

## **FACTORS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING: MANIFESTATIONS AND PERPETRATION - A QUALITATIVE STUDY FROM PAKISTAN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Work bullying commonly exists in organizations across the board, as a result, it has attracted considerable academic and research attention. However, very limited number of studies has appeared in developing countries' context and especially the case of Pakistan is under-researched. We explore extant literature on the subject and attempt identifies contextual factors of workplace bullying. This study has identified top-ten organizational and managerial acts of bullying at work in Pakistani organizations. We found out that organizations and managers bully employees on several occasions. The most important finding of this study is that elite bureaucratic mind-set of managers possesses unquestionable authority which encourages bullying to happen. This research also reveals that the perpetrator and victim of bullying both need counseling facility. Lastly, it is suggested that government and organizations should have enforceable laws and explicit policies to prevent health-endangering bullying behaviors at work.*

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**Key words:** Bullying behaviors, Victim, Organization, Management, Authority, Powerlessness

### **INTRODUCTION**

Workplace bullying has commonly been observed across organizations in developed and developing countries. In recent past, it has attracted increasing scholarly attention (Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith & Pereira, 2002). However, much of the research focus has remained yet in developed countries by ignoring the contexts of developing countries including Pakistan. Only few studies have reported workplace bullying only in nursing profession in Pakistan (Ahmer, Yousafzai, Siddiqui, Faruqui, Khan & Zuberi, 2009). The limitations of generalization of findings of previous research raise number of academic and research questions

and open up several avenues for further investigation. The central argument of this paper is that Pakistani organizations are inherently structured on bureaucratic and militaristic lines which afford 'boss' unquestionable delegation of power permitting workplace bullying and misuse of power to prevail. Similar expressions could be found in the studies of Khilji (2002, 2003).

The societal norms are considered to be paternalistic, collectivist and hierarchical with high power distance where supervisor or boss enjoys unchallengeable power to his or her level of comfort (Aycan *et. al.*, 2000; Hofstede, 1984; Islam, 2004; Khilji, 2003). Bullied subordinates hardly complain or demand compensation bearing in mind the dire consequences on one hand and poverty of organizational justice and absence of conflict resolution procedures on the other. Workplace bullying and abuse of authority is structural and correlated to employees' silence and absence of merit of justice (Khilji, 2003). Government sector enterprises in Pakistan have earned much defame as nepotistic and also have widely been criticized for having culture of *sifarish* (i.e. connection), cronyism and sycophancy which encourage bribery and under-table transactions (Khilji, 2003; Islam, 2004). The more recent investigation (Jhatial, Shah, Qureshi & Halepota, and 2009b) reported that such environment causes erosion of workplace satisfaction, commitment and loyalty and increases trust deficit between supervisor and subordinate relationships. Additionally, instances of bullying on the part of office bearers of employees' unions against management or against member of opposition trade union have also been reported in Pakistan (Jhatial, Cornelius & Wallace, 2009a).

Studies on workplace bullying have started appearing since 2000 in Pakistani context (Ahmer *et.al.*, 2009). However, literature on the subject is limited in Pakistan. This research as a result aims to review extant literature on the factors of workplace bullying and explores additional contextual variables in Pakistani work settings through employing semi-structured interviews with core-informants in government, private (local) sector and multinational companies. The findings of this study aimed to contribute to greater understanding of bullying behavior at workplace in Pakistan. Also, this study expects to pinpoint the perpetrator and

