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Understanding Workplace Abusiveness: A Study of Employee Experiences and Coping Strategies

Dr. Mahima Shukla*

Assistant Professor (SSBS), Sharda University.

*Corresponding Author: mahima.shukla@sharda.ac.in

Abstract

Workplace abusiveness, including harassment, bullying, and toxic leadership, significantly affects employee well-being, job satisfaction, and overall organizational performance. Employees subjected to workplace abuse often experience psychological distress, reduced productivity, and increased turnover intentions. This chapter explores the various forms of workplace abusiveness, its impact on employees, and the strategies used to cope with such situations. Coping strategies include seeking social support, engaging in self-care, utilizing organizational resources, assertive communication, and, in severe cases, seeking legal recourse. Additionally, organizations play a crucial role in mitigating workplace abusiveness through policies, leadership training, and fostering a positive work culture. Implementing effective coping strategies and organizational interventions can enhance employee resilience and create a healthier work environment.

Keywords: Workplace Abusiveness, Workplace Bullying, Abusive Supervision, Employee Well-being, Employee Morale, Employee Performance.

Introduction

Employee success and well-being depend on creating a secure and courteous workplace. Employee wellbeing refers to the overall physical, social and financial health of employees at the workplace. A good healthy and supportive workplace environment makes the workforce more productive and committed to the organization. Unfortunately, there are times when people may encounter abusive behaviour, which can negatively impact their general productivity, job satisfaction, and mental health. Any malicious behaviour by an employer or employee that is unfriendly, offensive, and detached to the employer's legitimate business objectives in the workplace is considered as abusive conduct (Austin,1988). Examples of abusive conduct are frequent verbal abuse, such as using insults, derogatory remarks, and epithets, physical or verbal behaviour that a reasonable person would find threatening, humiliating or undermining of an individual's performance at work. Unless it is extremely severe and heinous, a single act cannot be considered abusive conduct.

The majority of victims of severe workplace bullying have a devastating breakdown in their self-confidence, and self-esteem (Suggala, Thomas., & Kureshi, 2021). Even the most basic activities, which they completed without giving them any thought prior to the assault, are difficult or impossible for them to complete. They wind up doubting everything about themselves, scrutinising their behaviour, becoming so poor at making decisions and completing things that their sense of competence and self-worth collapses (Sohal & Sharma, 2025). Workers frequently suffer from depression. They don't want to go out and avoid people because they feel like they can't handle basic responsibilities enough. Energy that was formerly spent on hobbies and socialising is now used to deal with personal insults and maintain competence at work. They fear that something would occur that they can't handle and that will reinforce their sense of inadequacy.

Bullying at work causes situations for the victim that make them feel unsafe at work. Victims are unable to anticipate when the next attack will occur, unable to stand up for themselves, and unable to locate honest or efficient sources of helping hand when they need it (Einarsen, 1999). Many victims think they can never regain the confidence they had prior to the assault. Abuse of employees can have serious and long-lasting effects. It may lead to a number of detrimental effects, including emotional distress, decreased job satisfaction and engagement, manifest in physical health problem, increased turnover rates within organisations (Vaidya et al.,2024). The well-being, performance, and reputation of the once-high-performing target eventually deteriorate substantially. Besides harming individuals, abusive behaviour in the workplace has greater implications for companies. Employee concentration and performance are seriously hampered when they are the targets of abusive behaviour (Leake, Amankwaa, & de Pater, 2025). This may result in decreased productivity and impede the performance of the company as a whole. Companies bear a risk of losing their goodwill if they don't confront and stop abusive behaviour. potential collaborators, clients, and employees might be reluctant to collaborate with a company that has a history of workplace abuse (Amel-Zadeh, Glaum, & Sellhorn, 2023). Businesses may be held legally liable for abusive behaviour. Lawsuits stemming from claims of bullying at work can be extremely costly and damage a company's reputation.

