

Gender: A Vulnerability Factor or Not? Exploring and Investigating Workplace Bullying in Nigeria

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Abstract—Workplace bullying as a concept, to a large extent, has generated a lot of debate and there has been no general agreement on the definition of workplace bullying. This study aims at exploring and analyzing the role that gender categorization plays in bullying relations. That is, the significance of gender in explaining employees' exposure to workplace bullying, the forms of bullying behaviors and comparing women's exposure to workplace bullying to men. The rationale for investigating gender is explained using the theory of Social Identity as a theoretical background. This study relates to how being a minority or dominant gender group within the organisation can be a vulnerability factor or the reason why a particular gender is more exposed to bullying in the workplace than the other. This paper is based on empirical investigation conducted on 650 employees across various institutions and sectors in Nigeria. A test of significance differences is used to investigate the relationship between gender and negative behaviors. The analysis revealed that both male and female experience various forms of bullying, and there is no significant difference between male and female respondents in terms of their exposure to bullying. That is, both genders are equally exposed to bullying in the workplace. Thus, this paper concludes by recommending that any form of workplace bullying should be completely eschewed and discouraged.

Index Terms—Workplace bullying, gender, male, female, negative act questionnaire.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept workplace bullying is receiving more attention in workplaces all over the world. This is possibly as a result of increasing academic publications, media involvement and organizations, that are to a large extent putting efforts into dealing with the social problem. Workplace bullying has been defined using several labels. Ascendant studies reveal that the first label used to define workplace bullying was 'mobbing'; which was developed by the pioneer researcher. [1], describing the occurrence as aggressive behaviors in the workplace. Other concepts used to describe the concept include 'harassment' [2], 'nonsexual harassment' [3], 'scapegoating, 'victimization' [4], 'emotional abuse' [5], 'workplace aggression' [6] and 'workplace incivility' [7]. All these concepts are used to describe antisocial behaviors in the workplace, which have negative consequences. Workplace bullying, according to Leymann [1], is therefore defined as a persistent pattern of negative acts directed at a worker(s) which has negative consequences. A lot of studies have classified or categorized

different risk groups in the organization that are more vulnerable, with most of these studies identifying organizational position, age, gender, ethnicity as factors responsible for differences in exposure to workplace bullying. Such reports according to [8] are to some large extent contradictory and at the same time ambiguous. That is, in some studies, women are reported to be more exposed to workplace bullying than men [9], while in some other studies, there are no significant differences reported [10]. [8] argue that little is still known on the significance of gender in explaining the experience and process of workplace bullying. Differences in report could be as a result of the differences in sectors, locations and as well as the methodologies used in investigating the issue. For some studies, such as [11], argue that the operationalization of the term 'gender' connotes 'biological sex', while ignoring the fact that gender is socially constructed. Others, such as [8], argue that some studies lack clear theoretical framework, thereby making some of such findings different and hard to compare. Given this lack of convergence, this current study utilizes the theoretical framework of 'social self' to explain workplace bullying.

II. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between gender and the exposure to bullying, using the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised. It also seeks to determine if women are exposed to bullying behaviours than men within the Nigerian work setting.

III. THE SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE SOCIAL SELF

Social identity theory proposes that inter-group behaviors are always preceded by some social categorization activities and such categorization involves the allocation of the self to one of the available groups, with corresponding implications for the search for social coherence and self-enhancement [12]. The concept of the social self, according to [13] and [14] emerged in order to elaborate the differences in the behaviour of an individual as a person (personal identity) as well as an individual as a member of a group (social identity). The combination of individual and group cognitive motivational processes, therefore, account for inter-group relations, which is an implicit identity that is complex, rich, interrelated and affectively charged, see [15], [16]. That is, individuals derive a portion of their identities from their membership of, and interactions within and among, the group [17], [18]. Social identity theory offers the prospect of resolving one of the relationships between the individual and the group [18]. It provides an analysis of