victim in most cases through demographic variables-age, gender, position in the organization.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace bullying appears much common across the government, private and multinational, small, medium or large scale organizations (Johnson, 2009). Quine (2001) defines bullying as repeated unreasonable actions of individual or group directed towards employee or group intentionally to intimidate and create a risk to the health and safety of the employees. Many scholars have elaborated bullying in light of the definition as acts of abuse or misuse of power by which perpetrator unleashes his or her anger on or settles score with subordinate or peer. The instances of undermining an individual's right to dignity at work or acts like needless criticism, blaming, discriminating on the bases of race, religion or ethnicity manifest bullying behaviour. The other examples of bullying at work may include shouting at someone, joking or isolating someone intentionally. According to Einarsen *et. al.* (2003) workplace bullying is negative and directly proportional to interpersonal, emotional and physical loss of employees. The review of extant literature suggests that research and academic scholarship has paid serious attention on understanding causes and consequences of bullying at work across the developed and developing nations. The fundamental objective, of this article, to explore factors of workplace bullying builds upon and extends earlier studies such as Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson & Wilkes (2006) article explores bullying issues in nursing profession and found that bullying phenomenon exists only among nurses, rather it should be considered within the broader organisational context. They further suggested that power and authority within the hierarchical position is major source of bullying. Additionally, Curtis *et. al.* (2007) also identified that bullying is commonly affecting nursing profession. They found out bullying factors such as humiliation, powerlessness and lack of supportive management attitude. The recent study of Ahmer *et. al.* (2009) identified that bullying causes stress, anxiety, depression, sickness, absences and intention to leave the job in nursing profession in Pakistan. They called for further research on

the subject and also emphasized on to introduce anti-bullying policies at organizational level.

### MANIFESTATIONS OF BULLYING BEHAVIORS

One of the main objectives of this study is to identify the patterns of bullying at work. Einarsen *et. al.* (2003) and Rayner & Keashly (2005) pointed out that bullying may be hidden or explicit and sometimes difficult to understand or predict. The extant literature for example (Moayed *et. al.*, 2006; Quine, 2001; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005) suggests that threatening someone's professional status, making mockery, or persistent criticism is considered as manifestations of bullying. Yildirim & Yildirim (2007) went one step further and reported that not only professional status but if someone's social status has been threatened could also be manifestation of bullying. According to Moayed *et. al.* (2006) and Zapf & Einarsen (2005) manifestations of such acts like isolating someone socially or withholding information or even if phone calls or emails are not answered, such acts could be bullying acts. Other acts like unreasonable workload, unrealistic deadlines, excessive monitoring and meaningless tasks could also be classified as manifestations of bullying behaviors (Quine, 2001; Yildirim & Yildirim, 2007; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Bullying at work can be divided into two main categories (a) institutional or organizational and (b) managerial. Following section presents brief literature on these categories:

***Institutional bullying:*** This category of bullying acts signifies organizational circumstances when organizations place irrational expectations from employees and failure to meet those expectations mean dismissal, demotion or transfer of employee. The findings of some studies suggest that workplace bullying is a natural outgrowth of modern workplace environments (Hoel & Beale, 2006; Ironside & Seifert, 2003). Young (1990) reveals that the inherently hierarchical and bureaucratic workplaces oppress workers by removing their sense of control, thus rendering them powerless. A situation where boss or senior executives encourage employee(s) to fabricate complaints about their colleague(s) on the promises of promotions or threats of disciplinary action is also institutional bullying. The recent research studies (Salin, 2003;

Ironside & Seifert, 2003; Hutchinson *et. al.*, 2006) consider organizational change similar to restructuring or downsizing could be reason of bullying acts so naturally. Other studies found that human resources management (HRM) policies and practices where role-conflict and role ambiguity and inexplicit promotion policies also become organizational bullying (Salin, 2003).

**Managerial bullying:** Another category manifestation of bullying is known as managerial. This type of bullying manifests in an attempt to control peers or subordinates. This category is commonly applied to control and direct employee behavior (Hutchinson *et. al.*, 2006; Ironside & Seifert, 2003). Studies from the advanced countries such as United Kingdom (UK), Australia and United States of America (USA) demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of victims of bullying were bullied by their managers (Ironside & Seifert, 2003). The findings from previous studies suggest that managerial bullying also causes high employee quitting (Xin & Pelled, 2003). Some studies suggest that managers justify bullying acts used by them for reinforcing the rules and maintain the status quo (Hutchinson *et. al.*, 2006). The study of Salin (2003) classified leadership styles such as highly coercive or authoritarian and *laissez faire* can be source of where bullying flourishes. The most recent research report that destructive leadership styles render double jeopardy of causing damage to the interest of organization and raising employees dissatisfaction and turnover (Einarsen *et. al.*, 2007; Jhatial *et. al.*, 2009b).

