DOI: 10.52131/pjhss.2025.v13i2.2728

Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 13, Number 02, 2025, Pages 11-20
Journal Homepage:
https://journals.internationalrasd.org/index.php/pjhss

A Study of Workplace Bullying and Emotional Strain among Teachers at Universities

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
Received: January 03, 2025
Revised: April 02, 2025
Accepted: April 03, 2025
Available Online: April 4, 2025

Keywords:
Workplace Bullying
Emotional Burden
Teachers
Universities

Funding:
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to examines the prevalence of workplace bullying among university teachers at universities in South Punjab, Pakistan. The research further investigates differences in perceptions of workplace bullying and explores emotional burden on teachers' overall productivity. The current study employed a quantitative research design. The study population covered 207 two hundred and seventeen teachers from three public universities. The sample was selected using simple random sampling from 150 teachers working in faculty of Social Sciences at public universities. The data was collected through a structure questionnaire. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics mean and standard deviation and inferential statistics t-test through SPSS Software to observe the workplace bullying trends. The results indicated that verbal abuse, intimidation, social exclusion, and psychological manipulation are prevalent forms of workplace bullying. However, the findings revealed no significant gender-based differences in perceptions of workplace bullying. Based on the results, this study recommended that universities should establish anti-bullying policies, structured reporting mechanisms, training programs, and psychological support services to promote a safe and respectful work environment.

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1. Introduction

Workplace bullying is increasingly recognized as a significant source of stress, negatively impacting employee well-being and job satisfaction. Research has shown that workplace bullying involves an imbalance of power, where individuals experience repeated and harmful treatment, affecting their psychological health and professional performance (Shaw, 2017). Furthermore, Coyne et al. (2017) further stress that workplace bullying manifests in various forms, including intimidation, exclusion, and verbal abuse. According to Orange (2018), workplace bullying is defined as

"Persistent and harmful behaviors directed at an individual or group in a work environment with the intent to undermine their well-being, dignity, or work performance"

Next, workplace bullying is an environment that uses pressure and brutality based on power or orientation. Moreover, it creates an atmosphere of fear and stress, negatively impacting employees' well-being and productivity. The concept of bullying involves undesirable gestures and different sorts of conduct that harm the psychological well-being of individuals in any organization. In particular, workplace bullying forces individuals to comply with demands that may humiliate or intellectually distress them (Nenzhelele, 2020). According to Doehring et al. (2023), bullying has been characterized by irritating behaviors, shouting, the use of disparaging names, the "silent treatment," withholding essential information, aggressive eye contact,

negative rumors, sudden outbursts of anger, and publicly ridiculing someone. Additionally, workplace bullying includes loud verbal abuse, repeated threats of punishment without justification, and offensive messages. Furthermore, De Wet and Jacobs (2014) explains that workplace bullying can take a physical form, ranging from unwanted touching, grabbing, and invasion of personal space to extreme cases such as sexual harassment or assault. Moreover, Campher (2023) state that in Asian countries, workplace bullying is one of the issues that organisations have not adequately addressed. Consequently, educators might suffer from reduced satisfaction within their profession, which would in the end impact the learners' performance academically (Johan Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2019). After battling workplace bullying, a teacher's overall physical and mental well-being greatly suffers, translating to lower productivity and efficiency within the classroom.

In addition to this, Ariza-Montes et al. (2016) emphasize that workplace bullying has a cultural and contextual component. In particular, behaviors associated with bullying aim to lower or undermine a particular employee or defined group of employees (Malik, Ali, & Shah, 2023). In the same way, Fahie (2019) emphasizes that bullying happens everywhere, including in the playground, within classroom walls, and even in the office, whether verbally or physically. More so, Rayner (2021) emphasize that bullying in educational settings not only puts the teacher's health and safety at risk but also the quality of education that the learners receive. Because of its magnitude, workplace bullying has emerged as an issue of concern to many professions and industries. It has drawn attention due to its adverse effects, from increased levels of anxiety and depression to lowered performance at work (Johan Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2019). Furthermore, other hateful behaviors may include name-calling, completely shutting the individual out, and threatening the person with violence. Even though a considerable number of studies have been done on workplace harassment in many fields, the level of understanding of its consequences on educators in the universities of Multan is limited. Therefore, in order to alleviate this problem and achieve a safe and healthy educational environment, it is important to analyze the views of university teachers (Nielsen et al., 2019). Despite the growing recognition of workplace bullying as a serious organizational issue, there remains limited understanding of its psychological impact on university teachers in the South Punjab region. Previous research has largely ignored how these experiences affect teachers' emotional well-being and job performance, especially in public institutions. This study aims to fill that gap.