The abuse may manifest as overwork, overcontrol, contempt, or public humiliation. When a supervisor is under too much stress, he abuses his position, makes unreasonable, unrealistic demands, puts his employees under excessive strain, and makes them work overtime (Fischer et al.,2021). Achieving goals and meeting targets is the prime goal of supervisors and managers, even if it is achieved by abusing their subordinates. In order to receive incentives, job stability, and promotions, subordinates also follow their boss's instructions. Favouritism is also a demotivating factor on the part of a supervisor towards a subordinate as it hinders the growth and development of some talented subordinates (Joseph & Alhassan, 2023). A hostile environment is created when the supervisor meddles excessively, overloads the staff, and treats them badly (Johnson & Indvik ,2001). However, a hostile work environment can be created by a single person engaging in small unauthorised behaviour.

Human Resources, the most powerful department in an organisation, may sometimes be the source of discrimination. Human resource professionals engage in a variety of discriminatory practices, including unfair policy implementation, worker ambush, and supervisors' unregulated personnel activities (Demuijnck, 2009). Sometimes, despite claiming to safeguard others, organisational policies ignore particular worker groups. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of workplace abusiveness. It shows the complete paradigm of antecedents and outcome effect of workplace harassment. According to Wendt and Slonaker (1992), such bias in the workplace unintentionally fosters a hostile work environment. A series of abusive situations will develop if such a hostile and abusive practice breeding ground is not removed.

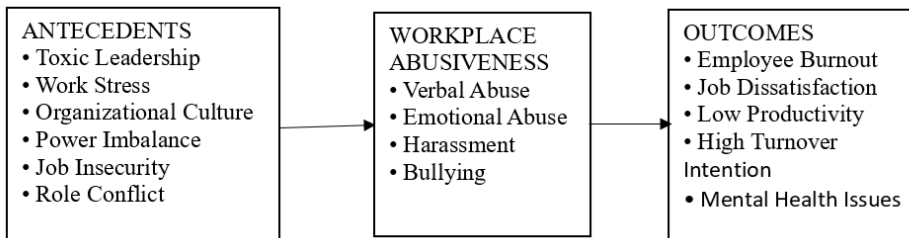


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Workplace Abusiveness

Fostering a supportive and healthy work environment requires acknowledging and dealing with abusive behaviour (Bowen, Privitera & Bowie, 2011). Organisations can take proactive steps to avoid and resolve abusive conduct by being aware of its characteristics and the effects it has on employees and businesses. In a respectful workplace, empathy and understanding are valued traits. Encourage employees to put themselves in each other's shoes, view situations from different perspectives, and respond with empathy (Parker, Atkins & Axtell, 2008). A more peaceful and effective workplace can be achieved by fostering a culture of respect, offering training on proper workplace conduct, putting strong regulations against abusive behaviour into place, and making a thorough compliance hotline accessible to all staff members (Popa, 2025). Through proper ethics hotlines, harassment training programs and working together, businesses can eradicate abusive behaviour and establish safe and respected work environments for everybody. Businesses should provide counselling to victims of workplace bullying whose confidence and general well-being have collapsed. So that, they can regain their self-confidence and acquire new, more self-preserving and self-protective behaviours (Kowalski, 2003). They become more self-aware when they return to work, prepared to function efficiently, and eager to enjoy their jobs. They also exhibit the courage to use a difficult circumstance as a chance for growth and learning (Gonzalez, 2012).

Prevalence of Workplace Abusiveness

Numerous studies have examined the effects of an abusive workplace on workers' mental health. In his research, Fishman, (2010) found that workers do not want to remain or work in hostile environments because they do not gain any new knowledge within and are constantly looking for alternative, better jobs. A study conducted by the UN

International Labour Organization (ILO) found that Nearly 23% of workers, or more than one in five, report having been the victim of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse at work. The number of incidents can be higher than 50% in toxic workplace cultures, particularly in the absence of effective anti-bullying legislation (Hamerton,2025) . Assessing harassment and abuse in the workplace is a very challenging task. According to the report, half of victims globally tell others about their experiences, particularly if they are abused repeatedly (Watts & Zimmerman,2002). According to a nationwide survey carried out in Norway, incidents of abuse were more common among women, younger employees, and those with less education level (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). Also, the study found that women are more likely to report instances of abuse and harassment than men. According to Yamada ,2022 study, the highest number of cases of workplace bullying were primarily found in the fields of social services, assembly plant, healthcare, brokerage firm, tele marketing and education. Many supervisors who manage such workplaces emphasize the policy of work first and workers' well-being second. Numerous research and surveys have shown how prevalent workplace abuse is across industries and organisational hierarchies, making it a worrying global issue (Branch et al, 2013; Lopez et al., 2009)

