

## **HUMAN RESOURCE PROFESSIONALS’ PERCEPTION OF WORKPLACE BULLYING IN SRI LANKA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores how human resource professionals understand bullying and the perceptions and beliefs about the concept. A proper and comprehensive understanding of the concept is the backbone of any preventive measures concerning bullying introduced in companies. We conducted in-depth, in-person interviews with 30 human resource professionals using qualitative research methodology representing diverse industries. The findings indicated that the participants were not adequately aware of what bullying is. They tend to confuse bullying with other negative workplace behaviours such as aggression, incivility and sexual harassment. The participants also commonly did not understand who could be bullies and who could be victims. This lack of understanding of bullying and the many misperceptions that carry will inevitably result in ineffective prevention and handling of bullying in their organisations. The implications of these findings for management are discussed.

**Keywords:** *bullying, workplaces, negative workplace behaviour and human resource professionals, perception*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bullying continues to be a devastating workplace issue, bringing various negative consequences to organisations, employees, and society (Djurkovic et al., 2004; Einarsen& Nielsen, 2014; Georgakopoulos et al.,

2011; Vartia, 2001). It is well established that workplace bullying causes a significant risk to workers' health, safety, and well-being and consequently becomes a problem for organisations that is too costly to be ignored (Dumay & Marini, 2012; Needham, 2003). The primary responsibility in curtailing the issue lies with the top management generally (Dumay & Marini, 2012; Baillien & Witte, 2009; Baillien et al., 2013) and with the HRPs, more specifically (Cowan, Clayton, & Bochantin, 2021; Salin, 2008; Salin et al., 2020). However, ample research has shown that the HRPs do not manage bullying complaints successfully because they do not take the problem seriously (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2009; Lewis & Rayner, 2003; Salin, 2009). In their review of literature related to HRPs role in bullying, Cowan, Clayton, and Bochantin (2021) document how HRPs tend to misperceive and misunderstand various aspects of bullying. Lack of understanding, misperceptions and misunderstanding can lead to HRPs not intervening in bullying incidents and bullying not being handled effectively, thereby making the situation worse.

As such, victims of bullying may feel helpless, frustrated, devalued, dejected and worried about themselves and the security of their jobs. These employees will resort to various other means to handle their experiences, such as absenteeism, resignation, legal action, trade union action and even suicide. In turn, organisations would suffer from efficiency and productivity issues and negative image and legal conflicts. These would involve many direct and indirect costs to organisations. Most importantly, when bullying incidents are not effectively addressed, bullying incidents can increase as the bullies feel safe. Victims will lose trust in the HRPs

and will not make future complaints, leading to increased bullying incidents.

Within this background, the importance of HRPs effectively handling workplace bullying is uncontested. HRPs need to clearly understand workplace bullying and how it is different from other forms of workplace aggression to handle bullying effectively. This understanding is needed for HRPs to identify workplace bullying, to protect the target adequately, to intervene in bullying to prevent and handle the incidents, to develop effective and successful policies, procedures and strategies to prevent and handle workplace bullying, to implement policies and procedures effectively, and also to handle bullying complaints successfully.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to investigate HRPs understanding of bullying, their beliefs and perceptions of bullying and the various misperceptions they hold. This understanding will be useful in several ways. While there is ample research on bullying, they are mostly focused on exploring the prevalence and coping strategies related to bullying and has paid scant attention to the prevention of bullying (Salin et al., 2020). Moreover, we could not find any studies that have specifically explored how HRPs understand and perceive bullying and the common misperceptions they hold about the issue. As Salin et al. (2020) affirm, HRPs voice is largely ignored in prior research in bullying. Because HRPs awareness and perceptions about bullying is an important element of prevention, the findings of this study will add to the existing knowledge on HRPs and prevention of bullying at workplaces. Further, most research in the area is conducted in the Western context (Salin et al., 2020) and,

therefore, does not reflect the unique contexts of Asia. Hence, our study will contribute to the knowledge of bullying in the Asian context as well. From a practical perspective, understanding HRPs awareness about the issue and the misperceptions they hold will help in taking steps to address any unawareness and misperceptions for HRPs.