1.2. Significance of the Study

Teachers are some of the most important members of any society since they play a critical role in shaping our children for the future. To ensure their well-being, it is important to understand the challenges they face, including workplace bullying. Bullying in professional settings is a common issue, yet it often remains unaddressed and inadequately reported, particularly among teachers. The degree of satisfaction and effectiveness that teachers experience directly impacts the quality of education provided to students. Workplace bullying can hinder teachers' ability to perform their duties effectively, which can influence the extent of student learning. This research study can guide educational institutions in creating and implementing policies and practices that prevent workplace bullying and promote an environment of mutual respect.

1.3. Research Objectives

- To examine the perspectives of teachers regarding the prevalence of workplace bullying at public universities.
- To assess the level of emotional strain among teachers at public universities.
- To investigate the differences in perspectives about workplace bullying based on teacher gender at public universities.

1.4. Research Questions

1. What are the perspectives of teachers regarding the prevalence of workplace bullying at public universities?
2. What is the level of emotional strain among teachers at public universities?
3. What are the differences in perspectives about workplace bullying based on teacher gender at public universities?

In line with the above objectives, this study is organized into several sections. The first section introduces the research problem and outlines the study's significance, objectives, and questions. The second section reviews relevant literature, while the third describes the research methodology. The fourth section presents the results and discussion, followed by the conclusion and policy recommendations. Finally, suggestions for future research are provided.

2. Literature Review

First, Plimmer et al. (2022) led research on workplace harassment and burnout among employees in higher education. Specifically, a quantitative co-social design was utilized to determine the relationship between workplace harassment and burnout among employees in the academic sector. Next, in recent years, the prevalence of workplace bullying has gained increasing attention from researchers and the media due to its negative consequences on organizations, ethical concerns, and broader social implications (Misawa, Andrews, & Jenkins, 2018). Perceived as a critical threat to employees' well-being, workplace bullying remains a growing concern across various professions (Feijó et al., 2019; Scott, 2018). Moving forward, Olweus and Limber (2018) distinguishes between direct and indirect bullying. Direct bullying includes physical aggression, offensive language, and demeaning gestures, while indirect bullying involves ignoring, exclusion, rumor-spreading, and withholding essential information. Moreover, Pilinkaite Sotirovic et al. (2024) highlights that physical intimidation can escalate to threats of violence when victims attempt to report harassment.

Also, De Wet and Jacobs (2014) examined educators' understanding of workplace bullying through a two-dimensional model of harassment. Additionally, Hernández conducted a fundamental review of teacher violence, analyzing 63 studies published between 2010 and 2021. Their findings showed that 37 studies focused on mobbing (workplace harassment), 21 examined violence from students, and 5 explored digital harassment targeting educators (Mehmood et al., 2024). Moreover, Neto et al. (2017) conducted a cross-sectional study in the U.S., revealing that peer-initiated harassment often stems from work-related competition. In such cases, individuals who fail to respond assertively become prime targets, allowing colleagues to gain professional advantages. As a result, workplace bullying has been linked to reduced job performance, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover intentions. In addition, Sabbath et al. (2018) found that workplace bullying victims reported a wide range of physical, mental, and social health issues. Importantly, many of these conditions aligned with psychiatric disorders, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and panic attacks. Furthermore, Williams noted that workplace harassment significantly impacts teachers' effectiveness, ultimately hindering the learning process and affecting institutional culture, particularly in developing economies like South Africa. Quraishi, Aziz and Siddiquah (2018) investigated the effects of workplace bullying on university teachers' performance, concluding that bullying significantly impacts workplace culture and professional productivity(Dhivya et al., 2023; Ragmoun & Alfalih, 2024).

Likewise, Quraishi, Aziz and Siddiquah (2018) reinforced these findings, demonstrating that workplace harassment leads to psychological distress and job dissatisfaction. Razzaghian and Ghani (2014) explored workplace bullying in Pakistan's private universities, finding limited evidence of workplace harassment. However, Zafar et al. (2016) discovered a strong correlation between workplace bullying and turnover intentions, noting that organizations face increased costs due to high employee turnover. In addition, Razzaghian and Ghani (2014) highlighted that victims experience severe psychological effects and seek various coping mechanisms to mitigate the damage. Acquadro Maran et al. (2023) examined stress management strategies in workplace harassment cases, finding that workplace bullying is a strong predictor of stress-related coping behaviors. Similarly, in the digital context, Saleem, Khan and Zafar (2021) reported a significant increase in cyberbullying in Pakistani educational institutions. Additionally, Shamsi, Andrades and Ashraf (2019) and Mehmood et al. (2024) found that bullying extends beyond workplaces, occurring in classrooms, playgrounds, buses, and cafeterias. Notably, Shahzadi et al. (2019) revealed that over 50% of students engage in peer harassment, while 40% experience victimization and seek retaliation. Rafi (2019) examined age-related differences in cyberbullying, concluding that younger individuals are more likely to experience digital harassment(Ahmed, Azhar, & Mohammad, 2024; Mohammad, 2015).