## THE PERPETRATION

Earlier section of this article focused on the main factors and patterns of bullying. This section presents literature review and gap on the issues surrounding the way bullying behavior is perpetrated at workplace. The growing interest of academia to identify the sources and explain consequences of bullying found out that powerfulness and powerlessness as two extremes in workplace that encourage bullying (Einarsen *et. al.*, 2003). More recent article by Jhatial *et. al.* (2009b) also identified that lack of organizational procedural justice escalates power differences which as a consequence bullying perpetrates. Other literature on the subject suggests that power differences are legitimate and rooted in the



hierarchy of the organizations (Einarsen *et. al.*, 2003; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). The significant number of studies has examined relationship of immediate boss or supervisor with employees' job attitudes such as satisfaction, commitment, turnover, and retention (Jhatial *et. al.*, 2009b).

According to research contribution of Spector & Fox (2005), the positive, helping, familial and constructive attitudes of boss at workplace have demonstrated greater satisfaction, commitment and higher rate of retention. The findings of the research of Xin & Pelled (2003) report that if supervisor is with low consideration and high structure leadership style then employees' grievances and turnover intentions will be high. Much recent investigations have reported that there are several ways for boss or supervisor to show abusive, destructive or sadistic behavior at work which directly affects employee satisfaction and commitment. Keeping in view of the discussion, this study identified that much of the research has been done in developed countries by ignoring the contexts of developing countries, especially Pakistan. This research, as a result aims at exploring contextual factors of bullying through employing semi-structured interviews with core-informants in government, private (local) sector and multinational companies. The findings of this study aimed to contribute to greater understanding of bullying behavior at workplace in Pakistan. Also, this study expects to pinpoint the perpetrator and victim through analysis of demographic variables such as age, gender, position in the organization.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Sample:** In 2008, various banking, information technology & communications (ITC) and tertiary education organizations were asked to participate in this study. Ten organizations were contacted, however, seven agreed to participate. Within these organizations, core informants' top executives, human resource managers, collective bargaining agents and non-management employees were probed regarding bullying behaviors in their respective organizations.

**Method of data collection:** Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews. First, we provided a definition of

bullying behavior; subsequently we checked whether the interviewees knew of an actual incident within the organization. Then, we asked the interviewees to retrospectively analyze which environmental risk factors could have triggered or influenced the incident. In order to collect information on broad range of risk factors, we made a checklist including possible factors from previous studies in the realm of negative acts at work. A total of 60 interviews were conducted.

***Procedure of data analysis:*** In order to minimize any negative impact on the participants the ethical protocols of British Psychological Guidelines was followed and all necessary documents were signed by the researchers. All the participants gave their informed consent freely without any intimidation and without having been coerced and their confidentiality was guaranteed and respected. The main objectives of data collection were explained to respondents and then appointment was fixed for conduct of face to face in-depth interview. All interviews were transcribed; coded, analyzed and main emerging themes were separated for further analysis. Table 1 depicts demographic information of sample interviewees such as age group, gender, experience, levels of management position and business sector. Data analysis process involved coding, categorizing and comparing themes to interpret the meaning of social phenomenon. Present study employed 'narrative analysis' method to analyze the data. Narrative analysis looks at self-story and individual experiences of interviewee regarding social phenomenon, i.e. reality at workplace. This analytical technique helped authors to compare and categorize emerging themes to give meaning to words, context-situation, story and basic actions. Narrative analysis has been chosen to interpret the spoken life stories, past or present experiences that are temporal and sequential with referral and evaluative understandings of participants which establish valid knowledge and contribution for theory and practice. Ontological assumptions of this analytical method are positioned in the real life experience and personal stories of participants.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the initial stage of analyses, three main categories from interview transcriptions or narratives were generated. On the bases of commonalities in the personal experiences and stories of respondents, the emerging patterns and themes were separated and interpreted. The analyses revealed several contextual factors other than discussed in the previous literature which are the major findings of this study. Following sections present detailed discussion of results and relevant theoretical, practical and managerial contributions.