### **Workplace bullying in Sri Lanka**

While there are very few studies on workplace bullying in Sri Lanka, being a global phenomenon, it is uncontested that workplace bullying is also prevalent in Sri Lanka (Thisera & Nawarathna, 2018, Edirisinghe & De Alwis, 2015). A recent study by Thisera & Nawaratne (2018) on bullying in academia has found evidence to indicate the prevalence of bullying in the *state university sector in Sri Lanka. Cognitive, emotional and aggregate job demands have a significant impact on exposure to workplace bullying. Also, Kaushalya and De Alwis (2016) revealed that workplace bullying has a significant impact on the intention to leave, which leads to an increase in the rate of turnover among newly hired nurses in Sri Lanka's state hospitals.* However, there does not seem to be much attention given to the issue. While there are various policies, procedures, strategies, and provisions relating to harassment, aggression, and violence in many organisations in Sri Lanka, there are no specific laws or policies to address bullying at the workplace. Of course, specific legislation and policies related to harassment and aggression would address bullying indirectly. However, they do not identify the specific and unique characteristics, making it an issue that organisations and HRPs largely overlook. With this absence of specific laws and policies to

address bullying, it is even more critical for HRPs to “do the right thing” in the event of complaints of workplace bullying (Duffy, 2009).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is derived from a broader qualitative study that attempted to understand how HRPs handled and prevented workplace bullying within a legal and ethical context. As part of this broader study, we also explored how HRPs’ perceive workplace bullying and the different beliefs and misperceptions they hold. Hence, the information for the present study is derived from semi-structured, in-depth interviews carried out with 30 HRPs from large and medium scale organisations. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique through personal contacts and snowballing. HRPs represented different industries and various organisational positions, providing a good representation of the HRPs. Participants were from the public and private sectors, including manufacturing, banking, healthcare, tourism, and education. None of the organisations the participants belonged to had anti-bullying policies, nor did they have any other policies or procedures to address workplace bullying.

The interviews were conducted in both Sinhala and English languages and the interviews conducted in Sinhala were translated to English. With the permission of the participants, interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. A brief background of the participants is provided in table 1.

**Table 1: Description of participants**

Interviewee	Private/ public/ semi	Type of company	Position of the interviewee	Sex
1	Private	Manufacturing	Senior HR manager	Male
2	Private	MNC	Industrial relational officer	Female
3	Private	Retail and Manufacturing	Senior HR manager	Male
4	Private	MNC  Diversified Corporate; Healthcare, Leisure, and Mobility	Senior Manager HR	Male
5	Semi- Government	Education	Senior lecturer (HR)	Male
6	Private	MNC - conglomerate	HRD senior executive	Male
7	Private	MNC - Manufacturing,	HRD executive	Female

		transport and logistic		
8	Private	MNC - Manufacturing	Assistant HR manager	Male
9	Private	Local bank	Head HR	Male
10	Private	Education	HR Consultant	Male
11	Public	Service	HR manager	Male
12	Private	Local Bank	HR manager	Male
13	Private	Health	Head- HR	Male
14	Private	MNC - Manufacturing	Director HR	Male
15	Private	Manufacturing	Manager - Administration	Male
16	Private	Tourism	Entrepreneur *	Male
17	Public	Bank	Area Manager *	Female
18	Private	Manufacturing	Director - Human affairs	Female
19	Private	Insurance	Senior Manager*	Male

20	Private	Automobile	Manager HR	Female
21	Private	Manufacturing	Entrepreneur *	Male
22	Private	IT	General Manager *	Male
23	Public	Education	Senior Registrar *	Female
24	Private	Hotel	Manager HR	Male
25	Private	MNC	IR officer	Female
26	Public	Service	Director*	Male
27	Private	Manufacturing	Head- HR	Male
28	Private	Health	Manager Administration	Male
29	Public	Health	Registrar *	Female
30	Private	Retail (Supermarket)	Area Manager *	Male

\* While not professional HRPs, these individuals are given the responsibility of managing the HR in their organisations, and therefore, they are taken to represent the HRPs perceptions concerning bullying

The analysis was carried out using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) by focusing on specific behaviours that the participants identified as



bullying while being mindful of the existing definitions of bullying and its nature. We followed the phases advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). After familiarising ourselves with the transcribed interviews, we engaged in initial coding. These initial codes identified were mainly various behaviours that the participants mentioned as bullying and understood as bullies and victims. These initial codes were then collated into broader categories that indicated the participants' broader understanding of bullying and their misperceptions.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