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inter-group behaviour which is simultaneously individualistic and social. It can be used to describe the self-structure of individuals as they are defined by categorical membership [15]. For instance, individuals belonging to a minority group within an organization would no longer see themselves as different from others within the organization, but rather a representative of the social group to which they belong [18]. The sense of belonging would now provide individuals within the group with shared set of beliefs, thoughts and behaviors to follow [19]. It therefore means that if bullying is one of the shared behaviors, then individuals that find themselves within the group will be more likely to behave in like manner, irrespective of their personal values prior to belonging to the group. [18] referred to such behaviors as the process of depersonalization, which according to [20] may explain how some bullying behaviors are justified within the organization, especially when all the identities operate by the same principle. Thus, determinants, operations and consequences established with one selected or constructed identity are presumed to generalize to other identities [15]. The foregoing depicts that the strength of one's identification with a group is important and is determined by one's commitment to whichever group one belongs [18].

IV. WORKPLACE BULLYING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Within the workplace bullying literature, the culture, organizational structures and job roles are all components that can enhance the climate for workplace bullying, see [8], [21]. For instance, in an organization where group identification depends on the work situation, such as duties undertaken and the strength of the categorization, such as gender; individuals within such organizations will have varying opportunities to join the dominant group. That is, groups are open to some and closed to others [14], which stands in contrast to the self-categorization view of social identity that assumes that an individual's opportunity to join a group is a function of their readiness and fit for the group [16]. For example, in a male-dominated organization, the accessibility of a woman is dependent on the woman's evaluation of the group, her ability to fit into the group, and the readiness of the group to accept her.

Demographic characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality and religion may shed light on why certain groups of individuals are more likely to be victimized or bullied [8]. That is, belonging to an under-represented group may be an additional risk factor to such an individual [22]. In like manner, being different or belonging to a majority group in an organization can be said to be a vulnerability factor [23], which in some cases can be out of the control of the individual involved. In this situation, individuals might not be given equal opportunities to be part of the dominant group and the ability to fit into the group may be beyond the control of the individuals involved in the interaction.

Accessing the dominant group in this situation will be difficult, which implies that individuals in some cases cannot just join or be a member of any group [16]. The work situation is a constraining factor [24]-[26], limiting the choice of available groups and therefore closing the group

to some who might seek to fit into the group under consideration. Hence, the inability of group members to tolerate each other can create an avenue for bullying situation to occur. In other words, when bias and discrimination begin to grow within such a group, there will likely be competitive struggle for power, which will result in the dominant group striving to maintain the status quo at any cost [16]. Given that conflicts within groups in the organization can lead to either direct or indirect aggression to one another, and all acts of bullying begin with a single act of aggression [27], [28], anything that increases the likelihood of aggression may thus serve to increase the likelihood of bullying. Once a cycle of aggression towards one another begins, the process will likely continue, escalate and subsequently result into negative responses towards others [29]. In other words, many types of workplace bullying behaviour can start from conflicts, and then move to either direct or indirect aggression towards one another, which can then grow to more overt types of workplace bullying. In essence, conflict can be linked to perceived incompatibilities between parties or groups, which can lead to a situation whereby an individual or group feels negatively affected by another individual or group [30]-[32].

Hence, the relationship between workplace bullying, gender and social identification is based on the assumption that a member of a particular gender group has essentially the same meaning and significance for all who identify with that category. The social nature of identity implies that there are socially based constructions of meaning which lead people to show consensus in some aspects of identity [13]. Hence, the interactions between the various groups are important in painting the true picture of how gender categorization can increase the likelihood of some employees being exposed to some bullying behaviors than others. Given these assumptions, the following hypotheses are stated.

V. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The following null hypotheses were formulated for the study and tested at 0.05 level of significance

H₀: There is no relationship between gender and the exposure to bullying behaviors

H₁: There is a relationship between gender and the exposure to bullying behaviors

This hypothesis if further broken down into five hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1

H₀: There is no relationship between gender and having individual's opinions ignored in the workplace

H₁: There is a relationship between gender and having individual's opinions ignored in the place of work

Hypothesis 2

H₀: There is no relationship between gender and being ordered to work below level of competence

H₁: There is a relationship between gender and being ordered to work below level of competence

Hypothesis 3

H_0 : There is no relationship between gender and being ignored and excluded from activities

H_1 : There is a relationship between gender and being ignored and excluded from activities

