professional cleaners work in a complex work environment, subjected to various physical and mental loads. This paper focuses on work related violence and threats and practical suggestions for its prevention and mitigation. By organizing and designing cleaning work in time and space it is possible to reduce the risk of cleaners being in the ‘wrong place at the wrong time’. Cleaners need to have sufficient knowledge of how their work can be carried out as safely as possible; how to act when threatening or precarious situations occur, and feel confident in managerial support if they need to interrupt work in a threatening situation.

Keywords. Work related violence, work environment, cleaning, work organization.

1. Introduction

Professional cleaners work in a complex work environment, subjected to various physical and mental loads. The study presented in this paper is a part of a larger project aiming to further the knowledge about cleaners working conditions, and to develop and disseminate methods and practical measures for an improved work environment (Antonsson et al., 2016). Specifically, this paper presents an analysis of the risks associated with work related threats and violence, and suggest preventive measures.

1.1. Background

Cleaning companies operate in a highly competitive market, placing high demands on cost efficiency. In practice, this implies that the time allowed for completing a task is very limited. Since it is also a service industry, customer requirements are instrumental for the content and organization of the cleaning work that is usually performed on premises owned and controlled by other actors. The work is often done as solitary work, or in small groups, and the contact with other occupational communities that might be present at the premises is often limited.

The cleaning industry in Sweden is an expansive industry. In the wake of the introduction of the RUT tax deduction for domestic services in 2007, the industry saw a rapid expansion of new establishments. According to the Swedish Work Environment Authority (SWEA), many of the newly started small cleaning companies lack basic knowledge about work environment management, and the number of accidents and
incidents reported to the SWEA from the cleaning industry increased by more than 200 per cent between 2005 and 2010. Long-term sick leave is twice as common among cleaners compared to the average for workers in Sweden. The most common causes for long-term sick-leave are musculoskeletal disorders, but statistics has also seen an increase in cleaners being subjected to occupational threats and violence.

There is no generally agreed definition of occupational threats and violence. The term has been defined in diverse ways depending on context and area of activity (Wikman, 2016). For the purpose of this study, the point of departure is the definition used in the SWEA provisions on Violence and Menaces in the Working Environment, that defines violence as the full range of aggressive acts, including homicide, assaults, threats, sexual harassment and verbal abuse (AFS 1993:2, p.5).

Previous research show an increase in work-related violence in Sweden and the Nordic countries, and especially among women (Wikman, 2016). The violence in general has however remained at a relatively constant level, making the working life the single largest arena for threats and violence. In the 2013 Work Environment Survey, about 14 per cent of the survey respondents (18 per cent of the women and 11 per cent of the men), representing all professions, reported that they were subjected to work-related threats and violence sometime during the last 12 months (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2014). Contemporary workplace violence is more than the stereotypical image of robberies and assaults in the retail business, and violence aimed at first responders. Certain groups of professionals, such as health care and social workers account for an increasing proportion of incidents, both as perpetrators and victims of violence (Wikman, 2008). In the typology of Bowie (2002), workplace violence can be categorized in four types: intrusive (intentional criminal action performed by a stranger), consumer-related (customer, client, patient to employee, or vice versa), relationship and organizational (organizational violence against employees or costumers, clients, patients).

In Sweden, bullying and sexual harassment is significant of the incidents classified as relationship violence, where the aggressor is a colleague or in other ways is familiar with the victim (Wikman, 2008). Sexual harassments at the workplace is particularly common in sectors, traditionally dominated by women workers (LO, 2015). Harassments range from physical acts, such as unwanted hugs or groping, to body-shaming, comments or gestures. In a survey conducted by Novus on behalf of LO (The Swedish Trade Union Confederation), 11 per cent of employees in the hotel and restaurant industry, including cleaners, report to have been subjected to harassment by other persons (LO, 2015, p. 33). In addition, the survey shows that relationship violence is more common at hotels and restaurants than other workplaces, and that the risk is further increased for employees on fixed-term employment contracts. That the risk of being subjected to workplace harassment varies with gender and class has been described also in international research (see, for instance the systematic literature review by McDonald, 2012).