In analysing the understanding, awareness and perceptions of HRP's regarding bullying, we looked at the existing definitions and frameworks on workplace bullying to compare the participants answers with the existing definitions and characteristics of bullying. Among the many definitions of bullying, we take the widely used (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013) definition of Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007). They define bullying as 'a situation in which one or more persons systematically and over a long period perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of adverse treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation in which the person(s) exposed to the treatment has difficulty in defending themselves against this treatment'(p. 735). Stemming from this definition, we have identified several standard dimensions that distinguish bullying from other forms of harassment and aggression. For example, 1) the act needs to be repetitive (systematically and over a long period), 2) negative treatment 3) the receiver finding it difficult to defend him/herself. Hence, the discussion below is carried out with these main characteristics of

bullying in mind and the overall nature of bullying in terms of who perpetrates bullying and who becomes victims.

Overall, it was seen from the participants' answers that many did not correctly understand what bullying is. The way they thought of bullying was different from the accepted definition (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007) of workplace bullying. The participants appear to mistake bullying with general harassment, mistreatment, discrimination, aggression or workplace incivility. Before proceeding further, it is important to understand what these other terms mean to see how the participants' perceptions differ. Workplace harassment is identified as “[i]nterpersonal behaviour aimed at intentionally harming another employee in the Workplace” (Bowling and Beehr 2006, p. 998) and mistreatment is identified as offensive behaviour that is unsolicited and unwelcome (Keashly and Jagatic 2003 as cited in Harlos 2010). Workplace aggression is a general term encompassing all forms of behaviour. Individuals attempt to harm others at work or their organisations (Neuman and Baron 1998), while incivility is ‘low-intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target, violating workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviours are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others’ (Andersson and Pearson 1999, 457); Discrimination is unequal treatment of persons or groups (Pager and Shepherd 2008).

The understanding of participants indicated that they tend to confuse these different negative workplace behaviours with bullying. HRP 3 understanding represents the understanding of many other participants of the study. As HRP 3 stated, bullying is; *“What I understand about bullying*

*is that it is discrimination or harassment basically. So, that's how I think as bullying”.*

In explaining what they understand as bullying, participants illustrated various behaviours they consider as bullying. Although the behaviours they think of as workplace bullying, such as joking, gossiping, rumours, yelling, scolding, are behaviours of bullying, these behaviours alone cannot be considered as such. For an action to be bullying, it needs to be repetitive (systematically and over a long period) (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). Almost all the participants were not aware of this important characteristic of bullying. For example, HRP 22 said,

*“sometimes some workers come and tell us I can't work with let's say X... reason may be an unnecessary joke, being scolded without reason, using offensive language. Bullying means behavior like this, right?”*

As HRP 23 mentioned, *“ there are some people who spread rumors, they gossip on some people. Even if it happens once we take them into consideration, we have disciplinary procedures to take action against such type of behavior”.*

When we probed further as to how long do the employees suffer from such behavior that the participants think of as bullying, HRP 22 stated, *“Some two or three times, some may be only one time ...even only one time it happens, if it is a burden to the employee, we should attend to it.*

This being a common understanding of the participants, it was clear that the participants were mistaking bullying with other negative workplace behaviour such as general harassment or incivility (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Further, participants also identified work overloaded, complaints against work schedules and time schedules, erratic scolding and yelling, work pressure, cancellation of holidays, criticism in front of others, and aggressive behaviour as bullying. However, here again, while these behaviours can be bullying, merely engaging in these behaviours will not make it bullying, as to be considered bullying, the behaviour should be repetitive and systematic.

HRP 8 stated, *“most of the employees complain about work overload, assigning an unachievable task, ordering work till late night. These may be the bullying behavior”*. These behaviour are more of general harassment or bossy behaviour as they are not necessarily done to cause harm. Also, it is not focused on one target. A bossy worker/leader/supervisor has his or her own way to get the work done by others. The goal of the bossy is not to hurt anyone but to get the work done anyhow. There are no specific targets of bossy behaviour.

