



Background

Workplace bullying is gaining recognition as a serious public health issue. Bullying among the working population poses a widespread threat to employee health [1], both physical and psychological, with direct socioeconomic consequences [2, 3].

While the forms of work bullying are myriad, the outcomes associated with bullying are singularly negative. In particular, workplace bullying carries implications for mental health. Past research demonstrates that work bullying has an adverse impact on the mental wellbeing of not just employees who are bullied, but has been shown to demoralise and affect witnesses and bystanders as well [4].

The psychological consequences of workplace bullying, particularly in the context of added vulnerabilities associated with low income is akin to a double setback for employees already struggling on a day to day basis with the challenges and pressures of work demands and responsibilities.

It has been documented in the organisational literature that economically and/or socially disadvantaged groups in the workplace are more vulnerable towards being victimized as a result of workplace bullying [1]. Individuals from lower income groups, as well as employees who have ever experienced workplace bullying, have been separately shown to be at heightened risk of poorer mental health.

This is important given that socioeconomic disparities are a main determinant and contributor of persisting health inequity. The association between workplace bullying and psychosocial adversities may be mediated by socioeconomic status, which, in developed countries [5], is postulated to aggregate in low socioeconomic sectors of the population.

Little is known of the extent of workplace bullying in Malaysia [5–7] despite its growing acknowledgement

Demographic characteristics (age, gender, educational level and marital status) were assessed with a general checklist.

Descriptive statistics are presented for all demographic characteristics. Differences between groups were analysed using univariate Chi-Square (X^2) and t-test. Comparison of independent means for ever bullied and never bullied employees were run using a two-sample t-test. Mean differences in psychological distress scores between the never bullied and ever bullied groups were

Table 1 Characteristics of employees from 47 organisations in Malaysia (N = 5235)

Characteristic	Never bullied n = 3190	Ever bullied n = 2045	χ^2 ^a
Gender			0.001
Male	1286 (40.3)	690 (33.7)	
Female	1904 (59.7)	1355 (66.3)	
Age (years)			0.001
18–24	435 (13.6)	269 (13.2)	
25–34	1389 (43.5)	1000 (48.9)	
35–44	901 (28.2)	562 (27.5)	
45–54	368 (11.5)	178 (8.7)	
55–64	94 (2.9)	35 (1.7)	
≥ 65	3 (0.1)	1 (0.0)	
Ethnicity			0.001
Malay	1280 (40.1)	555 (27.1)	
Chinese	1299 (40.7)	1051 (51.4)	
Indian	515 (16.1)	375 (18.3)	
Other	96 (3.1)	64 (3.1)	
Marital status			0.001
Single	1389 (43.5)	983 (48.1)	
Married	1638 (51.3)	934 (45.7)	
Separated/ Divorced	62 (1.9)	39 (1.9)	
Widowed	23 (0.7)	8 (0.4)	
Prefer not to say	78 (2.4)	81 (4.0)	
Educational attainment			0.135
No formal education, primary, lower & upper secondary	270 (8.5)	163 (8.0)	
Post secondary	578 (18.1)	328 (16.0)	
Undergraduate degree	1769 (55.5)	1195 (58.4)	
Postgraduate degree	593 (18.0)	359 (17.6)	
Occupational group			0.224
Manager	995 (31.2)	587 (28.7)	
Professional	896 (28.1)	602 (29.4)	
Technician or junior professional	300 (9.4)	191 (9.3)	
Clerical support worker	372 (11.7)	223 (10.9)	
Service worker	32 (1.0)	23 (1.1)	
Sales worker	110 (3.4)	80 (3.9)	
Skilled agricultural/ forestry/ fishery worker	1 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	
Plant and machine operator or assembler	4 (0.1)	0 (0.0)	
Elementary occupations	1 (0.0)	1 (0.0)	
Other	265 (8.3)	163 (8.0)	
Don't know	43 (1.3)	37 (1.8)	
Prefer not to answer	171 (5.4)	138 (6.7)	
Work irregular hours			0.005
No	2558 (80.2)	1574 (77.0)	
Yes	632 (19.8)	471 (23.0)	
Psychological distress (K6)			0.001
K6 score of 0 to 12	2930 (63.9)	1657 (36.1)	

Table 1 Characteristics of employees from 47 organisations in Malaysia (N = 5235) (Continued)

Characteristic

to be specifically associated with drawing a higher income. Being female and greater psychological distress was also linked to ever being bullied at work. However, our findings did support the notion that low individual income was associated with greater psychological distress. Thus several psychosocial risk factors for workplace bullying in this setting were identified: being female, drawing a higher income, and greater psychological distress.

In general, employees from the lowest individual income bracket reported the highest levels of psychological distress, with slightly over half all employees who reported significant psychological distress earning monthly individual income of \leq RM3,999. On closer examination however, regression analyses revealed that

higher income employees were more likely to report ever being bullied at the workplace. These findings refute the hypothesis that workplace bullying and psychological distress both aggregate in low socioeconomic status groups, and of itself these findings are unsurprising for a developing economy of a middle-resource country [14–16].

These findings suggest that sociodemographic factors appear to play a role in workplace bullying. Indeed, across a wide income discrepancy seen amongst our sample of employees in this study, workplace bullying appears to cluster among employees with higher income brackets. We should however not allow this to obscure the fact that bullying occurs across all economic strata. Income levels per se, therefore, may not be a clear

indicator for risk of workplace bullying even where economic disparities are also evident.

In our study, there were clear gender differences in terms of work bullying prevalence, with a higher proportion of female employees who reported ever being bullied at work, compared to their male counterparts. This is at odds with recent evidence in the literature [17, 18] which argue that work bullying is a gender-neutral phenomenon. Our findings ally with the general dictum drawn from the bulk of evidence and overall consensus of studies which consider work bullying to be a gendered issue [19].

It remains unclear whether female employees are more likely than males to experience or to report work bullying. Past research however have shown that women at the workplace may be more vulnerable to workplace bullying [20], and together with employees with mental health difficulties and employees from lower income brackets, form a vulnerable population whom may be susceptible to bullying at work and enduring poorer mental health.

It is also important to remember that work bullying affects not just females, but males as well. Gender does not mitigate levels of psychological distress experienced by bullied employees. This is why we may need to reduce stigma around men's mental health and encourage

bullying. Findings should therefore be interpreted with the reminder that any causality cannot be determined due to the cross-sectional nature of our study. We cannot determine causality, thereby rendering it impos-

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