Abusive behaviour at work is very harmful act and take many different forms. Some common examples of workplace violence are verbal abuse, threatening language, unequal treatment, bullying, sexual harassment (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). Taking credit for someone else's labour, physical violence, unfair paying and punishing employees who raises their voice against unfair means are consider as abusive behaviour (Mayhew & Chappell, 2007). A supervisor may be abusive towards an employee in a number of ways, including threats, intimidation, ridicule, revenge, and jealousy. Abusive supervision also includes public criticism, being harsh with subordinates, expressing frustration, target them for insignificant reasons, putting pressure on them to perform at certain standards, and keeping constant observation on them (Tepper,2007). The supervisor might be criticized subordinate into their performance related issues in front of the other co-workers. Being criticized in front of other co-workers is very disrespectful and affects performance and job success. The pervasiveness of workplace abusiveness in the workplace has a significant impact on employee performance, thus organisations and policymakers must pay close attention to this important issue (Leake et al.,2025).

Workplace abusiveness is a major hurdle to the growth of any organization as it destroys the culture and has a direct negative impact on the mental and physical well-being of the employee (Hlatywayo ,2025). If the warriors of any organization are mentally depressed and unmotivated, its existence and survival become very challenging (Duffy& Sperry,2014). Abusive organisations not only discriminate against their employees but also create a hostile environment. In such a hostile environment, the employee remains scared of his supervisor and co-workers and does not feel safe among them. In an abusive environment, employees have a general disrespect for each other. Abusive organisations do not care about the comfort, health and security of their workers(Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). They are only concerned about work, for which they force them to work for more hours with few resources. Many employees who are retained due to the

fear of losing their jobs keep following their bosses and cope up with this abusive treatment. Some employees have a lot of desperation for their job and work, due to which they accept abusive behavior in the short term to hold on to their job and position in the long run.

Employee workloads are increased in understaffed organisations. These organisations' performance is valued quantitatively. Meeting deadlines and goals is the main focus of these types of businesses. All of this leads to increased stress at work. It becomes necessary for employees to complete their work efficiently and with fewer resources and meet targets. If employees do not meet job expectations, they are often ridiculed by their supervisors and treated harshly. Employees who endure this kind of mistreatment lose confidence in themselves and feel unworthy or incompetent.

Abusive organizations never give importance to the need of work and personal life balance of employees. Some organizations promote work-family program through PR activities to build good reputation and public relations in their market but do not actually implement it. These organisations have family-friendly programs, but staff members who use them face consequences or humiliation. Abusive companies are actually "discriminating" against workers who require care for dependents or the elderly by penalising them for availing family-friendly benefits (Wendt & Slonaker,1992). For example, some organizations make their employees work on flexi hours between 7 am and 9 am but they schedule a meeting at 8 pm without informing anyone and impose a penalty on those who do not attend. Although any employee could experience this kind of maltreatment, women are more likely than males to be impacted because mothers often handle a family of dependents. Therefore, many women feel that these unspoken policies that penalise staff members for utilising the family-friendly programs are the reason they do not receive promotions as frequently as they need to. The prevalence of workplace abuse is a serious problem that, if neglected, will impede both the growth of the workplace and its workforce. Thus, organisations and policymakers must pay close attention to this important issue.