However, alternative forms of bullying, such as verbal and social harassment, showed no significant differences across primary, secondary, and university levels (Siddiqui & Schultze-

Krumbholz, 2023). On an international level, studies have provided deeper insights into the psychological characteristics of workplace bullies and cyberbullies. Burkhart and Keder (2020) found that individuals who engage in workplace bullying exhibit higher levels of aggression, social withdrawal, and manipulative behaviors. Moreover, these individuals often experience academic difficulties and internalized/externalized psychological struggles, which they project onto their peers. Despite extensive research on workplace bullying in various professions, there is limited empirical evidence focusing specifically on university teachers in South Punjab, Pakistan. Most existing studies have either generalized the teaching profession or emphasized private institutions, overlooking the unique challenges faced by faculty in public universities. Furthermore, the emotional and psychological consequences of bullying on teachers' job satisfaction and well-being remain underexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the prevalence, gender-based differences, and emotional strain caused by workplace bullying among university teachers in South Punjab.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design

The current research investigation employed a quantitative research design to meet the objectives.

3.2. Population and sample

The study population covered a total of 207 two hundred and seven teachers from three public universities: Bahauddin Zakariya University, The Women University, and Emerson University. The sample included a total of 135 male and female teachers selected through simple random sampling from five departments within the social sciences: Education, International Relations, Sociology, Psychology, and Political Science.

3.3. Data Collection

For data collection, a questionnaire was designed after an extensive literature review on a 5 Likert scale ranging from (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) neutral, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree to get teachers' perspectives on workplace bullying at universities. The questionnaire comprised two sections. Section A consisted of demographic information of research participants. Section B consisted of statements related to workplace bullying.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was finalized after validation by experts in the field of education. To check the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach’s Alpha was utilized, and the result was 0.771, which was in an acceptable range.

3.5. Analysis of Data

For the analysis of collected data, SPSS software descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) and inferential statics (t-test) were used in this study.

3.6. Ethical guidelines

This study strictly followed the research ethics as set by the American Psychological Association (APA). To respect the rights and dignity of participants. The researcher informed participants about the study's purpose and kept the responses secret to maintain confidentiality throughout the research process.

4. Results

Table 1: Institute-wise analysis

Name of institute	Frequency	Percentage
BZU	50	33.3
Education University	50	33.3
Women University	50	33.3
Total	150	100.0

The table indicates the frequency and percentage distribution of students across Women University (50, 33.3%), BZU (50, 33.3%), and Education University (50, 33.3%), nearly equal representation among the institutes.

The table 2 depicts gender distribution, with females comprising the majority at 82 female teachers (54.7%), and males at 68 (45.3%) out of a total of 150 teachers.

Table 2: Gender wise analysis

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	68	45.3
Female	82	54.7
Total	150	100.0

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Prevalence of Workplace Bullying (PWB)

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. You have witnessed or experienced verbal abuse from university staff.	150	3.65	1.331
2. Employees fear or are intimidated by powerful people.	150	3.94	1.281
3. Workplace bullying negatively impacts the university's work environment.	150	3.72	1.405
4. Certain individuals or groups experience exclusion or isolation at work.	150	2.72	1.275
5. Some of my coworkers have faced excessive criticism or scrutiny, affecting their work performance.	150	3.00	1.321
6. Staff often use abusive language.	150	3.00	1.442
7. Authority or control is sometimes exerted through physical intimidation or aggression.	150	2.89	1.286
8. You have seen workplace bullying in unjust task distribution.	150	3.91	1.341
9. University staff express concerns about cyberbullying.	150	3.79	1.354
10. Workplace bullying includes undermining or sabotaging coworkers' work.	150	2.73	1.379
11. Leaders may use psychological manipulation or control.	150	2.97	1.397