Hypothesis 4

H_0 : There is no relationship between gender and individual's exposure to unmanageable workload in the workplace

H_1 : There is a relationship between gender and individual's exposure to unmanageable workload in the workplace

Hypothesis 5

H_0 : There is no relationship between gender and spreading of malicious gossip and rumors

H_1 : There is a relationship between gender and spreading of malicious gossip and rumors

VI. METHOD

This study utilized quantitative research method. The Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised Edition developed (NAQ-R) by [33] was adapted. The NAQ-R is an internationally accepted research instrument for investigating workplace bullying and it consists of 23 items, each written in behavioral terms with no reference to the term workplace bullying. The NAQ-R was derived from two distinct sources of information - literature studies and accounts given by victims of long lasting harassment. The scale measures how often the respondents have been subjected to a range of negative acts and potentially harassing behaviors. The (NAQ-R) has been accepted internationally used by international researchers such as [34], [22].

The questionnaires were distributed across various public and private organizations. A sample size of six hundred and fifty (650) respondents was drawn across various organizations and industries using the simple random sampling technique. Therefore, we use the t-test for independent means to study two groups (Male and Female). The analysis compares the observed difference between male and female sample means ($M_1 - M_2$) with respect to knowing which gender is more susceptible to workplace bullying. The research was sensitive in nature and research ethics were strictly adhered to by addressing issues of confidentiality and anonymity in accordance with meeting the requirements of ethical research standards.

VII. RESULTS

A. Demographic Analysis

The analysis of the demographic characteristics of the respondents showed that 346 (53.2%) are male, while 304 (46.8%) are female. For the age categorization, respondents under the range of 25 years accounted for 57 (8.8%), 503 (77.4%) are between the ages of 25-39 years, 63 (9.7%) are between the ages of 40-49 years, 25 (3.8%) are between 50-59 years, while 2 (0.3%) are 60 years or over. It shows that the majority of our respondents are male, between ages 25

and 39, and therefore constitute members of the active workforce within the Nigerian population. Other demographic data related to this analysis are presented in the Table I below.

TABLE I: DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

S/N	Descriptive	(N=650)	Per cent (%)
1. What is your gender?			
	Male	346	53.2
	Female	304	46.8
2. What is your age?			
	Under 25 years	57	8.8
	25-39 years	503	77.4
	40-49 years	63	9.7
	50 – 59 years	25	3.8
	60 years or over	2	0.3
3. Do you consider that you have a disability?			
	Yes	10	1.5
	No	640	98.5
4. To which religious group do you belong?			
	Christian	531	81.7
	Muslim	109	16.8
	Traditional	2	0.3
	Others	8	1.2
5. Indicate your ethnic background			
	Hausa	20	3.1
	Yoruba	374	57.5
	Ibo	148	22.8
	Other ethnic group	108	16.6
6. How long have you been working at your organization?			
Under 1 year	110	16.9	Under 1 year
1-5 years	302	46.5	1-5 years
6-15 years	201	30.9	6-15 years
S/N	Descriptive	(N=650)	Per cent (%)
7			
What level are you?			
	Junior Level	268	41.2
	Middle Management	284	43.7
	Senior Management	98	15.1
8. What is the condition of your employment?			
	Permanent employment	434	66.8
	Temporary employment	101	15.5
	Contract work	115	17.7
9. Which institution do you work?			
	Financial Service	176	27.1
	Education	90	13.8
	Tourism and Hospitality	37	5.7
	Building and Construction	50	7.7
	Health Services	39	6.0
	Agriculture	10	1.5
	Others	39	6.0
10. Which sector do you work?			
	Public Sector	132	20.3
	Private Sector	518	79.7

B. Findings: Test of Significant Differences

From the demographic analysis illustrated in Table II below, 346 male and 304 female responses were used to test for significant differences in employees' exposure to bullying behaviors. An independent T-test was conducted to investigate if women are more exposed to bullying in comparison to men. Based on Table II below, the results of independent sample test $t(648) = 0.004$; $p = 0.242$, > 0.05 ; and since the p-value is greater than 0.05, it means that the

variability in both male and female respondents is about the same and not significantly different. We therefore conclude that there is no significant difference between the effect of having the opinions and views of both male and female respondents ignored. For the second hypothesis, the results of independent sample test. The $t(648) = 0.735$; $p = 0.185$, > 0.05 . Hence, since the p-value is greater than 0.05, it means that the variability in both male and female respondents is about the same and not significantly different. We therefore conclude that there is no significant difference between being ordered to work below your level of competence for both male and female respondents.

