Workplace bullying and its consequence to employee productivity in civil society organisations in Lira City, Uganda

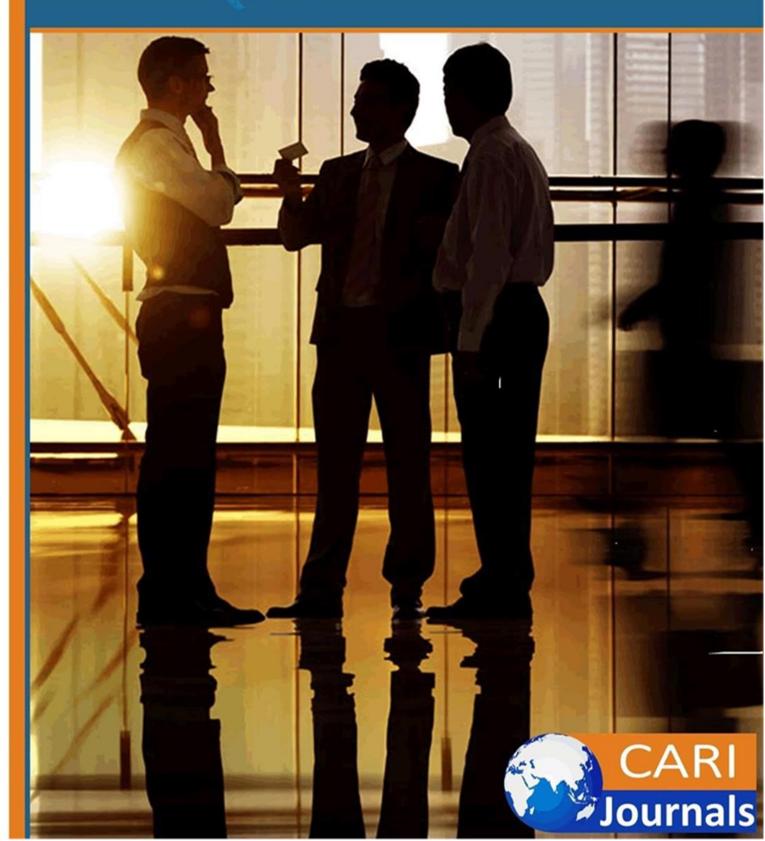# Workplace bullying and its consequence to employee productivity in civil society organisations in Lira City, Uganda

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study sought to investigate the consequence of workplace bullying on employee productivity in CSOs in Uganda. Consequently, three questions were answered, namely: what is the consequence of workplace bullying on employee attendance in civil society organizations? What is the consequence of workplace bullying on employee efficiency in civil society organization? And what is the consequence of workplace bullying on teamwork among employees in civil society organizations?

**Methodology:** This study adopted a literature review method of secondary data from available sources including academic manuscripts, and peer-reviewed journals.

**Findings:** Workplace bullying has negative implications on the productivity of employees, and by extension, negative implications on the productivity of organizations. Workplace bullying diminishes productivity of the organization by causing absenteeism, which deprives an organization of man-hours which should have been put into productivity. It leads to increased absenteeism among employees, which concurs with available studies which observed that the consequences of workplace bullying like absenteeism are liable to affect work performance. Workplace bullying can affect efficiency by altering work tasks and make them difficult or impossible. This way, workplace bullying slowdown work and thereby reduce employees' productivity. In the same vein, bullying makes employees feel that they are not valued or respected, and as a consequence lose their motivation and become less engaged in work, thereby slowing down work pace and by extension, productivity of the organization.

**Conclusion and recommendations:** From the study, bullying contributes a small portion in the variations in slow down among employees in the selected organizations. While bullied employees disguise themselves to continue working, they waste a lot of time attempting to avoid the bully even if bullying does not contribute to significant amount of work slowdown per day, yet cumulative effects of that have negative ramifications on teamwork and employee productivity in general.

**Unique contribution to policy and or practice:** This study used the substantive theory to review the relationship between workplace and bullying and staff productivity. The study has shown significant influences of workplace bullying absenteeism and teamwork. The results validate the significance of the Substantive theory in studying workplace bullying and its influences on staff productivity. Consequently, management of international non-government organizations should not take workplace bullying lightly but should take it as something costly

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for organizations and therefore should be prevented or redressed by putting in place anti-bullying policies and measures. Also, CSOs should implement procedures for managing both the oppressors and sufferers of workplace intimidation.