### **Demographics**

Table1 demonstrates the information of sample interviewees' age, gender, experience and occupational status and their respective organizational affiliation. The majority of participants' age ranges between 25 and 45. Main focus in data collection was set to have equal representation of male and female participants to minimize the gender bias, as a result, we had 29 male and 31 female in the study. Similarly the participants' position in the organizations was also key demographic variable and thus we had addressed it very fairly by having interviewees from all management and non-management groups including the voice of collective bargaining agents (CBAs) was also heard.



**Table-1**  
**Demographic detail of sample interviewees**

Demographic variables	Specifications	Public (n)	Private (n)	MNCs (n)	Total (n)
Age	25 to 35 years	10	5	6	21
	36 to 45 years	12	4	5	21
	46 to 60 years <sup>i</sup>	6	5	7	18
Gender	Male	18	13	8	29
	Female	12	09	10	31
Experience	Up to 10 years	12	8	11	31
	11 to 20 years	5	6	4	15
	21 to 30 years	5	5	4	14
Position in the organization	TLM	3	2	3	8
	MLM	7	5	3	15
	FLM	7	5	4	16
	CBAAs and non-management group	7	6	8	21

Source: Developed by researchers

MNC= Multi-National Corporations;

TLM= Top Level Management;

MLM=Middle Level Management;

FLM= First Level Management;

CBA= Collective Bargaining Agents; N= numbers.

### Manifestations of bullying

Overall, the results regarding factors of manifestations of workplace bullying were estimated in terms of organizational, managerial and politico-cultural quanta. During interview, the participants were asked to rank organizational or institutional factors of bullying and subsequently they were also asked to do same for managerial acts of bullying at work. The participants were given ten acts or factors that cause bullying and asked to rank these factors according to their experience and feeling. Table 2 and 3 provide the top-ten organizational and managerial factors that contribute to the acts of bullying at work. The interviewees across the government, private and multinational companies believed

<sup>i</sup> In Pakistan, formal retirement age for employee is 60 years (Khilji 2003).

highly hierarchical organizational structure and poor working environment have been top ranking factors that employees can't help either to challenge the authority nor they could improve working conditions unless authorities do on their own. The recruitment, selection, promotion, evaluation and transfer of employees (HRM practices) are at the mercy of elite management and *sifarish* (e.g. connection or family networks) or connection appears to be the most crucial factor accompanied by job insecurity. Participants other than top-level management consider themselves victim of ambiguity of HRM systems.

**Table-2**  
**Ranking of top ten organizational factors**  
**of workplace bullying**

Organizational	Ranking
Highly hierarchical organizational structure	01
Poor and unpleasant working conditions	02
Lack of transparency in HRM-policy and practice	03
Job insecurity	04
Lack of autonomy to perform	05
Role ambiguity	06
Absence of organizational justice	07
Lack of conflict resolution procedure	08
Lack of career opportunities	09
Terms and conditions of employment	10

**Source:** Developed by researchers

The participants agreed in majority on 'lack of autonomy' as top ranking factor to frustrate employees and role ambiguity is also one of the major factors to tell the story of employees' powerlessness to perform, knowing the jurisdictions of their authority and role. In government and private organizations, there appeared complete absence of organizational justice and procedure for conflict resolution. In contrast, in compliance to the 'parent-company' laws the multinational subsidiary companies seem to have conflict resolution procedures. However, the lower level employees gave the impression of still victimized, powerless and hopeless. Similarly, the lack of career development and growth opportunities and terms and conditions of employment daunt the employees of all organizations equally.