The test for hypothesis three is presented in the Table II below, using the independent sample test $t(648) = 2.041$; $p = 0.743$, > 0.05 . Hence, since the p-value is greater than 0.05, it means that the variability in both male and female respondents is about the same and not significantly different. We therefore conclude that there is no significant difference

between being exposed to an unmanageable workload for both male and female respondents. Table II below presents the test result for hypothesis four. The independent sample test $t(648) = -0.622$; $p = 0.254$, > 0.05 . Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, it means that the variability in both male and female respondents is about the same and not significantly different, we therefore conclude that there is no significant difference between being ignored and excluded from activities for both male and female respondents.

The result of hypothesis five shows that the results of independent sample test $t(648) = 0.175$; $p = 0.324$, > 0.05 . Hence, since the p-value is greater than 0.05, it means that the variability in both male and female respondents is about the same and not significantly different. We therefore conclude that there is no significant difference between spreading of gossip and rumors about both male and female respondents.

TABLE II: GENDER AND HAVING YOUR OPINIONS IGNORED

Equal variances assumed Equal variances not assumed	Group statistics		Independent Sample Test			
			Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means	
	What is your gender?	N	F	Sig.	t	df
Having your opinions and views ignored	Male	346	1.369	0.242	0.004	648
	Female	304			0.004	607.223
Being ordered to work below your level of competence	Male	346	1.757	0.185	0.735	648
	Female	304			0.732	624.234
Being exposed to toa unmanageable work load	Male	346	0.017	0.743	2.041	648
	Female	304			2.045	641.465
Being ignored and excluded from activities	Male	346	1.302	0.254	-0.622	648
	female	304			-0.619	618.338
Spreading of goss[ips and rumors about me	Male	346	0.976	0.324	0.175	648
	Female	304			0.176	645.006

VIII. DISCUSSION

The main hypothesis predicted that there is no relationship between gender and the exposure to bullying behaviors. Five sub hypotheses were developed and findings revealed that there are, indeed no significant differences between female and male in terms of their exposure to five negative behaviors in the workplace. That is, both women and men are equally exposed to having opinions ignored in the workplace; they are equally exposed to being ordered to work below their levels of competence; they are equally exposed to being ignored and excluded from activities; they are equally exposed to unmanageable workloads in the workplace; and they are equally exposed to spreading of malicious gossip and rumors.

For having opinions ignored, this study reported no significance difference between men and women. Having opinions ignored, according to [35], is a type of overt bullying which the recipient can find offensive and sometimes might be subtle. Having individual's opinions ignored is a silent way of ostracizing or socially excluding the individual. Reports like this are indication that both male and female are affected in similar manner with respect to exclusion of opinions in the workplace. This finding, however, is not in tandem with the works of [36] who

revealed that women are more exposed to social exclusion than men in their study on a public sector organization in the UK. The differences in report could be as a result of the cultural differences and organizational differences in the two continents. This finding is in sharp contrast to the views of [37], who is of the opinion that the disparity between the genders in the Nigerian context is usually problematic to resolve, given the name tags that are differently attached to each of the genders; with Nigerian males usually described as 'tough', while the females are alluded with the 'tender' personality. Hence, it can be counter-argued in this study that women, irrespective of their stereotypical placement within the Nigerian cultural setting, are engendered to bullying behaviors, just as their male counterparts are, whether from male or female perpetrators.

