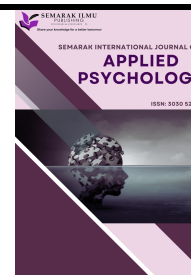




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A Systematic Literature Review of Workplace Bullying: Institutional Dynamics, Psychological Impacts, and Prevention Strategies across Global Sectors

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying represents a pervasive global challenge that severely compromises employee well-being and organisational efficacy across multiple sectors. This systematic literature review (SLR) synthesises 17 peer-reviewed articles published between 2022 and 2025 to investigate the institutional dynamics, psychological consequences, and preventive interventions associated with workplace harassment. The findings reveal that while bullying is a universal phenomenon, it manifests through sector-specific vulnerabilities, such as the disproportionate burden borne by LGBTQ+ employees in higher education and the high prevalence of burnout among nursing professionals. The results further identify critical psychological mechanisms, including work alienation and emotional exhaustion, which serve as mediators between persistent negative acts and total job burnout. Furthermore, the review highlights the pivotal role of ethical leadership and innovative social-learning tools, such as gamified discussion platforms, in fostering a climate of trust and psychological safety. Ultimately, this study advocates for a transition toward a human-rights-based framework in organisational policy to safeguard professional dignity and institutional sustainability in the modern era.

1. Introduction

Workplace bullying has emerged as a critical global challenge, significantly affecting organisational health and individual well-being across diverse cultural and professional contexts. Defined as a persistent pattern of negative social behavior, it goes beyond ordinary interpersonal conflict and reflects deeper issues in organizational culture and leadership. Recent scholarship, spanning 2022 to 2025, emphasizes that this issue is not confined to corporate environments but is

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prevalent in vital public sectors such as healthcare, higher education, and the civil service. As organizations evolve into more complex and fast-paced structures, the psychological safety of employees has emerged as a critical concern for human resource management and legal scholarship.

Despite the implementation of anti-harassment policies in many institutions, workplace bullying continues to result in severe psychological trauma and organisational inefficiency. There is a notable gap in the literature regarding how specific demographic vulnerabilities, such as sexual orientation in academia or professional hierarchy in medicine, intersect with organisational structures to foster toxic environments. Furthermore, while the consequences, such as emotional exhaustion and burnout, are well-documented, there is a limited synthesis of how these outcomes vary across international contexts, from the public sector in Australia to medical residencies in Iran. This review addresses the gap by analysing recent global data to uncover cross-sector patterns and successful institutional strategies. This systematic review is guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What are the primary consequences of bullying on employee well-being?

RQ2: How do different institutional sectors experience bullying?

RQ3: What leadership styles or intervention actions taken prevent bullying behaviours at a workplace?

Practically, the findings provide evidence-based insights for leaders, human resource practitioners, and policymakers seeking to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies. The study reinforces the need to conceptualise workplace bullying as a systemic organisational issue, thereby supporting the development of psychologically safe and sustainable work environments.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Selection Process

This systematic literature review was conducted in strict accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure a transparent and reproducible study selection process. A comprehensive search was undertaken across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, targeting peer-reviewed empirical studies published between January 2022 and December 2025. The search strategy employed a structured Boolean string combining key constructs related to workplace bullying and organisational outcomes. The Boolean string used is as follows: ("workplace bullying" OR "workplace harassment") AND ("emotional exhaustion" OR "burnout") AND ("organisational commitment" OR "leadership")

To determine suitability for inclusion for the review purpose, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

Table 1

Inclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria
Articles published in the English language only.
Studies conducted in both local and international settings.
Articles reported only on empirical evidence to achieve rich data and peer-reviewed journal articles.
Articles focused on the impacts of bullying on employees and organisations.
The research was published within a period of four years, from 2022 to 2025.

The initial search yielded 240 records, but based on the inclusion criteria, 85 duplicate or highly similar entries were removed, resulting in 155 unique articles subjected to title and abstract

screening. During the screening phase, 138 records were excluded based on predefined criteria, including non-empirical designs, school-based populations, unavailability of full-text articles, and non-peer-reviewed sources. Following a full-text eligibility assessment, 17 studies met all inclusion criteria and were retained for final synthesis. A total of six (6) researchers were involved in the analysis of all 17 articles to find similar themes across the articles. The complete identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process is illustrated in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1) below, ensuring full methodological transparency and alignment with best practices for systematic reviews.