Table 3 presents the prevalence of PWB among university faculty members. The highest mean score (M = 3.94, SD = 1.281) corresponds to the statement, *"Employees fear or are intimidated by powerful people,"* indicating that power-based intimidation is a dominant concern. Other significant issues include unjust task distribution (M = 3.91, SD = 1.341), verbal abuse (M = 3.65, SD = 1.331), and cyberbullying (M = 3.79, SD = 1.354). In contrast, social exclusion (M = 2.72, SD = 1.275) and physical intimidation (M = 2.89, SD = 1.286) had lower mean scores, suggesting these forms of bullying are less prevalent. Overall, the findings highlight that hierarchical power dynamics and verbal mistreatment are the most significant bullying concerns in university settings, while physical intimidation and exclusion are less commonly reported.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Emotional Strain among Teachers

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
12. Workplace bullying has upset me.	150	3.83	1.427
13. Workplace bullying made me feel uncomfortable or agitated at work.	150	3.97	1.279
14. Workplace bullying has hurt my self-esteem.	150	3.91	1.226
15. Workplace bullying has separated me socially.	150	3.80	1.331
16. Workplace bullying harms mentalhealth.	150	3.70	1.426
17. Workplace bullying lowers employee morale and motivation.	150	2.95	1.183
18. Bullying at work increased absenteeism and disengagement.	150	2.78	1.325
19. Workplace bullying decreased my job satisfaction level .	150	3.89	1.334

20. Workplace bullying made me hesitant to speak up.	150	3.51	1.214
21. Bullying has that limited my professional advancement.	150	3.95	1.481
22. In our university teacher's morale and productivity are affected at workplace.	150	3.77	1.429
23. Workplace bullying contributes to teacher turnover and decreased job commitment.	150	3.12	1.226
24. Bullying at work has affected my mood and attitude towards coworkers.	150	3.61	1.563

Table 4 explores the psychological and emotional impact of workplace bullying among university faculty members. The highest mean score (M = 3.97, SD = 1.279) corresponds to the statement, *"Due to bullying concerns, I feel uncomfortable or agitated at work,"* emphasizing the emotional distress experienced by faculty. Other notable impacts include decreased self-esteem (M = 3.91, SD = 1.226), social isolation (M = 3.80, SD = 1.331), and negative effects on mood and coworker relationships (M = 3.61, SD = 1.563). Additionally, workplace bullying significantly affects faculty morale and productivity (M = 3.77, SD = 1.429) and contributes to the creation of a hostile work environment (M = 3.95, SD = 1.481). Decreased job satisfaction (M = 3.89, SD = 1.334) was also a major concern. While absenteeism and disengagement (M = 2.78, SD = 1.325) had relatively lower scores, they still indicate an underlying issue. These findings highlight the profound emotional and professional consequences of workplace bullying, highlighting the urgent need for targeted intervention strategies.

Table 5: t-test about Prevalence of Workplace Bullying (PWB) based on gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	p-value
Male	68	19.74	3.560	.432	.688	148	.492
Female	82	19.30	4.011	.443			

Table 5 presents the results of an independent samples t-test comparing the prevalence of workplace bullying based on gender. The findings indicate that male faculty members (M = 19.74, SD = 3.560) and female faculty members (M = 19.30, SD = 4.011) reported similar experiences of workplace bullying. The t-test result (t = 0.688, p = 0.492) suggests that the difference in mean scores is not statistically significant (p > 0.05), indicating that workplace bullying is experienced at comparable levels by both genders.

5. Discussion

The study reveals that workplace bullying exists in university environments where employees claim to be bullied by people with power, subjected to verbal assault, and having a negative overall effect on the institution's morale. This corresponds with earlier work, such as that by Khawaja, Khoja and Motwani (2015), who noted that bullying within urban academic institutions usually encompasses physical and verbal abuse accompanied by considerable psychological suffering and diminished professional output. The same case for Neto et al. (2017) who reported that bullying in the workplace is associated with dissatisfaction with one's employment, increased sick leave, and greater intentions of leaving the job. The part that men and women play in workplace bullying is still an issue that is not clearly defined. No statistically significant difference was found in the experience of workplace bullying between male and female faculty members. This does differ from Olweus and Limber (2018), who hypothesize that female faculty are more likely to suffer some form of harassment, such as exclusion, spread of rumors, and psychological abuse rather than overt aggression. Besides, Sabbath et al. (2018) and Quraishi, Aziz and Siddiquah (2018) assert that women in academia often experience overt or even disguised discrimination in the workplace, which does not get captured in far too many quantitative studies. Despite the current study showing that gendered experiences of workplace bullying do not differ significantly between women and men in the workplace, former research points out that traditional survey methods might not capture that nuance. Research by Zafar et al. Female faculty members is often deterred from reporting workplace bullying, such as that perpetrated by male faculty, due to fear of professional retribution and lack of institutional response (2016) and (Razzaghian & Ghani, 2014). This agreement is in concurrence with (De

Cieri et al., 2019), who noted that victims of workplace harassment, especially women, are often not encouraged to speak out because of organisational hierarchies and power imbalances.