Answers of the majority of the HRPs interviewed also indicated that they thought sexual harassment was bullying. Sexual harassment is identified as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature’ which affects the terms, conditions, or employment decisions related to an individual’s job (‘quid pro quo’ harassment) or creates an ‘intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment’ (‘hostile environment’ harassment; EEOC 1980, 29

CFR § 1604.11) Hence, as the participants elaborated, proposing to have unnecessary relations, sending unwanted photos, text messages, Facebook post, deliberate touching, squeezing certain parts of the body, and leaning over, are acts that makeup of sexual harassment behaviour rather than bullying behaviour.

As HRP 22 stated,

*“I know, like joking, gossiping, sending someone unwanted sexual text messages, Facebook posts, or nude pictures, isn't it?”*

There were only a very few HRPs who appear to have a correct understanding of what bullying is, where they identified behaviours such as assigning unachievable work task constantly, asking targets to work till late at night very often, devalue the work every time, isolating, spreading rumours, name-calling, aggressive treating and criticising, which are unwanted by the victim, very often, as bullying.

As HRP 14 stated,

*“there are many. isolating, spreading rumors, name calling, mm.... sometimes aggressive criticisms...you know, criticism is good, but sometimes workers complain not once or twice their boss may be supervisor or manager they criticise very often and even that is very aggressively.*

HRP 9 said that whenever a complaint of negative workplace behaviour is reported he usually looked at the pattern and frequency of the behavior, *“in that situation first I looked at the pattern how he had done it. If he*

*repeatedly doing it then of cause there is an intention to harm”*, indicating HRP 9s factual understanding of bullying behaviour.

### **HRPs perceptions of bullying**

Our next intention was to find out whether the HRP believe that bullying happens in Sri Lanka and their general perceptions regarding the issue. However, to find out whether they believed that bullying is prevalent in their workplaces, we had to explain what bullying really is, as they had misunderstood what workplace bullying is. Almost every HRP believes that workplace bullying is prevalent in Sri Lanka, *“misuse of power is the culture of our country so it is normal to have bullies in such a country. That is not something that has happened recently. Something from royal times. It is only recently that this has come to our attention”*(HRP 14).

Yet, it was interesting that some participants were reluctant to accept that bullying exists in their current companies. They shared their opinion citing incidents that had taken place not in their present organisations but in companies where they had previously worked or overall.

For example, HRP 6 stated,

*“In my current organisation, bullying behaviour is very minimal. Since you know, I have experience with textile industry as well as in the plantation industry; previously, I have experience of many bullying incidences”*.

Most of HRP appear to believe that bullying is more prevalent in female-dominant industries. Even though HRP 6 currently works in an MNC

conglomerate, he believes that most textile industries, known to be female dominant, have a high prevalence of bullying, *“especially in the textile industry, this is very high. In my current organisation, bullying behaviour is very minimal..., female-dominant industry (plantation and textile industry), bullying incidence are high”*.

Few other participants believed that bullying is high in factories, showrooms, and even in team-based workplaces. Upon further inquiry, it was clear that many of these participants believe that bullying occurs mainly among blue colour workers and rarely among white colour workers. For example, HRP 1 stated,

*“Currently, in my company, we don’t see this happening among the officers. In our head office and in some officers, we don’t have[bullying]. But in showrooms, there are some instances so far that have been reporting”*.

HRP 6 *“there is bullying behaviour, but in the operations division,”*.

HRP 6 also appear to believe that bullying is less in his company because human interaction is low.

It was also clear that some participants held certain misperceptions about who the bullies were. According to their views, in most cases, bosses are the bullies. They see the reason for that as the authority or the power which the superiors have. However, as they mentioned, the most important thing is that when the boss is a perpetrator, it becomes difficult for the target to defend themselves. In a way, this is in line with bullying, as one main characteristic of bullying is that the receiver finds it difficult to defend

him/herself (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). Hence, when the bully is the boss, the receiver/victim finds it difficult to defend him/herself due to the power differentials.

As HRP 10 said,

*“Always supervisor, means boss, is doing most of the bullying acts. As per my experience, this immediate supervisor, you know..., the perpetrator is that person..., because, the perpetrator is trying to have an unusual target on the particular purpose. They are compressive, they have specific right, they are smart, they have power and authority.”*

While bosses can be bullies and sometimes the most common bullies, they are not the only ones who bully in organisations. When HRPs hold this view, they would not identify bullying perpetrated by people other than bosses as bullies and might not believe the victims when they complain of bullies other than bosses and therefore not hold them responsible.