**Keywords:** *Bullying, Employee productivity, CSOs, Workplace, teamwork*

## 1. Introduction

Workplace bullying is recognized as a phenomenon of global prevalence and an important issue to be studied across various parts of the world (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003). The academic interest in workplace bullying started in the late 1980s in Sweden, with the pioneering studies of Heinz Leymann (Leymann, 1990) from where the interest spread to Norway, Finland, UK, Australia and other European countries by the mid-1990s (Einasen et al, 2003). A meta-analysis of eighty-six international prevalence studies found that 14.6% of employees are bullied at work (Moris, 2016), though according to Namie (2003) anywhere from 50% to 80% of workers also witness bullying somewhat during their work histories.

Tuckey (2015) compares it to cancer in that, exposure to pervasive and severe bullying may have detrimental repercussions on both the professional and personal lives of affected employees, as well as threaten the existence of the entire organization in which it occurs. According to Namie (2014), in addition to being bullied, targets of bullying are significantly more likely to lose their jobs than the bullies (83% versus 18%). Potential consequences of bullying include direct costs of litigation, workers compensation claims, medical insurance claims, decline in employee and organization morale, declining employee engagement, disruptions in work teams, fear and anxiety throughout the organization, and absenteeism (Yamada, 2008). According to Chekwa and Thomas (2013) close to 40% of employees utilize a personal day or sick day off due to a stressful relationship at work. Yamada (2012) observed that bullying behavior typically starts at a young age and if allowed to manifest itself in the workplace it results in "harms that raise significant human rights and public health concerns"

It is a phenomenon that is increasingly being acknowledged worldwide as a malignant scourge in organizations (Cilliers, 2012), attracting a considerable amount of domestic and international interdisciplinary attention: Sociologists, organization psychologists, and legal scholars have identified and categorized the types of workplaces conduct that constitute bullying, surveyed its prevalence, and analysed the individual and societal costs of workplace (Harthill, 2008). According to Einarsen (2000), the prevalence of bullying in the workplace varies across countries due to the influence of national culture (Ciby & Raya, 2015). For example, in England a study in 1999, 42% reported having witnessed workplace bullying in the last one year (Quine, 1999), while more than 80% of respondents in a 2015 study in the United States reported to either have personally experienced or witnessed workplace bullying, while 67% indicated that no actions were taken on the perpetrators of bullying (Lewis et al, 2015). As such, in the United States workplace bullying has gained national of American employee relations stakeholders and the public generally, including where in 2011 over two dozen US cities, towns and counties issued proclamations endorsing Freedom from Workplace Bullies Week, an event created by the Workplace Bullying Institute (Yamada, 2013). As a result, by 2015 in the State of California alone the number of cities and counties which endorsed the Freedom from Workplace Bullies Week numbered 116 (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2015).

Subsequently, in the late 1990's researchers from Europe with psychology backgrounds clarified what workplace bullying is by cataloguing behaviours associated with bullying to

include social isolation, personal attacks, insulting remarks, gossip, verbal threats, humiliation, work interference (Einarsen, 1999), information withheld, unmanageable workload, work below target's level of competence, unreasonable/impossible deadlines, excessive monitoring of work, ignored opinions and views, humiliation and ridicule of work, isolation from others, reminded repeatedly of errors, hostile interactions when target approaches others, insulting remarks, gossip/rumours spread about target, being shouted at or targeted with anger, false allegations, persistent criticism, intimidating and threatening behaviour, responsibility taken away, excessive teasing and sarcasm, hints or signals that target should quit, pressured into not claiming entitlement, subjected to practical jokes, and threats or actual physical abuse (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997).

However, to date, workplace bullying is not an easy concept either to define or identify, and its manifestation can take many forms (Parliament of Australia, 2014). While there is no single universally accepted definition of workplace bullying, the formal definition by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI, 2014) is that workplace bullying is the "repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators. It is an abusive conduct that includes threatening, humiliating, work interference, sabotage and verbal abuse which prevent work from getting done". Workplace bullying is a pattern of persistent, malicious, insulting, or exclusionary intentional or non-intentional behaviours that a target perceives as intentional efforts to harm, control, or drive a co-worker from the workplace (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). Bullying can take the form of overt physical or verbal assaults. Common types of overt behaviour are: constant criticism, shouting and verbal abuse, and persistently picking on the victim. Bullying behaviour can also take more subtle forms such as removing responsibilities and replacing them with trivial tasks, withholding information, and blocking promotions. Indeed, the most common form of bullying is assigning unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines (Harthill, 2008).