In similar vein, the spread of malicious gossip and romours are ways by which employees can be bullied. The study showed that both male and female are equally exposed and affected by such behaviors. Lastly, the remaining variables which can be classified as work-related bullying also showed no significant differences between male and female. These findings are in contrast to that of [22] study on Finnish professionals, where women had higher exposure to bullying. These results are not surprising because women are most likely to report being bullied than their men counterpart, therefore, the high occurrence should

be seen as true picture of what is going on in most organizations in Nigeria. These findings can be supported by previous arguments presented by [38], [1], and [39], revealing that there is no significant difference between a man and a woman in terms of bullying experiences. Although, there have been general misconceptions and assumptions that the proportion of women experiencing the acts of bullying are more than men, some empirical findings given by [22], and [40] gave a contrasting argument. [22] is of the opinion that underrepresented sex in any work environment is at a higher risk of being bullied at the work. That is, women have a higher exposure to bullying and only that, women are most likely to report being bullied. Such finding is in contrast to the present study that found no relationship between gender and their exposure to different types of bullying.

Like most large scale studies have reported fairly equal ratings about bullying among men and women, this current study present similar pattern. However, a closer look at the relationship between men and women reveals more complex pattern, which according to the [41], bullying is 'status-blind'. Although [41] argue that, the probability for women targets to be bullied by another woman bully is the same as men. A pattern like this is, according to [41], an indication of the structural consequences of work life. That is men mostly work together with men and women with women. Although, it could be reasoned following previous research by [1] and [41] that men attack women in a higher proportion compared to women attacking men. Findings like these buttress the significance of power interplay, especially because women are more open to attacks than men.

While referring back to the theoretical framework of using the social identity theory to explain categorization of male and female into different social groups, the social environment and the cultural background can affect how these categorization into male and female make sense of the bullying acts. For instance, a less represented group or gender in a work environment are more likely to feel more intimidated and stressed out when compared to their other counterparts. For example, men can interpret negative experiences differently and can defend themselves accordingly using face to face confrontation as an example, unlike women who are more likely to report the exposures [42]. Hence, the finding in this study shows that gender in relation to bullying practices take a peculiar cultural outlook among the Nigerian cultures—especially Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. This contrasts the study of [43] who revealed that cultures within the Nigerian cultural society view women as second class citizens who are neither, showing the amount of preference attached to a particular gender over the other within, thereby breeding enough grounds for bullying practices in organizations, whether in subtle or overt forms. From the above analyses, it can be concluded that, although gender, as one of the demographic factors, play a significant role in the exposure of employees to bullying behaviors [44], this study reveals that there are no significant differences

between men and women in their exposure to workplace bullying in Nigeria.

IX. CONCLUSION

Workplace bullying as a concept will continue to gather more attention, continuous research in this area will broaden our understanding of the concept. This study identifies gender as one the vulnerability factors that can increase the likelihood of being bullied. However, the statistical analysis revealed a different pattern in explaining the interaction between gender and workplace bullying. Even though there are no significant differences in exposure to workplace bullying, it is worth noting that employees in this study reported exposure to different forms of negative behaviors in the workplace. Going forward, it is suggested that bullying practices in the Nigerian workplace can be addressed through the positive involvement of all stakeholders in averting its occurrence, and responding to it. Since gender related bullying situations can take place in any workplace, to forestall this situation, it is proposed that activities, such as identifying the probable causes and symptoms for workplace bullying; taking individual and organizational-wide preventive measures; eliciting senior managers' commitment of displeasure toward bullying practices through their individual conducts and body language; continuously taking bullying risk assessments; and instilling firmly rooted organizational policy that address workplace bullying issues should be implemented. Bullying policies should inculcate attributes such as the broad description of bullying behaviour(s), a statement that support the prevention of workplace bullying and encourages the reporting of witnessed or experienced bullying behaviour(s), as well as the standard mode of behavior(s) that is expected from employees in the workplace.

Studies like this, that seeks to broaden understanding of the concept reveals that much still remains to be done in Nigeria regarding existing bullying behavioral patterns.

Limitations

This present study has investigated the relationship between gender and workplace bullying, while it is still not left without some flaws. First, the sampling procedure is random across various organisations in Nigeria, including the combination of different sectors and organisations which may not be a perfect representation of a particular institution or sectoral group. The number of respondents from each organisation is may not be an accurate representation; therefore organizational comparison might be a challenge, especially if the number in each classification is low. Furthermore, this study is based on the research ethical principle of confidentiality and anonymity, hence, limitation on reaching respondents that have actual experience.

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