However, other HRPs mentioned various categories of personnel as bullies such as middle-level managers *“middle-level managers, as well as sometimes the categories that means similar workers are doing bullying with the mind of certain different targets”* (HRP 6); senior worker, *“most of the bullies are senior workers”* (HRP1); peers *“Sometime that would take place among the peer-groups”* (HRP 9), and co-workers. While these perceptions are correct, participants need to have a more comprehensive understanding that anybody in an organisation can be a bully.



It was also interesting to note that the participants believed that the most common bullying victims are women. “*We all know that women have to face various problems in our society*” (HRP 14). One HRP believed that men could not be victims because men have either internal or external power. As he mentioned, it is challenging for women to build such power unless she holds a high rank, and as such, it is the women who become victims of bullying.

HRP 16 stated,

*You know, it is very difficult for women to build up their power. Unless she holds high ranks, it is difficult. Men are not like that. Whether they have hierarchical power or not, men do not become victims because they have the ability to build up an informal power. That may be because of their seniority, personality..., whatever.*

While some studies have found a gender difference in being victims of bullying (Escartin et al., 2011; Vartia & Hyyti, 2002), there are ample studies that confirm that bullying is a gender-neutral phenomenon, with both men and women being victims of bullying (Vartia & Hyyti, 2002). Furthermore, perceptions of HRP 16 also indicate the sexist attitudes and gender role stereotyping beliefs they hold.

Participants like HRP 23 appear to think that the top managers would not be victims of bullying. According to HRP 23’s statement, “*if you have legal power, you will not become a victim. Top-level managers always have power when compared to others. Therefore, I don’t believe top-level managers would be victims*”

These beliefs that most of the victims are women, men will not be the victim, and top-level managers cannot be victims are misperceptions as it is not only women who become victims and even top-level managers too can be victims of bullying.

HRP 6 believed that educated employees do not engage in bullying behaviour.

*“Here, most important thing is our executives are educated. 70% of our ...no.. 80% of our executive carder is graduates. 30 engineers (Bsc engineers), around 15 chemists and another graduates. And all the executives have at least studied up to diploma level. Likewise we have learning environment. In this environment people feel shy to do this type of things”.*

In his view, it is clear that HRP 6 believes that bullying depends on the level of education of the bully. They argue that people with a high level of education do not commit such behaviour, because they consider it a shameful act to engage in. However, the bullying literature testifies that the level of education does not matter in bullying (Lewis, 1999). Highly educated people, such as doctors, nurses, and professors, are bullies.

However, the majority of the HRPs held similar views that both men and women, subordinators, junior staff, peers, colleague, and team members could be vulnerable to workplace bullying. HRP 3 said that, *“may be from manager to executives, among managers this bullying is taking place”*, HRP 4 stated, *“I found one particular trainee is being bullied by a supervisor”*, HRP 18 argued, *“Women and men alike can be victims of such*

*acts. This condition is more common among peers and co-workers.... M...m... boss towards subordinators like wise...”.*

As HRP 5’s thought: *“in most of the cases bullying take place against the new people or the weak people”* These perceptions are factual and indicate a more proper understanding of some aspects of bullying by the participants.

We also explored the participants' perceptions of what leads or causes bullying in workplaces. This understanding is specifically essential to prevent workplace bullying by eliminating the causes of bullying.

Again, we identified several misperceptions that the participants' harbour as to what causes bullying. HRP 7 thought that the perpetrators' age is a main influential factor that causes bullying at the workplace. According to her explanation, people who belong to the millennial generation wouldn't engage in this type of conduct because they have certain work ethics such as commitment, understandability, supportiveness and loyalty.

HRP 7 stated,

*“Anyway, the people who are in that millennial age find to be very less in doing bullying behaviour. they are very committed, they understand each other, so they support each other well”.*

HRP 7 also thinks that when there are strong work relationships among team members, they contribute to work without harming their peers. In such an environment, she believes that workplace bullying would not occur.

Although prior research indicates that bullying may occur among peer groups, research has not identified a specific age group of the bullies.

HRPs cited many reasons they think cause bullying, such as lack of rules, regulations, and policy on bullying in the country and company and a hostile organisational environment. In addition, factors such as jealousy due to victim's extraordinary performances, victims' lack of confidence, bully's characteristics such as narcissism and anger were also cited.