In Asia almost a decade ago, workplace bullying started to receive attention among Asian countries, while in the Africa region South Africa pioneered studies on workplace bullying, where a 2012 study revealed 35.1 of employees had exposure to workplace bullying behaviours 'always' and 'often' in their workplace. Prevalence of the vice across continents vary, with the lowest prevalence of the vice observed in Scandinavia (Denmark) with just 01%, and the highest prevalence in Asia with 52% (Ciby & Raya, 2015). The variations in the level of workplace bullying across continents and within continents vary due to the influence of national culture (Einarsen, 2000), as countries systematically differ in the cultural dimension such as power difference and masculine/feminine values (Hofstede, 1980). According to a study commissioned by the Workplace Bullying Institute, one in three employees experience bullying in the workplace either as a victim or as a witness suffering collateral damage, with seventy five percent of those instances involving top-down bullying by a supervisor (Zogby International, 2010). Few organizations or operational flaws can wreak as much havoc as a bully in the workplace, and yet many bullies get away with their abusive behavior every day. Many employers do not know that workplace bullies exist or they choose to ignore the warning signs. This can result in tragic consequences for an office (Killoren, 2014).

## 1.1 Theoretical review

The Substantive theory emerges from a limited or a single empirical investigation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Substantive Theory was selected to underpin this study because it labours to explain reality of scientific research on social environments such as management and organizations (Punch, 2014), by reflecting abstract representation of reality to illustrate the phenomena being studied. In other words, it provides a "working theory" of action for a specific context (Charmaz, 2011). It provides an explanatory, constructive, and systematic account of a rich, significant and fundamental subject-matter. It is considered transferable, other than generalizable, in the sense that elements of the context can be transferable to contexts of action with similar characteristics to the context under study. In the circumstances, the theory is relevant in illustrating and understanding workplace issues (Remenyi, 2014) such as workplace bullying. Substantive theory is therefore appropriate in the study of the implications of workplace bullying on employees' productivity because it offers a reference point to guide employers and their management in rolling out intervention strategies to address workplace challenges such as bullying (Einarsen et al, 2011; Gamian-Wilk, 2013).

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Whereas there has been increasing attention to workplace bullying, with much of the research originating in other countries of the world (Cilliers, 2012) other than Uganda, including Canada (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006), the UK (Harthill, 2008), Australia (Birks et al, 2017), the EU (Xu et al, 2019), and Asia (Kwan et al, 2020; Tsuno et al, 2018) the different researches have not yet resolved the confusion between the phenomenon and other counterproductive behaviours in the workplace such as harassment Cunnif & Mostert, 2012, and Smit, 2014). In the circumstances, to date workplace bullying continue to be a growing problem which has detrimental effects on individual effectiveness, efficiency, absenteeism, productivity, happiness and overall workplace climate (Barrow, 2012). The serious consequences thereof necessitate increased awareness of its nature and dynamics (Ncongwane, 2010). However, whereas workplace bullying has remained a good topic for research due to its implications on productivity, human rights, dignity and the survival of organizations, there are only very few known studies on workplace bullying in East Africa, including Uganda to date. The few known studies in the East Africa region include Moronge and Ndegwa (2016) study in Kenya, which found out that workplace bullying is rampant in Kenya, and Kakumba et al (2014) study in Uganda which found the most common form of workplace bullying in Uganda to include intimidation, forceful assignment, too much workload for juniors, discrimination, sabotage of deserving privileges etc. are just about the prevalence of workplace other than their implications on productivity.

## 1.3 Objective of the study

To investigate the consequence of workplace bullying on employee productivity in CSOs in Uganda. Consequently, three questions were answered, namely: (i) what is the consequence of workplace bullying on employee attendance in civil society organizations? (ii) What is the consequence of workplace bullying on employee efficiency in civil society

organization? And (iii) what is the consequence of workplace bullying on teamwork among employees in civil society organizations?

## 2. *Methods and materials*

This study adopted a literature review method of secondary data from available sources. The sources included academic manuscripts, peer-reviewed journals, statistical abstracts, and periodicals. This method is handy at every stage and can be adopted as a means to enhance the quality of a research.