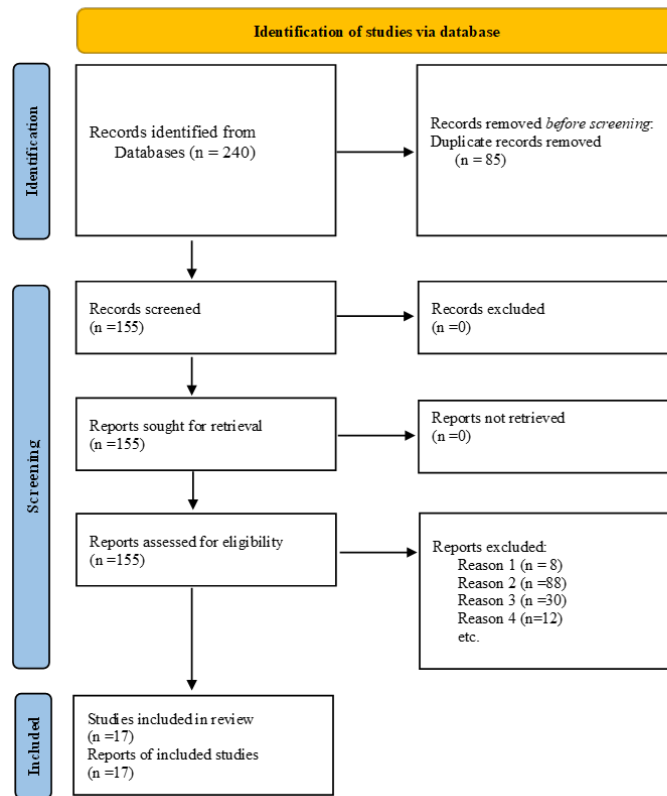


Figure 1. PRISMA in article selection

Fig. 1. PRISMA process for article selection

2.1 Data Extraction and Synthesis

From the initial pool of results, 17 key articles were selected for in-depth analysis. Data were extracted into a structured matrix focusing on:

1. Author(s) and Publication Year
2. Institutional Sector
3. Geographical Focus
4. Key Psychological/Organisational Outcomes

Table 2
 Selected articles for review

Author(s)	Year	Title	Source/Journal	Key Findings/Focus
Pitsia, <i>et al.</i> , [1]	2025	<i>Bullying in Higher Education Institutions: Are LGBTQ+ Employees Bearing the Burden?</i>	<i>Higher Education Quarterly</i>	Examines the disproportionate exposure to workplace bullying and its psychological burden among LGBTQ+ employees in higher education institutions.
Awashreh, R.A., & Al Toobi, S. [5]	2025	<i>Workplace Bullying and Its Effects on Job Performance: Evidence from the Health Sector</i>	<i>Journal of Applied Social Science</i>	Demonstrates a significant negative relationship between workplace bullying and job performance among healthcare employees
Tran, Q.H.N., & Nguyen, A.Y. [17]	2025	<i>Exploring Relationships among Workplace Bullying, Organizational Commitment, Work Engagement and Work-Related Stress in Vietnamese</i>	<i>Journal of Management</i>	Shows that bullying undermines organisational commitment and work engagement while increasing occupational stress in academic libraries.
João, <i>et al.</i> , [2]	2025	<i>Exploring Vulnerability to Stress and Its Correlation with Bullying in the Nurse's Workplace</i>	<i>Society</i>	Establishes a strong association between workplace bullying, stress vulnerability, and burnout among nursing professionals.
Assadpour, <i>et al.</i> , [7]	2025	<i>Factors Influencing Quality of Professional Life and Perceived Bullying among Medical Residents in Iran</i>	<i>BMC Medical Education</i>	Identifies quality of professional life as a key predictor of perceived bullying among medical residents.
Berglund, <i>et al.</i> , [3]	2025	<i>Workplace Bullying, Stress, Burnout, and the Role of Perceived Social Support: Findings from a Swedish National Prevalence Study in Higher Education</i>	<i>European Journal of Higher Education</i>	Highlights the mediating role of social support in reducing burnout and stress associated with workplace bullying.
Gil-Monte, <i>et al.</i> , [10]	2025	<i>The Role of Transformational Leadership in Prevention of Workplace Bullying and Psychosomatic Disorders in Non-University Women Teachers</i>	<i>International Journal of Bullying Prevention</i>	Demonstrates how transformational leadership mitigates bullying and reduces psychosomatic health outcomes.
Jayaram, <i>et al.</i> , [15]	2025	<i>Coping with Workplace Bullying and Emotional Exhaustion: Role of Work Engagement, Loyalty, Promotional Opportunities and Perceived Social Support</i>	<i>International Journal of Conflict Management</i>	Explores coping mechanisms and identifies engagement and organisational support as buffers against emotional exhaustion.