More specifically, although some studies (Razzaghian & Ghani, 2014) found little to no proof of workplace harassment in private universities of Pakistan. Others, like Saleem, Khan and Zafar (2021), noted that the prevalence of cyberbullying as a new type of workplace harassment disproportionately affects women within academic environments. Because of these differences, future studies should take a qualitative approach, such as interviews or case studies, to determine if there are specific types of workplaces bullying that equally impact men and women but at a level that cannot be quantified. Such a call for attention mirrors that of Burkhart and Keder (2020) and Guo (2016), who argue for more profound psychological research through critical lenses on workplace harassment that relates to institutional power balance and gender roles. In summary, the findings suggest that while workplace bullying is a widespread issue affecting all faculty members, gendered experiences of harassment may require further investigation through alternative research methods. Universities should implement targeted policies to address both overt and covert forms of workplace bullying, ensuring that reporting mechanisms are accessible, protective, and effective in addressing gender-based workplace discrimination.

6. Conclusions

This is the first systematic exploration of workplace bullying at universities, revealing its frequency, nature, and effects on emotional wellbeing of teachers at universities. The results demonstrate an urgent need for universities to implement clearer anti-bullying policies, tighter training programs and readily available reporting mechanisms. This is how universities can build a climate of inclusion, respect for others, and academic honesty. The theoretical contributions of this study highlight workplace bullying through an educational lens, and connecting organizational behavior theories with higher education policies. On a practical level, the results yield data-driven suggestions for university administrators who will formulate successful intervention strategies. However, this study has its limitations. The sample consisted of only three public universities and is not generalizable. Future research must carry out a study on bullying in private universities or in multicultural settings so that a better picture of the phenomenon is obtained. Additionally, qualitative interviewing may be more informative regarding the psychological effects of bullying in the workplace.

In conclusion, bullying in the workplace requires a concerted effort on behalf of university leadership, faculty members, and policymakers. With preventative measures in place, colleges and universities can make their workplaces safe, respectful, and academically productive for all. This study adds to the growing body of research on workplace bullying in academic institutions by providing empirical data from the underexplored context of public universities in South Punjab, Pakistan. It reinforces theories related to organizational behavior and emotional strain by demonstrating how power dynamics and bullying practices affect teachers' mental health and job satisfaction. The findings support and extend existing models of workplace bullying, especially in non-Western educational settings. Practically, the study highlights the urgent need for public universities to implement anti-bullying policies, create awareness through training programs, and offer psychological support services for affected faculty members. University administrators can use these findings to improve workplace culture, boost teacher morale, and enhance overall educational quality by reducing emotional strain caused by bullying.

6.1. Policy Recommendations

Here are the recommendations from this research study.

- Universities should develop and enforce clear anti-bullying policies, ensuring transparent reporting mechanisms, strict consequences for perpetrators, and a supportive environment for victims.
- Regular awareness campaigns and training programs should be conducted to educate faculty, staff, and students about workplace bullying and its consequences.
- Universities should establish confidential support services for victims of workplace bullying, including counseling, mediation, and legal assistance.
- Universities must prioritize a safe, inclusive, and respectful workplace culture, making workplace bullying prevention a core part of their institutional policies and values.
- Academic leaders and policymakers must take immediate steps to ensure that higher

education institutions become free from harassment, discrimination, and toxic workplace behaviors.

6.2. Suggestions for future research

Here are a few extra ideas for future examination on work environment harassment at the college level:

- Examine the relationship between workplace bullying and employee well-being, with a focus on its impact on mental health, job satisfaction, and professional burnout.
- Investigate how workplace bullying affects academic productivity and research quality, particularly in higher education institutions.
- Analyze the role of power dynamics and institutional hierarchies in workplace bullying, examining how authority and organizational culture influence harassment experiences.
- Explore the intersection of workplace bullying with other forms of violence or harassment, such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and cyber harassment, to understand overlapping risk factors.
- Conduct a cross-cultural study of workplace bullying in universities across different countries and regions, comparing institutional policies and cultural influences on bullying behaviors.

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