HRP 14 stated that the managers who engage in bullying targeting their juniors often do so due to the extra ordinary performance of the juniors.

HRP 14 stated,

*“If you look at the people who have reported many incidents where their manager or their boss is reported to be committing acts of violence, the majority are super workers. While it is commendable to have such a person in his team, bully's intention is to prevent his rise because they fear that person will challenge them in the future”.*

HRPs also say that the traits of a perpetrator can have a profound effect on bullying behaviour. For example, most HRPs said that traits such as anger, narcissism, aggressiveness, arrogance, boasting are more likely to lead to workplace bullying behaviour. They further narrated their experiences, explaining that people with such traits choose innocent and weak individuals to bully.

HRP 20 stated,

*“Mentally ill people often perform these kinds of actions. For instance, people like narcissists, arrogant ones, those who have high opinion of*

*themselves and of cause people with instant anger. Such people choose the weak people of the institution for their low mental satisfaction.”.*

As with many of the participants, HRP 2 mentioned that many workers do not dare to go against their bosses. *“they don’t have the personality to make complaints against their boss”.* HRP 5 explained how a person with weak self-confidence becomes a victim of workplace bullying.

*“In most of the cases, bullying takes place against new people or weak people. if you are strong enough like..., they don’t want to..., they don’t try to bully you. But when you are a weak person and when you are kind of emotionally little weak or new to the organisation, people try to take advantage and then try to bully you. So, this new person doesn’t want to report about bullying”*

As HRP 7 mentioned,

*“Actually, from my experience also I am telling, if the receiver..., if the harasser knows that the receiver will take seriously..., will take action..., they will go and complaint to the HR..., the harasser also will mindful about their behaviour. They also will not do that. They will..., initially they will try to do something safe, the harasser does that according to the victim reaction. Whether to continue or not will depend on the victim’s reaction”.*

According to HRPs’ *‘fear’* is another essential factor that influences workplace bullying. Fear about the powerful, fear about the job, fear of being isolated, and fear of damaging the own character are causes that contribute to the fear factor. HRPs understand that victims don’t formally report bullying due to fear.

As HRP 5 stated, *“for one reason I think they [victim] are kind of afraid of the person who is bullying and they think that it [bullying] might increase if they report this to the authorities”*.

Further, HRP's also stated how various societal factors encourage bullying and refrain victims from reporting.

HRP 4: *“Our society believe reporting bullying is bad thing. That they are not good team players, they got no idea how to take a joke, they got no idea how to tolerate something, they are very stressed, they can't take pressure' that's how they have the negative perception about the person who is reporting about the bullying.”*

Some HRP's also identified how gender role stereotyping beliefs could refrain women from reporting bullying due to embarrassment.

HRP 11 stated: *“fear of being ridiculed by friends. Shame. Fear of alienation from co-workers”*.

HRP 4: *“if you look at our culture also, overall in Sri Lankan culture we tend to tolerate a lot of things from school days. 'he is doing that as a colleague., don't treat that as bullying. It's not bullying. He is just a friend. He is just trying to tackle joke. We are also worried that if you make a complaint, people might start rejecting you, saying that 'that person is a very serious person. This person doesn't understand the joke and doesn't even tolerate., she can't work with the team. Not a good team player' like that people discourage complaints.”*

Hence, HRPs believed that these different reasons could discourage victims from bullying, which in turn can exacerbate bullying

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

It is imperative as the personnel who holds the main responsibility of creating a safe and healthy work environment for employees, HRPs engage in preventing and handling bullying in workplaces (Woodrow and Guest, 2014). As such, it is fundamental for the HRPs to have an appropriate comprehension of the issue. If HRPs do not have a clear understanding of the problem of workplace bullying and holds misperceptions, they will not be able to make reasonable decisions, nor would they be able to prevent or handle the issue effectively. Without a proper understanding of bullying and misperceptions, bullying incidents may be dismissed as usual, and the workers may suffer further negative consequences. In addition, employees' trust in the HRPs and the organisation will be broken. It can damage the organisation's reputation and lead the organisation to incur various direct and indirect costs.