Quinn, <i>et al.</i> , [8]	2025	<i>Unmasking Organizational Factors Contributing to Bullying Behaviors in Public-Sector Workplaces: Insights from the Australian Public Sector</i>	<i>International Journal of Public Sector Management</i>	Identifies structural and managerial contributors to bullying within public-sector organisations.
Akella, <i>et al.</i> , [14]	2025	<i>Managerialism and Workplace Bullying in Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis</i>	<i>International Journal of Bullying Prevention</i>	Compares how managerial ideologies influence bullying practices across different cultural contexts.
Burke, <i>et al.</i> , [11]	2024	<i>PlayDecide Teamwork: A Discussion Game for Junior Doctors to Explore Workplace Bullying and Harassment</i>	<i>BMC Medical Education</i>	Evaluates a gamified intervention aimed at improving awareness and reporting of bullying among junior doctors.
Ahmed, G.F. G [13]	2024	<i>Psychological Hardiness as a Mediator Variable between Workplace Bullying and Job Anxiety among Early Childhood Teachers</i>	<i>International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare</i>	Highlights that psychological hardiness reduces job anxiety caused by workplace bullying.
Portelada, <i>et al.</i> , [16]	2024	<i>Teacher Well-Being under Threat: The Consequences of Workplace Bullying from Preschool to Higher Education</i>	<i>Education Sciences</i>	Examines the detrimental impact of bullying on teacher well-being across educational levels.
López-Vílchez, <i>et al.</i> , [9]	2024	<i>Is There a Single Profile of a Victim of Workplace Bullying? The Prevalence of Workplace Bullying in the Educational Sector in Spain and Its Consequences for Teachers' Health</i>	<i>Spanish Journal of Social Sciences</i>	Identifies victimisation profiles to inform targeted prevention strategies in education.
Migliaccio, <i>et al.</i> , [6]	2024	<i>Bullying within Academia: A Cultural and Structural Analysis</i>	<i>Learning, Culture and Social Interaction</i>	Analyses systemic power structures and cultural norms that perpetuate bullying in academia.
Gavya, V., & Subashini, R. [12]	2024	<i>Addressing Workplace Bullying: Protecting Human Rights in the Modern Workplace</i>	<i>Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental</i>	Advocates a human-rights-based framework for preventing workplace bullying.
Song, Y., Lee, Y., & Lee, J.[4]	2025	<i>Resilience as Mediator and Moderator in Witnessing Workplace Bullying and Professional Identity</i>	<i>Advances in Health Sciences Education</i>	Demonstrates that resilience both mediates and moderates the relationship between witnessing bullying and professional identity formation.

Table 2 summarises the articles used for the systematic review of workplace bullying. These selected studies were evaluated based on their methodological rigor, including the use of validated

scales, such as the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised, and the clarity of their theoretical frameworks, ranging from managerialism to human rights perspectives.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of 17 articles, three emerging themes regarding the effects of workplace bullying have been identified. The themes are further discussed in the next sections.

3.1 Theme A: Sector-Specific Vulnerabilities

The synthesis of current literature reveals that workplace bullying is not a uniform experience but is deeply influenced by the institutional sector in which it occurs. In the context of higher education, Pitsia *et al.*, [1] revealed that marginalised groups, particularly LGBTQ+ employees, face a disproportionate burden of bullying. Their findings suggest that academic environments may perpetuate heteronormative biases that manifest as exclusionary behaviours and targeted harassment. This situation thereby undermines the career progression of the minority staff. Similarly, the healthcare sector exhibits a unique vulnerability profile. João *et al.*, [2] highlighted that nursing professionals are exceptionally susceptible to negative acts, which are often normalised within the high-stakes, hierarchical nature of clinical work. These findings indicate that sector-specific cultural norms play a critical role in either facilitating or shielding employees from bullying behaviours.

3.2 Theme B: Psychological and Performance Impacts

The next theme that emerged from the analysis of the 17 articles is the psychological and performance impacts. The psychological toll of workplace bullying is extensively documented as a precursor to severe occupational health issues. Berglund *et al.*, [3] established a direct link between bullying and the onset of professional burnout, noting that a lack of institutional support exacerbates the depletion of emotional resources. This process is further clarified by Song *et al.*, [4] who identify work alienation as a critical mediator. Those employees who experience bullying often feel a profound sense of detachment from their work, which accelerates the transition toward complete job burnout. Beyond the psychological impact, there is a tangible decline in organisational efficiency. Awashreh *et al.*, [5] provided empirical evidence that bullying behaviours significantly impair job performance. Their research suggests that the cognitive and emotional distraction caused by harassment prevents employees from fulfilling their professional duties effectively, creating a detrimental cycle of underperformance and further victimisation.

3.3 Theme C: Power and Identity

The final theme is power and identity. A deeper qualitative exploration of the data reveals the transformative impact of bullying on an individual's sense of self. Utilising an autoethnographic approach, Migliaccio *et al.*, [6] provided a compelling narrative of the "loss of self" that occurs within toxic, power-imbalanced environments. The study illustrates that bullying is not merely an external stressor but an internalising force that causes individuals to stop recognising their own professional identities. This erosion of identity is often the result of systemic power structures where the victim is systematically silenced or discredited, leading to a long-term psychological scarring that persists even after the individual leaves the toxic environment.

