

Research Commentary: Workplace Bullying and Harassment: Examining the Key Issues and Call for Action

Throughout the world, workplace bullying and harassment impact employees across industries and demographic factors. Studies of high-income countries report high rates of bullying and harassment in the workplace. For example, studies conducted in the United Kingdom have reported rates typically ranging between 10 percent and 20 percent, influenced by occupation, measurement variance, and cultural perception. A recent UK study utilizing data from the 2014 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey found nearly 11 percent of respondents experienced workplace harassment in the past year, with higher rates among women, mixed-racial/ethnic heritage individuals, and those in debt. Studies in the United States report even higher rates; the 2024 U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey found 32 percent of adults directly experienced bullying, with 72 percent awareness of it as a problem.¹

Measuring workplace bullying and harassment in middle and lower-income nations is more challenging. A 2021 systematic review noted conceptual and methodological issues limit a complete picture of sexual harassment but found some evidence linking sexual harassment and depressive symptoms, with higher prevalence in higher education. Studies of Malaysian hospital employees found an 11 percent bullying rate, similar to UK findings but lower than U.S. 2024 survey results.²

This article examines patterns and trends in workplace bullying globally, risk factors, adverse health outcomes, and legislative efforts to address these issues arguing that the continuing challenges presented by workplace bullying demands more research and scholarship, as well as legislative responses to address the problem. Data from the U.S. reveal challenges in defining and measuring prevalence, varying clinical definitions, and international literature

coverage differences.³ The 2010 National Health Interview Survey found 8 percent of adults reported workplace harassment in the past twelve months. A content analysis of court cases revealed few state filings but more federal cases referring to workplace bullying, underscoring limited legal action despite prevalence.⁴ National surveys by the Workplace Bullying Institute show increasing recognition, with 32 percent reporting direct bullying experiences in 2024.⁵ Government data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission affirm widespread harassment, particularly sexual harassment.⁶

Studies to date in the United States and other nations have found a variety of risk factors that increase the likelihood of workplace harassment and bullying. These risk factors include gender, race, sexual orientation, and type of job occupation. In the sections that follow, empirical findings regarding each are examined.

Gender is a critical risk factor in workplace harassment and bullying. Women consistently report higher rates of victimization and experience different types of harassment behaviors. For example, in a 2019 systematic review of fifty-one papers, Feijo, Gräf, Pearce, and Fassa found that women were at higher risk of being bullied in most studies (odds ratio from 1.17 to 2.77).⁷ According to the Workplace Bullying Institute's 2024 U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey, 51 percent of female respondents were bullied, with 71 percent of perpetrators identified as male.⁸ Interestingly, women were perpetrators of bullying towards other women 67 percent of the time. Other research by Lipińska-Grobelny (2023) using a sample of Polish employees found that gender significantly altered the relationship between mobbing (group bullying, usually in a work place) and mental health outcomes.⁹

Racial and ethnic minorities also experience greater levels of workplace harassment and bullying, though findings on specific racial group differences vary. The 2024 Workplace

Bullying Survey revealed that bullying rates were 44.3 percent for African Americans, 33.5 percent for Hispanics, 30.1 percent for Whites, and 25.9 percent for Asians.¹⁰ A British study found 19.6 percent of Asian employees reported bullying compared to 10.5 percent of white employees.¹¹ Some U.S. studies found no significant difference between whites, Asians, and African Americans but noted that Hispanics/Latinos reported higher bullying rates.¹² Recent qualitative research focusing on higher education documents hostile environments for Black and Latino librarians, reflecting persistent racial and ethnic disparities in workplace bullying.¹³

Discrimination against sexual minorities such as LGBTQIA+ individuals results in high levels of hostility and bullying across life domains, including the workplace.¹⁴ Rooted in heteronormative societal power structures and binary gender dominance, discrimination is influenced by media and stigma.¹⁵ The 2024 Workplace Bullying Survey showed LGBTQIA+ respondents experienced bullying at a rate of 51 percent, compared to 31 percent of heterosexual respondents.¹⁶ Similar high rates were found internationally, such as 20 percent in Portugal.¹⁷

Gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation have been identified throughout the workplace bullying and harassment literature as critical demographic factors that influence victimization. We next turn the focus to the type of work (remote vs. in-person) as the field one works in as causative factors in workplace bullying.

Work Location/Type of Job/Occupation

A final area where studies have noted issues surrounding workplace bullying and harassment is the work location (remote vs. in-person) and the type of work employees engage in. It should be noted that remote work did not start due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it became the standard for many industries as a result of it.¹⁸ Most experienced the transition to remote work rapidly, with little preparation.¹⁹ Many have argued that bullying was a significant

stressor for those working in person.²⁰ Recent studies have found that workplace bullying may also be a significant challenge for hybrid and remote workers; the 2024 Workplace Bullying Survey found 51 percent of hybrid workers experienced bullying, compared to a 32 percent rate for fully remote workers.²¹ While evidence is limited, it is likely that individuals in hybrid or remote positions are not spared workplace harassment.