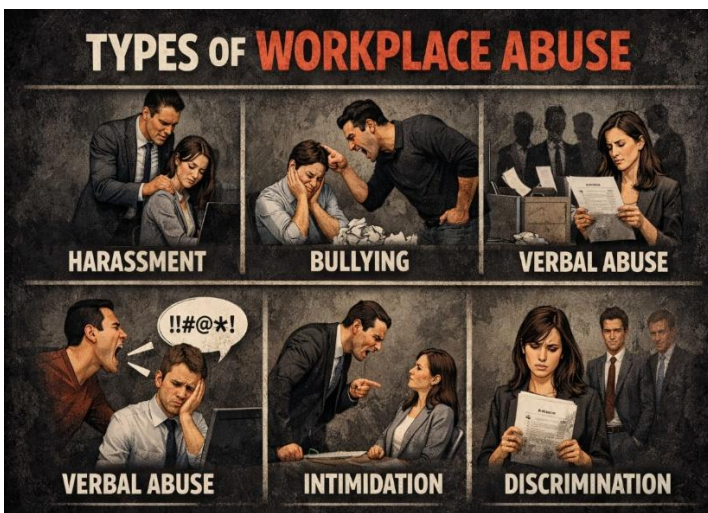


Figure 2: Types of Abusiveness Employees can be Victim of an Organisation

Impact of Workplace Bullying

These detrimental behaviours can have significant negative effects on individual psychological well-being, productivity, and workplace culture.

Workplace abusiveness is a very serious problem that has a huge negative impact on individuals, teams, organizations, and society. The effects are both short-term and long-term, impacting productivity, workplace culture, mental and physical health, and organisational success. Research shows that workplace abusiveness generates a variety of negative outcomes including depression, anxiety, stress, headache, sleeping disorder and job dissatisfaction. In a study conducted by (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012) describe that exposure to workplace abusiveness associated with an increased risk of mental illness which further developing stress and anxiety symptoms. Further studies also show that workplace abusiveness can also lead to employee physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease due to prolonged stress and Gastrointestinal disease due to Headaches and sleep disturbance. workplace abusiveness weakens an employee's confidence, causes him to lose interest in his job and causes him to constantly search for a better, more respectable job.

Workplace abusiveness not only has a negative impact on the health and morale of the employee but can also impact the organization as a whole. Research has shown that workplace abusiveness can increased toxic absenteeism and decreased team efficiency and organisational commitment. In a study by Tindell et al. (2021), it was found that when an organisation has a toxic culture, sickness absence rises, productivity falls, and the organization's reputation suffers. Workplace abusiveness can impact individual performance, organizational performance as well as the broader community. According to Hol et al. (2011), bullying at work, for instance, can result in employee turnover and make it harder to find new recruitment, both of which can have a detrimental effect on the local economy. Also, bullying at work may lead to negative media relations, bad publicity, harming the organisation image and possibly affecting customer Trust and loyalty (Einarsen et al., 2011). At some point, the organisation loses its inherent value as a result of treating employees unfairly, demeaning them in front of everyone, and creating a sense of societal injustice. Workers become dissatisfied with their jobs and begin looking for other opportunities, which damages the company's reputation in the community. So, an organization does not have to support mistreatment of employees.

The pervasiveness of workplace bullying in the workplace has a significant impact on employee performance, thus organisations and policymakers must pay close attention to this important issue. In order to eradicate workplace abuse, will need to devise strategies for preventing it, which requires thorough study and understanding. Job crafting is one promising strategy that aims to increase employees' well-being by having them proactively change their job responsibilities, relationships, and attitudes (Reisel et al., 2021). According to a recent study, job crafting has the potential to improve employees' psychological health and job satisfaction by reducing the negative effects of workplace bullying (Reisel et al., 2021). Further study is required to determine effective techniques as the effectiveness of interventions to prevent and resolve workplace bullying is still in its early stages (Crawford & Hurrell Jr, 2013).