1.2. Study purpose and aim
The purpose of this study is to identify the most common types of threats, violence and sexual harassment directed at cleaning professionals in Sweden, and in which context
these incidents occur. The overall aim is that with increased knowledge of underlying causes and contributing factors, it is possible to suggest preventive measures to eliminate, minimize, and mitigate effects of occupational threats and violence.

2. Methods and materials
To provide a sufficiently elaborated understanding of the problem domain, a mixed methods approach was adopted (Johnson et al., 2007), combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. The study is based on the following research activities:

- **Analysis of statistics.** Analysis of occupational accidents and injuries related to threats and violence of cleaners, as reported to:
  - The Swedish Work Environment Authority\(^1\) (SWEA) during 2005–2010
- **Research interviews** with relevant stakeholders (Table 1), primarily focusing on frequency and type of events, causes and possible actions. Observations and interviews with professional cleaners during workplace visits to a hotel, a school and a pre-school.
- **Stakeholder workshop.** In the final phase of the project, a workshop was held with invited representatives of cleaning companies (manager, safety delegate, work environment specialist, and HR manager), a representative from a cleaning equipment supplier, as from the social partners. The workshop aimed for a critical and reflective discussion of the identified risks and suggest appropriate measures to eliminate, minimize or mitigate these risks as far as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional role</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HR manager</td>
<td>Large cleaning company &gt; 250 employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Large cleaning company &gt; 250 employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Small cleaning company &lt; 50 employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Small cleaning company &lt; 50 employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work environment specialist</td>
<td>Visita Employers ‘Association, representing 7 000 hotels, restaurants and other hospitality enterprises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ombudsman</td>
<td>HRF Hotel &amp; Restaurant Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional safety delegate</td>
<td>HRF Hotel &amp; Restaurant Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional safety delegate</td>
<td>Fastighets, Building Maintenance Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager, intendant</td>
<td>Municipal school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Municipal pre-school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR manager</td>
<td>Large hotel &gt; 250 employees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Reporting of work-related severe injuries or incidents to the SWEA is mandatory under the Work Environment Act (AML) chapter 3, 3a§.

\(^2\) AFA Insurance (AFA Försäkring), insures employees working within the private sector, municipalities, and county councils. Reporting is voluntary, but necessary to receive compensation for work-related injuries.
3. Results

The presentation of the results and analysis is structured in the following order. First, the statistics analysis is presented, showing the number and type of incidents reported to the SWEA and approved by AFA Insurance, respectively. Followed by the results from the interviews, workplace visits and stakeholder workshop, presented on the themes of working conditions, communication, and suggested preventive measures.

3.1. Reported accidents and injuries due to work-related threats and violence

The results of the statistics analysis originating from SWEA and AFA Insurance are presented in Table 2. Events that can be classified as accidents without intent to harm, have been excluded from this analysis, making the number of analysed incidents smaller than the total number of officially recorded incidents.

Table 2. Number of occupational injuries related to threats, violence or sexual harassment of cleaners, reported to the SWEA and approved by AFA Insurance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of injury</th>
<th>Examples of situations</th>
<th>SWEA</th>
<th>AFA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical assaults</td>
<td>Disgruntled customers, mentally instable patients, conflict between colleagues, criminal persons, solitary work, remote location.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal threats</td>
<td>Disgruntled customers, mentally instable patients, conflict between colleagues, criminal persons, unknown persons, solitary work, remote location.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal attacks</td>
<td>Assaulted of unattached dog, attacked of dog when cleaning staircases</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ball kick</td>
<td>School children/pupil kicked ball against the head of an employee.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>Attempted robbery in a staircase</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassments</td>
<td>Attempted rape</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>66</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Perpetrators of threats and violence, as reported in the free text responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported perpetrator</th>
<th>SWEA</th>
<th>AFA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colleague employed in the same company</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School student</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital patient</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer, employee at customers company</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal person, robber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead person found at work place</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bomb threat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undisclosed person</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results show that cleaners’ working conditions contain many features that can escalate to situations of threat, violence and sexual harassment. A closer examination of the free text responses in the reports to SWEA and AFA Insurance shows that offenders are often found in the cleaners’ proximity by people who have legitimate reason to be on the premises where the cleaning work is carried out (Table 3).