With respect to managerial factors of workplace bullying, the Table 3 reflects the voice of the majority of participants. The majority, almost eighty per cent participants, ranked mindset of bosses as bureaucratic followed by unquestionable authority. Participants further stated that misuse of power is considered as right of boss or it is source of pride, honor and status in male managers. Male managers are considered to have likeness for sycophancy, *sifarish* and cronyism (Islam, 2004). The interviewees also pointed out that subordinates are threatened with loss of job, demotion, revoking bonus or transfer; if they do not comply with the orders of boss. The threats of disciplinary action, ruining annual evaluation or confidential report, fabricating complaints and setting unrealistic deadlines and unachievable tasks are commonly found in the organizations. Managerial bullying acts also include passing belittling remarks for employees' ethnic, religious and educational alumnae affiliations.

**Table-3**  
**Ranking of top ten managerial factors**  
**of workplace bullying**

Managerial	Ranking
Bureaucratic mind-sets of boss	1
Unquestionable power/authority	2
<i>Sifarish</i> /connection based recruitment, promotion, transfer, etc.	3
Intimidation for loss of job, promotion, demotion, increment/bonus, transfer	4
Threats of disciplinary actions	5
Fabrication of complaints	6
Unrealistic deadlines	7
Belittling remarks (i.e. ethnic/religious)	8
Placing unreasonable expectations	9
False accusations	10

Source: Developed by researchers

Apart from the organizational and managerial bullying acts or factors, this study has also found out some politico-cultural factors that contribute to workplace bullying in Pakistani

organizations. The majority of participants talked about the managerial or co-workers' derogatory remarks regarding affiliation of employees with national political parties. This is surprising to note that managers and colleagues even freely pass racial, ethnic, tribal, religious and communal remarks and make fun of all that. Amongst the common bullying and hurting factors political rivalries, exerting political influence, cronyism, sycophancy, nepotism, bribe and corruption, leg-pulling, backbiting are prevalent at workplace across business sectors in Pakistan. Interviewees were also asked about the impact of bullying behavior on their health, family life and performance at work. The victims of bullying were probed regarding their physical, mental and health feelings. The respondents expressed that they often face financial problems due to absence, quitting the job or organization, reduced self-esteem, sleeplessness, or digestive problems. They also pointed out that owing to the low morale they fail to perform better which virtually affects their performance appraisal and promotion. The respondents who share their experience of bullying were also asked about the solutions to the problems. Many participants suggested that organizational justice system be strengthened and fair judicial mechanism must be in place to redress such organizational wrongs.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This paper attempted to explore extant literature on bullying factors. The major objectives of this study was set to identify and differentiate organizational and managerial factors and acts of workplace bullying in government, private (local) sector and multinational organizations in Pakistan. Through qualitative in-depth interviews with sixty core informants, factors of bullying behavior were identified and ranked according to the experience of participants. Participants were also asked about the consequences of bullying behavior. The similar and disturbing experiences were shared by most of the participants at lower level management and non-management employees. The participants find bullying behavior as health-endangering and low performance at work. The victims of bullying experienced significant physical and mental health problems such as high stress, sleeplessness and digestive problems. The breakdown of trust is found common between bully

and victim. Although, more recently government of Pakistan has promulgated legislation to protect women employees from any kind of workplace bullying and harassment, however, there appears need of a concerted effort and general legislation applicable to protect stakeholders at work. The workplace bullying is all-pervading regardless of organizational type and perpetrator and victim is also free of gender, age and status. Since, bullying is detrimental to the physical and psychological health of both the victim and also sometimes for bully as well which leads to increased sick-time and absenteeism. Organizations and management should have appropriate medical facility for all employees and special counseling programs may be more positive and beneficial in a negative and tense working environment. Government and organizations should enforce anti-harassment and bullying behavior laws and implement explicit policy to protect general working class.

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