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Abuse in the workplace cannot be overlooked because it is detrimental to the continued growth of any organisation. We should keep a careful eye on it and take the required steps to get rid of it. Preventing and intervening workplace abuses is essential to ensure safe, healthy and secure workplace environments. The most important prevention strategy is to give respect to employees and give them the importance they deserve because employees are valuable resource of any organization. It is very important to keep them happy and satisfied. This develops a positive organizational culture. Organizations should listen to the problems of their employees and give them the opportunity to provide valuable feedback and suggestions on how we can create a good work environment can help prevent abusive behavior. Another preventive strategy is that strict policies, rules and regulations should be made against abusive behavior and a separate specialized committee should be formed for its supervision. It should be clearly stated to employees that they have a zero-tolerance policy for abusive behaviour, harassment and bullying incidents and they should also be provided with multiple channels through which they can report incidents. It should also be monitored whether the employee is properly aware of all these policies or not. These specialised committees and policies should also ensure that every bullying event is carefully investigated and addressed seriously (Einarsen et al., 2021). Regularly review how effectively the current anti-abuse regulations and processes are working. Also, anti-abuse training programs can be provided to both managers and employees on how to identify sign of abuse, prevent and address workplace abusiveness. Theses program increases understanding about conflict resolution mechanisms and how to promote a non-abusive healthy, respectful work environment (Escartin et al., 2020).

It's also critical to intervene in when bullying occurs at work to avoid long-term negative effects on employees' health and wellbeing. Ascertain that leaders behave with dignity and take responsibility for their actions. Incorporate metrics pertaining to company culture and employee well-being into manager performance reviews. Make sure HR has the tools and power it needs to properly handle and stop abusive behaviour. Employees should also be empowered and encouraged to participate in decision-making. In order to determine employee satisfaction and identify possible abuse, employee surveys should also be conducted.

Furthermore, offering counselling and emotional support to staff members might lessen their vulnerability to mental health issues and help them deal with the consequences of bullying at work (Purvanova et al., 2021). Taking disciplinary action against the bully, such as reprimands, warnings, or termination, is another intervention technique (Hoel et al., 2021). But it's crucial to make sure that the victim receives protection from future harassment or retribution and that disciplinary punishment is applied equitably and impartially.

Conclusion

The chapter shed lights on how workplace abusiveness and bullying influence employees and organizations. It also suggests preventing and intervening in workplace bullying is important for promoting a safe and healthy work environment. Strategies such

as promoting a positive organizational culture, implementing policies and procedures, providing training programs, and intervening with mediation or disciplinary action can help prevent and address bullying incidents. These strategies can also help reduce the negative impact of workplace bullying on employees' mental health and well-being.

Based on the extant literature it can be inferred that workplace abusiveness is a critical issue that significantly impacts both employees and organizations. The detrimental effects of abusive behaviour, ranging from physical and mental health problems to decreased productivity and employee morale, underscore the importance of addressing this issue. Research shows that workplace bullying is associated with a variety of negative health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, stress, and physical ailments such as cardiovascular disease (Huge et al., 2011; Hoel et al., 2020). Abuse at work not only harms individuals but also compromises organizational success, leading to lower performance, higher turnover rates, and damage to the company's reputation (Conway et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is essential for organizations to create a secure and supportive work environment by implementing clear anti-abuse policies, offering training, fostering open communication, and providing emotional support for those affected (Escartín et al., 2020). Proactive prevention strategies and timely interventions, such as offering counselling, monitoring organizational culture, and enforcing disciplinary measures, can help mitigate the negative effects of workplace bullying (Purvanova et al., 2021; Hoel et al., 2021). Ultimately, fostering a culture of respect and dignity in the workplace not only promotes employees' well-being but also enhances organizational performance, ensuring a healthier and more productive work environment for everyone (Sim et al., 2021).

Besides chapter also discuss on how workplace bullying is a serious and pervasive issue that can have far-reaching consequences for both individuals and organizations. The extant literature suggests there is negative impacts of bullying on employee mental and physical health, productivity, job satisfaction, and overall organizational success (Einarsen et al., 2011; Hol et al., 2011). Preventing and addressing workplace bullying not only improves employee well-being but also enhances organizational performance and reputation (Sim et al., 2021). As research continues to explore effective solutions, it is crucial for both organizations and policymakers to prioritize the creation of safe and respectful work environments where all employees feel valued and supported (Leiter & Ashlyn Jr, 2013).

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