## 3. The consequence of workplace bullying on employee productivity in CSOs

### 3.1 The conceptual framework of workplace bullying versus employee productivity

Workplace bullying has negative implications on the productivity of employees, and by extension, negative implications on the productivity of organizations. Accordingly, workplace bullying diminishes productivity of the organization by causing absenteeism, which deprives an organization of man-hours which should have been put into productivity. The conceptual illustration demonstrates that even when employees are present in the workplace, and in most cases pretending to be working, workplace bullying makes them go-slow on their work, among other things because workplace bullying lowers employee's morale, loss of energy and fatigue. This points to the fact that workplace bullying hurts relationship within an organization, which impedes teamwork. By inhibiting teamwork an organization loses opportunity for synergy, which lowers productivity. Finally, it can be hypothesized that the anti-workplace bullying intervenes to prevent and respond to workplace bullying and thereby reducing its prevalence and mitigating its impacts like absenteeism, work slowdown and limited teamwork.

### 3.2 Workplace bullying and its consequence to employee attendance in CSOs

According to Tapas (2014) workplace bullying lead to increased absenteeism among employees, which concurs with Anjum et al (2011) who observed that the consequences of workplace bullying like absenteeism are liable to affect work performance. Thus, both Tapas (2014) and Anjum et al (2011) agree with Upton (2010) who earlier observed that workplace bullying has adverse effects on employees' mental health and the frequency of presence at the work, which can be highly disadvantageous to the organization. Similarly, Executive HaS (2018) reported that between 2014 and 2017, occupations associated with the delivery of health and social care had the greatest incidences of absenteeism in the UK due to work related stress caused by bullying. Upton (2010) corroborates Kivimaki et al (2003) earlier study which show an increase in sick-leave usage among bullied targets, which reduce the man-hours employees put on productivity in the organization, which is equally in agreement with Wilkin's (2010) that employees who experience repeated workplace bullying tend to take sick leave due to stress-related illnesses. Killoren (2014) agrees when he stated that workplace bullying can lead to serious sleep disorders, and weight gain or loss, and cause an increased number of sick days. In the same vein, Smit (2014) asserted that workplace bullying is costly for an organization

since it leads to reduced work performance, among others, by causing greater staff turnover and increased absenteeism.

Barlett & Barlett (2011) and Namie & Namie (2011) also concur when they state that victims of workplace bullying take more sick leave than their counterparts and as a result have lower performance and productivity. Momberg's (2011) study is in concurrence when it found that employees who were repetitively stressed due to bullying at work often experience psychological distress which in turn leads to them being absent from work, either to avoid the situation or seek medical attention, propping Rayner et al (2002) earlier study which found that abuse of power in form workplace bullying can lead to chronic stress and nervous breakdown as a result of impaired psychological and physical health. Similarly, Yildirim (2009) study reiterated that increased absenteeism is common among targets of workplace bullying and their performances decline, which finding Branch et al (2013) corroborated by contending that hostile work environment caused by bullying lead to increase in absenteeism, which leads to loss of productivity.

### 3.3 Workplace bullying and its consequence to employee efficiency in CSOs

According to Randall (2001) workplace bullying can affect efficiency by altering work tasks and make them difficult or impossible. This way, workplace bullying slowdown work and thereby reduce employees' productivity. In the same vein, Sidle (2010), late stated that bullying makes employees feel that they are not valued or respected, and as a consequence lose their motivation and become less engaged in work, thereby slowing down work pace and by extension, productivity of the organization. The same has been validated by McFarlane-Ossmann & Curtis (2011) who observed that in situations of bullying, abused subordinates may as a coping mechanism, to restore the situation to what it was before be withholding actions that benefit the organization and its representatives. Smit (2014) concurs with Randall (2001) and Sidle (2010) when he observed that workplace bullying is costly for an organization since it leads to reduced work performance, among others, by decreasing employees' motivation and morale which cause them to slowdown work, hence low productivity. Similarly, according to Christine Pearson of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 53% of workers report lost work time attempting to avoid the bully; while 22% reduced work efforts; 10% cut back on the number of hours they work (Pearson & Porath, 2005), hence causing work slowdown, which reduces workplace productivity.