3.2. Working conditions with perceived elevated risk
The interviews show that some workplaces and working conditions are perceived as particularly prone to threats and violence. Examples include cleaning of public transport facilities, such as metro and train stations, in stairwells, at schools, hospitals and other healthcare facilities. Also, transport to and from some workplaces is perceived as an elevated risk, especially when working at remote premises, during late evenings, night or early mornings. In the interviews, several of the respondents confirm what is seen in the statistics; that perpetrators of threats and violence often are known to the victim, such as a customer or a colleague.

Examples of situations described during interviews involve dissatisfied customers, mentally ill or demented patients at a health care establishment, or intoxicated individuals in the public. Especially when cleaning is performed during inconvenient working hours when the cleaners may be the only other person present, becoming an unfortunate channel for a perpetrator to let out anger or frustration for other reasons. Thus, the cleaners who are exposed to threats and violence are often not part of any conflict; they just happen ‘to be in the wrong place at the wrong moment’.

Conflicts at the workplace sometimes occur between cleaners with different ethnic background, or between supervisors and employees, especially when language barriers add to misunderstandings.

3.3. Communication of risks, preventive actions and reporting
The interviewed managers report a perceived lack of effective channels for knowledge transfer and communication of risks and incidents. Some incidents did not become known to the employer until the afflicted employee had reported sick of other causes, such as physical stress injuries. Documentation of threats and violence is often poor within the companies, making it difficult to investigate who did what and during which circumstances.

Among the reasons stated for employees not reporting incidents are language barriers, the employees having poor knowledge of their rights, or that a victim feels ashamed of what they have been exposed to. Employees on temporary employment contracts might fear a risk of losing their job if reporting.

3.4. Identified measures to reduce the risk of threats and violence
Effective prevention measures can be found at an organisational, technical and individual level. At the organisational level, prevention is facilitated by a functioning systematic work environment management that examines and assesses the risk of threats, violence and harassment. Managers and supervisors need to have good knowledge and understanding of what and why certain situations can occur, how often, and what kind of preparedness is needed to mitigate effects of potential
incidents. An important part of preventive work is how the work is organized and planned in time and space to reduce the risk of employees being at the wrong place at the wrong time, and that solitary work is avoided where this is inappropriate. For this planning, the employer needs clear procedures for how risks can be assessed and managed. Often, it needs to be performed together with the customer or co-ordinator for the property. Cleaning can for instance be co-ordinated with other staff in the workplace so that the cleaner does not have to work alone. For example, setting up meetings with other employees (own colleagues or others), guests, caregivers, students and the public who are present where the cleaning is to be performed. Here, it is important to discuss where the cleaning will take place, what sort of cleaning tasks that will be performed, and whether there are any special needs or requirements to increase safety. This applies especially for cleaning in environments with a lot of people present or moving through, such as hotels, schools, waiting venues for air, train or public transport, or other places with a lot of queues. Other environments that could increase the risk include hospital environments, social offices or other similar public administration offices; places where there may be people who are exhausted, stressed, sick or affected by alcohol and drugs.

Technical issues include design of parking and access roads, alarm and lock functions, lighting, and so forth. It is important to clarify how the cleaner can easily get in contact with a supervisor when needing assistance, and if special procedures are needed to check that the cleaner leaves the workplace at the scheduled time. Exactly how contact can be held between cleaning staff, supervisors and colleagues depends on the situation and the workplace. Sometimes it is enough with a telephone call or a text message, in other situations where phone coverage is poor, it may be justified to wear portable communication radio. Cleaners working alone or in particularly exposed places can be equipped with personal alarms. It may be a so-called man down alarm with a GPS that indicates if a person falls. There are also alarms that enables an external operator to follow and monitor an event, communicate with the victim and, if necessary, alert appropriate emergency services.