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 Cross-Cultural Perspectives

When examining workplace bullying through a global lens, it becomes evident that cultural context shapes the perception and manifestation of harassment. In Iran, Assadpour *et al.*, [7] revealed that the quality of professional life is a significant determinant of how medical residents experience bullying, suggesting that in collectivistic or highly hierarchical medical cultures, the social climate is the primary buffer against stress. Conversely, in Australia, Quinn *et al.*, [8] “unmask” the contributors to bullying in the public sector, pointing toward managerialism and the pressure for efficiency as key drivers of toxic behaviour. In Spain, the work of López *et al.*, [9] focuses on the categorisation of victim profiles, indicating that the Spanish labour market may require more targeted, profile-specific interventions. These comparisons illustrate that while the harm of bullying is universal, the institutional drivers differ from hierarchical quality-of-life issues in the Middle East to managerial pressures in Western bureaucracies.

3.4.2 The role of leadership and innovation

The literature consistently identifies leadership as the most critical factor in the prevention of workplace bullying. Gil *et al.*, [10] emphasised that ethical leadership acts as a protective shield, significantly reducing the incidence of psychosomatic disorders among teachers. By fostering a climate of integrity and transparency, ethical leaders can dismantle the structures that allow bullying to thrive. Furthermore, the review identifies a shift toward innovative, proactive training. Burke *et al.*, [11] introduce the “PlayDecide” game as a modern intervention for junior doctors. By using gamification to simulate harassment scenarios, this tool allows practitioners to develop a “moral courage” and practical response strategies in a safe environment. This suggests that traditional, passive training modules are being replaced by more engaging, social-learning models to curb the issue of workplace bullying.

4. Implications and Recommendations

4.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The Theoretical implications of this review indicate a need to reconceptualise work stress and workplace bullying. The evidence confirms that bullying should not be considered merely an interpersonal issue but rather as a symptom of organisational “managerialism” and structural power dynamics. This is consistent with the frameworks in organisational behaviour and occupational stress theory. Practically, this reconceptualisation challenges Human Resource departments to move beyond conventional complaint procedures, which often fail to address systemic causes. Based on the findings, it is recommended that organisations adopt the “Human Rights” framework proposed by Gavya and Subashini [12] which frames workplace bullying as a violation of fundamental human dignity. This approach provides a stronger legal, ethical, and organisational rationale for protecting employees and holding perpetrators accountable. Furthermore, integrating this framework into organisational culture and leadership training may reinforce ethical norms and reduce tolerance for bullying behaviours.

4.2 Policy Recommendations

At the policy level, this review highlights that generic anti-bullying policies are often not enough to protect employees effectively. Research shows that clear guidelines, combined with supportive leadership, can make a real difference in preventing harmful behaviours and fostering a respectful work environment. Employees are more likely to feel safe and valued when they know their organisation takes bullying seriously [12].

To achieve this, organisations should implement sector-specific policies tailored to the unique dynamics of each workplace, whether it's a busy hospital ward, an academic department, or a corporate office. This includes mandatory ethical leadership training for all managers, as leadership style directly influences workplace culture and the prevalence of bullying.

Additionally, employees should have access to independent, confidential reporting channels, so they can raise concerns without fear of retaliation. Regular wellness audits can also help organisations understand how staff feel about trust, morale, and support, providing insight into areas that need attention before problems escalate.

Finally, policies must be more than words on paper. They should be practical, monitored, and measurable. Tracking reductions in bullying incidents, improvements in employee wellbeing, and leadership accountability ensure that policies genuinely make a difference. By designing policies that centre on people's dignity, safety, and wellbeing, organisations can create workplaces where everyone feels respected and empowered.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic literature review has synthesised recent evidence to show that workplace bullying remains a significant threat to global employee health and institutional productivity. The findings highlight that while certain sectors like healthcare and higher education are particularly high-risk, the common threads of emotional exhaustion, work alienation, and performance decline are present across all fields. The review also underscores the importance of ethical leadership and the potential of innovative, game-based training in fostering safer work environments.

However, this review is not without limitations. Most of the included studies are cross-sectional, meaning they capture a snapshot in time rather than tracking the long-term career trajectories of victims. Therefore, future research should focus on longitudinal studies that examine the multi-year impact of bullying on marginalised groups and the long-term efficacy of human rights-based organisational policies. By continuing to investigate these dynamics, the academic and professional communities can better design workplaces that prioritise dignity, equity, and psychological safety.

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