Turning to occupations, certain fields—such as health care and education—are at higher risk for workplace bullying.²² A 2009 study using Danish national data enabled researchers to categorize job risk, finding unskilled workers and “working with things” had the highest bullying prevalence, while managers and those working with customers had the lowest.²³ Occupational status and the nature of the work process are crucial areas for understanding harassment at work.²⁴

As discussed above, workplace bullying and harassment present significant problems across the globe, including the United States. Victims subjected to such behaviors face a variety of outcomes.²⁵ Empirical and theoretical research has linked workplace bullying and harassment to physical symptoms, diminished job performance, and other social effects.²⁶ Bowling and Beehr’s 2006 meta-analysis identified generic strain, anxiety, burnout, frustration, negative affect, depression, and other negative health effects as associated with workplace harassment.²⁷ Harassment was also negatively associated with self-esteem, life and job satisfaction, and organizational commitment or justice.²⁸ Victims thus may experience impaired performance, lower satisfaction, and withdrawal from work. Other studies, such as Okechukwu, Souza, Davis, and de Castro (2015), confirmed that workplace injustices—including bullying—lead to adverse physical and mental health, negative job outcomes like lower promotion and productivity, and negative effects for witnesses.²⁹ A final example is Abdulla, Lin, and Rospenda’s (2023)

longitudinal study, which linked workplace harassment over twenty-three years to higher odds of cardiovascular and chronic health problems.³⁰

Workplace Bullying and Harassment - Victim Outcomes

As discussed above, workplace bullying and harassment are problems in nations across the globe, including the United States. Victims subjected to bullying and harassment behaviors face a variety of outcomes.³¹ In this section, we will examine the impact victimization in these areas has on victims—including how it influences their relationships with perpetrators and employers.

Empirical and theoretical research have identified adverse outcomes of workplace bullying and harassment.³² These outcomes may manifest as physical symptoms, affect job performance, and alter social behaviors. Bowling and Beehr's meta-analysis examining studies from 1987–2005 found that harassment positively predicted strains like anxiety, burnout, frustration, negative affect, depression, and physical symptoms, while being negatively associated with positive emotions, self-esteem, life/job satisfaction, and organizational justice.³³ These cumulative effects can foster a culture where employees lack commitment and ultimately undermine organizational viability.

Other studies, such as Okechukwu, Souza, Davis, and de Castro (2015), similarly found workplace injustices—including bullying—lead to adverse physical and mental health, negative job outcomes like lower wages/productivity, substance abuse, and negative effects for witnesses.³⁴ Finally, Abdulla, Lin, and Rospenda's (2023) longitudinal study linked workplace harassment over 23 years to higher rates of cardiovascular and chronic health problems.³⁵

In sum, workplace harassment and bullying result in a variety of outcomes for victims—including negative impacts on physical health (PTSD, high blood pressure, migraines), mental health (anxiety, decreased satisfaction), and job/occupational performance.

History of Legislative Efforts

In the United States, harassment in the workplace is considered a type of discrimination and is illegal.³⁶ Civil rights laws—such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1997, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990—make it illegal to harass an employee due to age, disability, race, color, religion, sex, and national origin.³⁷ It is also illegal for an employer to harass an employee for filing a discrimination complaint, charge, or participating in an investigation.³⁸

Additional legislation has been enacted at the state level. One major effort was California's introduction of the Healthy Workplace Bill (HWB) in 2003, one of the first aimed specifically at workplace bullying. To date, thirty-two states have introduced HWB legislation, with some adopting requirements addressing workplace bullying and harassment. A notable milestone occurred in Puerto Rico in 2020, when the Act to Prohibit and Prevent Workplace Harassment (House Bill 306) was signed into law.³⁹ Workplace harassment laws expanded after the #MeToo Movement, with twenty-five states and the District of Columbia passing further laws to address workplace harassment.⁴⁰ Legislative efforts are expected to continue, though political resistance remains.

The Special Case of Sexual Harassment

The above sections have provided an overview of workplace harassment and bullying, which may manifest in various ways. However, sexual harassment in the workplace is a distinct form, involving verbal, physical, and psychological behaviors that are unwanted.⁴¹ Victims often

experience insults, threats, or humiliation.⁴² Women and sexual minorities continue to face the highest risks for such victimization.

National data from the #MeToo 2024 study show that 37 percent of women and 14 percent of men report experiencing sexual harassment or assault at work.⁴³ Forms include verbal harassment, coercion, threats, physically aggressive behavior, and assault, with verbal harassment most prevalent among women (30 percent of women vs. 10 percent of men), and other types reported at lower but still concerning rates.

Key risk factors are demographic—age, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status—alongside occupational and organizational ones.⁴⁴ Male-dominated fields, power imbalances (e.g. hospitality jobs), and isolated workplaces are associated with higher risk.⁴⁵

Sexual harassment is linked to worsened career and economic outcomes for women, higher job turnover, and negative mental and physical health effects.⁴⁶ International research corroborates reduced productivity and greater intent to leave among victims, along with short- and long-term health impacts.⁴⁷

International Issues

A large portion of this discussion focuses on the United States; however, workplace bullying and harassment—especially sexual harassment—have been increasingly acknowledged across the globe, with more countries enacting laws to address them.⁴⁸ Many European countries, including France and Sweden, as well as Canada, Japan, and Australia, have adopted legislation on workplace bullying and harassment.⁴⁹ Scholars have also argued that, relative to other nations, the United States has been slower to adopt comprehensive legislation in this area.⁵⁰

Conclusion

This article provided an overview of workplace bullying and harassment and relevant legislative responses in the U.S. and abroad. These issues remain challenging despite increased attention, with elevated risks for women, sexual minorities, and racial/ethnic minorities, and with short- and long-term physical and emotional impacts on victims. Institutional and statutory responses have expanded, including in higher education, yet gaps and inconsistencies persist. Continued research is needed to clarify definitions, improve data collection, and strengthen generalizability so that more effective protections and remedies can be crafted.

ENDNOTES

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