

Workplace bullying in developing countries is wearing women down, new research reveals

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A University of South Australia study reveals that workplace bullying is significantly undermining job productivity and hindering economic development in Pakistan, where women are seen as subordinates. The

findings are [published](#) in the *International Journal of Manpower*.

More than 300 [female workers](#) in Pakistan's education and health sectors were surveyed on gendered [workplace bullying](#).

Findings from in-depth interviews revealed women had experienced various bullying behaviors against them including verbal, emotional, social, and physical/sexual bullying, such as casual teasing, insults, taking away of responsibilities, devaluation of work and [social isolation](#).

Women are disproportionately affected by workplace bullying, with 30% globally experiencing it (WHO 2021), costing up to 4% of GDP in less-developed nations (World Bank 2022).

Pakistan's workforce is predominantly male (83%) with female participation decreasing from 24% to 22% between 2016 and 2022 (World Bank, 2022).

Associate Professor Connie Zheng from UniSA's Center for Workplace Excellence, says male-dominated cultures, such as Pakistani society, influence the level of tolerance towards bullying.

"Workplace bullying is normalized in Pakistani society and occurs in casual conversation or for the amusement of others," she says.

"We heard that often bystanders joined in, perpetuating the behavior, and the affected women felt angry and weak. It was also evident that women were often seen as sexual objects and played submissive roles in the workplace."

One participant shared her experience of sexual bullying from their male supervisor who was "not just touching but also asking me for a relationship and calling me in his office and using the inappropriate

comments."

Others told of their experiences with male colleagues acting aggressively out of frustration and jealousy when challenged by their female counterparts. "They can't see a woman rising... so they try to break that woman by verbally assaulting or pressurizing them."

Assoc Prof Zheng says the findings of the study, which was conducted in collaboration with the Riphah International University and the National University of Modern Languages in Pakistan, identified a high tolerance towards bullying.

"In male dominated cultures, working women often face pressure from their family and society if they encounter workplace issues. Victims are blamed, leading them to stay silent instead of speaking up," she says.

"On the other hand, many working women fear repercussions like being fired if they speak up against bullying. So, they endure the bullying and mistreatment to sustain their family's livelihood. Tolerance is also displayed by the organizations and institutions themselves, perpetuating the silence."

Assoc Prof Zheng says a surprisingly positive aspect was identified among some Pakistani working women. Instead of being beaten down by the bullying, they were driven by it to perform better.

"Despite facing humiliation, women performed well in the workplace, reflecting a double-edged sword. Bullying can spur female workers to exceed expectations because they're potentially driven by a desire to prove themselves," she says.

"Yet, there are long-term mental health implications from excessive job demands. Someone can only operate in a highly stressed environment for

so long."

The study reveals systemic gender biases favoring men and exposes the need for real changes to address gender disparities and protect female workers from bullying.

Assoc Prof Zheng says organizations that provide [social opportunities](#) such as activities and informal gatherings can help foster cohesion and highlight workplace issues. Social support networks in workplaces can also provide women with a safe space to speak up when facing bullying.

"Addressing bullying is not only a responsibility for organizations, but it's also as much to do with individual empowerment," she says. "Women who experience workplace bullying should be empowered to stay confident and be strong enough to confront bullies. Silence is not an option."

More information: Connie Zheng et al, Workplace bullying and job outcomes: intersectional effects of gender and culture, *International Journal of Manpower* (2024). [DOI: 10.1108/IJM-01-2024-0008](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJM-01-2024-0008)

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