At the individual level, the cleaning staff also needs knowledge of how the cleaning work can be carried out as safely as possible and how to act in various threatening situations. The staff also needs to feel confident in having the support of the workforce, for example, work needs to be interrupted in a threatening or unpleasant situation. Before cleaning in a new location, all employees need a good introduction to the new object, what occupational safety hazards may exist and what security measures should be taken. In many cases it is appropriate that the cleaning staff be included in the customer’s regular protection work such as alarms, surveillance cameras, security guards and working during office hours when the customer’s staff are in place. If security-creating measures are implemented in a workplace for the customer’s own staff, or for students at a school, such as action programs against bullying, threats and violence among students or violent caregivers, these measures could also include the cleaners in the workplace.

In a cleaning company, it is important to agree on how any customer complaints are dealt with. The customer and the cleaning company can for example agree that the customer’s staff should raise complaints to their own organization and not to the
cleaners directly. This can be a good strategy, but there are also benefits that the cleaners have good direct contact with the customer in the workplace.

4. Discussion
The results show that workplace threats and violence constitute a small part of the reported incidents, about 2.5 per cent of the accidents and injuries reported to the SWEA, and about 9 per cent of the work-related injuries reported to AFA Insurance. It is however reasonable to assume that there is a major underreporting of work-related threats and violence. If an incident did not result in sick leave or a permanent damage, the victim would not be eligible for compensation from AFA Insurance, and would probably not report it. Furthermore, serious threats and violence that cause physical damage or where weapons are involved are generally reported more frequently (BRÅ, 2017), as is violence that occurs between people unknown to each other. It is also largely depending on how the victim perceives the situation. In a study of work-related threats and violence against municipal inspectors, fear of retaliation was often behind a decision not to proceed and report (Horn af Rantzien, 2014).

Cleaners are affected by workplace violence in many different environments, but especially during solitary work, at night or at times where it is difficult to get assistance. Preventive measures should be directed towards minimizing the risk of cleaners being in hazardous situations and avoiding solitary work. Measures include design of work tasks and work organization, as well as design of the physical work environment, work equipment and personal alarms. Cleaners should also receive training on how to act in environments where there are many other people, such as schools, health care facilities, and public environments. An evaluation of various training measures for managing work-related threats and violence, including verbal and non-verbal techniques to calm down and cope with a threatening situations in other areas of work has shown positive effects not only for cleaners, but also increased customer satisfaction (Beech & Leather, 2006).

5. Conclusion
By organizing and planning the cleaning work in time and space, the risk that an employee happens to be in the ‘wrong place at the wrong time’ can be reduced, and solitary work can be avoided as far as possible. Cleaners must have sufficient knowledge of how the cleaning work can be carried out as safely as possible and how to act when threatening or precarious situations occur. They must also be able to rely on managerial support if the cleaning work needs to be interrupted by a threatening or unpleasant situation. Suggested measures to reduce the risk include:

- Implement prevention of workplace threats and violence in the work environment management system to systematically identify and manage situations with elevated risks.
- Plan and coordinate the work with the customer or with other work tasks performed at the premises, to avoid solitary work.
- Work in particularly hazardous situations or environments need routines for keeping contact with the cleaner(s). Such a routine can be combined with an alarm or so-called man down alarm with GPS function.
• Workplace introduction with guidelines on how to perform work safely, and instructions on what to do in a threatening or unpleasant situation. Training on how to act to avoid and handle threatening situations may include verbal and non-verbal techniques to calm down and cope with various situations.
• Training for managers about threats, violence and sexual harassment, to be able to identify and manage risks.
• Company routines that clearly indicate that cleaners can cancel work if the situation becomes threatening and promptly contact their supervisor.

In addition to these preventive measures, routines and measures may also be needed when something happens. Preparedness may need to include access to first aid equipment, means of transport, interpretation assistance and information about the closest relative.

References