As the findings indicate, bullying is misidentified by most participants. According to Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007 and Nielsen & Einarsen (2018), to consider behaviour as workplace bullying, it should be a (1) detrimental form of aggression, (2) exposure should occur over a long period, (3) a target would not be able to defend him/herself against behaviour. Although concepts such as incivility, harassment, aggression, abuse are similar to bullying behaviour, there are distinct differences between the terms (Tepper & Henle, 2011). Definitional characteristics of workplace bullying highlight bullying as a unique and especially

detrimental form of aggression at the workplace repeatedly (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). However, it was surprising that almost all the participants did not know what bullying is and the distinctions between different types of negative workplace behaviours. Many HRPs thought overloaded work, complaints about work schedules, erratic scolding, joking, misconducts, and sexual harassment are similar to workplace bullying. Even though exposure to negative workplace behaviour has been conceptualised with a variety of definitions (Chirila and Constin, 2013), labels such as ‘abusive supervision’ (Tepper, 2007), ‘incivility’ (Cortina et al., 2001), bullying/mobbing (Einarsen et al., 2011), harassment (Nielsen et al., 2017), (citing Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018) and the interpretations may seem similar at first glance. However, theoretically, they are different (Tepper & Henle, 2011). Participants mostly tended to mistake bullying with these other forms of negative workplace behaviours. While the participants did identify particular behaviour that falls under the concept of bullying, they did not know that for these behaviours to be bullying; they need to be repeated for a considerable period. Further, there were many instances the participants believed sexually harassing behaviours to be bullying. The many misunderstandings as to what bullying is would directly impact the participants identifying bullying behaviour, which is the foundation of prevention and handling.

It is also interesting to note that many participants did not accept that bullying is an issue in their organisation, while they did accept that it is prevalent in other organisations. This self-denial will lead these participants to not take any action in their organisations to address the issue, which can elevate it. When bullies know that the organisation does



not take action against their behaviour and when victims think they are helpless as the company does not accept bullying, the issue will inevitably prevail and accelerate. Further, the participants' misperceptions that workplace bullying is high in the female-dominant workplaces and among blue-collar workers too are unhelpful in curtailing and addressing the issue.

Participants also tended to believe that bullying can take place from superior to subordinate and not from subordinate to superior. In addition, they also believed that women rarely engaged in bullying; 'if there were women in higher ranks, bullying would not be done by such women' and that it is women who generally gets bullied. Further, participants thought that more educated individuals do not engage in bullying. These misperceptions would lead to participants not correctly identifying bullies, leading to ineffective preventive and handling mechanisms. While there were instances where the participants had identified some areas/characteristics of bullying correctly, such as certain behaviours and the type of bullies (such as middle-level managers, bosses, senior employees, peer groups, co-workers, team members), without a comprehensive understanding of what bullying is, the participants are more likely to be misled and therefore, will not be able to prevent and handle bullying effectively. It will also not be possible to make accurate references to victims' claims and collect accurate and essential evidence. This will have a profound effect on ethical and just decision-making and effective prevention and handling of the issue.

It is also noteworthy that there were instances that participants identified that victims generally would not report bullying due to various factors such as shame and fear, whether they identified this specific to bullying or about harassment, in general, is not clear, as participants tended to mistake bullying with other forms of negative workplace behaviour.

### **Implications for Management**

All in all, the findings indicate the need for HRPs to be adequately aware of the different negative workplace behaviours, including bullying, to curtail and handle the issue. This is specifically important in a context where there are no legislation or policies and procedures commonly used by companies to address bullying. At the same time, there are specific policies and more significant debate about other forms of negative workplace behaviours such as sexual harassment and workplace aggression. It is thus important to create awareness about bullying among HRPs and correct their misperceptions to engage in effective prevention and handling of bullying in organisations. It is also vital to empower them to develop policies and procedures within companies to address bullying.

### **Directions for future research**

Perceptions of HRPs being a rarely studied area, it would be helpful to understand how this lack of understanding and misperceptions would impact the specific ways bullying is prevented and handled in organisations. Further, it would be useful to explore how HRPs handle bullying complaints, especially in this context where they do not correctly understand what bullying is.

## CONCLUSION

Evidence shows that there is no clear understanding about workplace bullying among the participants of the study and that they hold various misperceptions that would hinder them identifying bullying in the workplace, in carrying out investigations, in handling complaints, in creating a culture that is devoid of bullying and other harassment and also in really being committed to eradicating the issue from workplaces.

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