

## Chapter 3

# Leave Me Alone!

## Sexual Bullying at Work

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### ABSTRACT

*The contemporary work environment is plagued with many problems. Two such issues are the occurrence of sexual harassment and workplace bullying. These pervasive behaviors continue to proliferate, with attempts to curtail such acts from occurring. Interestingly, when employees are subjected to bullying tactics that are sexual and/or gender-related in nature, sexual bullying is occurring. This classification is novel in its application to the workplace setting. The authors seek to shed light on the issue, as within the workplace setting understanding this phenomenon is at an embryotic stage. This chapter considers the key elements of workplace bullying, sexual harassment, and conceptualizes sexual bullying. The possible consequences of sexual bullying on employees and the organization are explored. Further, victims of sexual bullying who are targets of cyberbullying is another consideration worthy of exploration. Possible solutions and recommendations are advanced as are areas for further research.*

### INTRODUCTION

Within the contemporary workplace, bullying and sexual harassment are pervasive issues that workers continue to experience at an alarming rate. According to the Workplace Bullying Foundation, a survey on workplace bullying from the United States of America (USA) in 2021 revealed that “39% suffer abusive conduct at work, another 22% witness it, 61% are affected by it, and 73% are aware that workplace bullying happens” (WBI 2021, 6). It was further projected that in the USA alone, workers who have been directly bullied are around 48.6 million and those who witnesses bullying is another 30.6 million. Another prevalent workplace issue is sexual harassment. In Canada, the Survey on Sexual Misconduct at Work revealed that in 2020, one in four women and one in six men have experienced inappropriate

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sexualized behaviors (Burczycka, 2021). Further, more than one in five employees targeted indicated that an individual with organizational authority perpetrated sexual behavior towards them. In the United Kingdom, sexual harassment research conducted in 2016 revealed that more than half (52%) of women, and nearly two-thirds (63%) of women aged 18-24 years old have experienced sexual harassment at work (Trades Union Congress 2016). Further, in many of the reported cases of sexual harassment the perpetrator was male (88%), and nearly one in five (17%) women reported that it was someone with direct authority over them, or their line manager. Findings are consistent in Australia where it was estimated that one in every three persons experienced workplace sexual harassment over the last five years, that is, 2017 to 2022 (Safe Work Australia, 2022).

In organizations, the fundamental principles and rights of workers promote equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and occupation (International Labor Organization, 2022). Employees' psychological contracts are shaped by organizational principles, work conditions, and intra-office relationships conflict. When an employee experiences a breach in the psychological contract, the result is a toxic work environment, which damages the long-term viability of the organization (Harder, Rash, & Wagner 2014, 207). Workplace bullying and sexual harassment are toxic events which violates the fundamental rights of workers as they are subjected to degrading and dehumanizing behaviors at the 'hands' of their perpetrator (s). When the victim is exposed to continued sexual mistreatment, this can have a detrimental effect, not only on the victim, but also bystanders, and the organization. The question arises, what happens when the bully uses tactics that are sexual in nature towards the target? While both phenomena have been explored under the umbrella of workplace aggression, but often investigated separately, in this article the researchers explore a hybrid of both, that is, sexual bullying.

## **OBJECTIVES**

Given the ever-evolving business environment and work dynamics, workplace issues are also mutating with sexual bullying becoming more apparent. It is against this backdrop that this chapter seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) Describe the key elements of workplace bullying, workplace sexual harassment, and workplace sexual bullying.
- 2) Discuss the consequences of workplace sexual bullying on employees and the organization.
- 3) Evaluate how victims of workplace sexual bullying can be targets of cyberbullying.
- 4) Propose approaches that organizations can adopt to deter workplace sexual bullying from occurring.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Workplace Bullying and Sexual Harassment**

Within the contemporary workplace, hostile work environments and cultures continue to permeate and flourish. Increasing pressures to survive and thrive are promoting the deployment of more intense and goal-oriented performance management systems whose ends justify the means (Harrington, Warren, and Rayner, 2011). In many instances, this is fostering a breeding ground for aggressive workplace be-

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