Whereas according to Einarsen (2000), bullies, as one of their bullying tactics, sabotage their targets by preventing them from obtaining the needed resources to do their jobs, so that the targets are blamed for poor performance. By starving their targets of resources needed to do work, bullying slows down work pace, which in turn lowers productivity. On the other hand, Fisher-Blando (2008) earlier observed that employees who experience repeated workplace bullying tend to waste time at work defending themselves and networking for support, which leads to work slowdown due to work hours lost, which observation Bailien et al (2009) concurred with that target of workplace bullying have low morale, which slows down work. The same validates Salin's (2001) earlier observation on the impact of workplace bullying on work pace that it creates stress, which in turn cause ill-health, low morale and poor job

performance of the victim. This is contradicted by Sysenck (2010) observation that anxiety caused among others by bullying motivate individuals to work harder and faster to avoid failure. Similarly, Namie (2014) identified negative emotional experiences as mediating variables in studying effects of workplace bullying, concurring with Moriya (2018) who held that individuals may devote more attention to optimizing coping strategies so as to ensure task completion. This is in concurrence who Hafsa and Qais (2015) who in their investigation of workplace bullying and Employee Performance Among Bank Personnel in Pakistan concluded that although workplace is prevalent, there is no significant association between workplace bullying and work performance.

### 3.4 Workplace bullying and its consequence to employees' teamwork in CSOs

According to Lutgen-Sandvik (2005), workplace bullies commonly pit workers against one another, play favourites that unexpectedly shit, and forbid or punish peer communication networks that might serve as hidden spaces for resistance. This way bullying disrupts interpersonal relationship and teamwork, and the synergy associated with teamwork, which diminishes productivity. Lutgen-Sandvik (2003) affirms this when she observed that fear of becoming a victim of abuse keeps other employees silent, which equally inhibit teamwork and the synergy associated with. Whereas according to Collinson (1994) blue collar workers who are victims of workplace bullying distance themselves as much as possible both symbolically and physically from the bullying supervisors, by among others, withholding information to obstruct the bully's efforts at control. This way bullying inhibits teamwork which adversely affects productivity. Similarly, Lutgen-Sandvik (2005) observed that despite bullies' perceived need for control over all organizational or departmental decisions, employees often withhold information from the bully as a means of self-protection and as a form of resistance, with the same adverse effects on productivity.

Smit (2014) concurs on the effect of workplace bullying on team work when he averred that workplace bullying is costly for an organization since it leads to reduced work performance, among others, by causing poorer interpersonal relationships at work. This inhibits synergy, hence low productivity. Momberg (2011) agrees, saying workplace bullying lead to breakdown of communication between subordinates and superiors and conflict, which inhibit teamwork and productivity. This corroborated Yildiz's (2007) contention that in an organization where bullying is left unchecked the environment is widespread with paralyzed relations between subordinates and superiors, and lack of respect and cooperation. Barlett & Barlett (2011) and Namie & Namie (2011) agree when they stated that victims of workplace bullying have poorer relationship with other employees and lowered group cohesion than their counterparts, therefore don't teamwork, and hence lower productivity.

From the literature review it is clear that although it is difficult to frame a precise definition, it is certain that workplace bullying has consequences on the employees' productivity, by among others causing absenteeism, work slowdown and inhibiting team work. In the premise, the literature review is in agreement with the conceptual framework herein. However, there are no robust literature on workplace bullying in Uganda as this study is one of the pioneering studies on workplace bullying in Uganda.

### 4. Conclusion

According to this study bullying contributes a small portion in the variations in slow down among employees in the selected organizations. The centres of slow down include feelings of less valued, feeling of less respect, and attempts to avoid the bully. While bullied employees disguise themselves to continue working, they waste a lot of time attempting to avoid the bully. Evidence from non-government organizations from Lira provide that bullying does not contribute to significant amount of work slowdown per day, though cumulative effects of that have negative ramifications on productivity. This study also found that bullying also contributes a very small portion to limited teamwork among selected international non-government organizations in Lira, though the cumulative effect of that over time on productivity is grave. Significant evidences of low teamwork include fighting open communication among colleagues and withholding communication as a means of self-protection.

### 5. Contribution of the study

From a theoretical perspective, this study used the Substantive Theory to reveiw the relationship between workplace and bullying and staff productivity. The study has shown significant influences of workplace bullying absenteeism and teamwork. The results validate the significance of the Substantive theory in studying workplace bullying and its influences on staff productivity.

### 6. Recommendations

The results show that much as workplace bullying is prevalent in workplaces, it is difficult for many employees to recognize and/or identify it and single it out from other vices. Consequently;

a) Management of international non-government organizations should not take workplace bullying lightly but should take it as something costly for organizations and therefore should be prevented or redressed by putting in place anti-bullying policies and measures.
b) Organizations (CSOs) should implement procedures for managing both the oppressors and sufferers of workplace intimidation.

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