

Cultural Influences on Workplace Bullying and Violence: Case of Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT: Workplace bullying and violence are important issues that deeply impact employee well-being, organizational effectiveness, and overall workplace culture. This study explores these challenges through two surveys conducted in April 2024 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, involving 92 individuals from the education, production, logistics, and sales sectors. Participants were divided into two groups of 46, with data collected through surveys self-administered in the presence of researchers and face-to-face interviews. The first study focused on workplace bullying, revealing that participants experienced various forms of mistreatment, including verbal abuse, social exclusion, and undermining of their work. Notably, cultural factors played a significant role in shaping the tolerance and perception of these behaviors. The second study examined workplace violence, uncovering instances of physical altercations and psychological harassment. Here, cultural attitudes toward authority, gender roles, and conflict resolution were found to influence the perception and management of such violence. These findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive strategies for addressing workplace bullying and violence. Developing policies and interventions that respect and reflect local values can help organizations in Uzbekistan foster safer, more inclusive work environments. This research contributes to the ongoing conversation in management and business studies, offering practical insights for organizational leaders, policymakers, and scholars seeking to enhance workplace culture in the region.

KEYWORDS: workplace bullying, workplace violence, Uzbekistan, culture

Introduction

Workplace bullying and violence are serious issues that affect employees and organizations all over the world. These behaviors are not only harmful to individuals, causing stress and anxiety, but they also damage the organizations where they occur. Research provides evidence about the nature, types, and impacts of these harmful actions, highlighting the need for companies to take them seriously and address them effectively. Workplace bullying involves repeated, harmful behavior by one or more people toward someone else. This could be through verbal abuse, social exclusion, or trying to undermine someone's work (Einarsen et al. 2020; Branch et al. 2021; Hoprekstad, Hetland, and Einarsen 2021). What sets bullying apart from other conflicts or occasional disagreements is that it's not a one-time thing—it happens repeatedly. Moreover, there is usually a power imbalance; the person doing the bullying often holds more power, whether formally as a supervisor or informally within the social structure of the team (Salin 2021; Marzionna 2023).

The continuous nature of bullying makes it particularly damaging. Those who are bullied often face prolonged stress and anxiety, which can lead to serious mental health issues like depression, anxiety disorders, and burnout (Nielsen et al. 2020; Salin et al. 2023). It is not just about the individuals who are bullied; the effects can spread across the workplace. When people see their colleagues being mistreated, it can lower morale and create an environment of fear and uncertainty. This kind of toxic atmosphere can make people less likely to collaborate, share ideas, or feel good about coming to work (Einarsen et al. 2020; Hoel, Cooper, and Einarsen 2020).

Bullying can show up in many ways from obvious actions like shouting or threatening someone to more subtle behaviors like spreading rumors, deliberately excluding someone from meetings, or setting someone up to fail by withholding important information (Zapf and Einarsen 2020). These more subtle forms of bullying can be especially tricky to deal with because they are harder to spot and report. Sometimes bullies even hide behind company rules or policies to target others, making it even more difficult for the organization to step in. For example, supervisor might apply an infrequently enforced dress code rule just to one particular employee. While it looks like they are just following the rules, they are actually isolating and penalizing that employee unfairly. This kind of manipulation of policy can mask the real bullying behavior, making it harder to address the issue effectively.

Workplace violence, while related, is a bit different from bullying. It includes a range of behaviors, from verbal threats to physical attacks. Violence can be sudden and intense, unlike bullying, which is often more about psychological abuse over a longer period (Hershcovis, Cortina, and Robinson 2020). Workplace violence can involve anyone—from coworkers to customers or even strangers—and can take different forms, such as a robbery (criminal intent), aggression from clients or patients, or personal conflicts that spill into the workplace (Kumari et al. 2020).

The effects of workplace violence can be severe and far-reaching. Physical injuries from violence can lead to lost workdays, high medical bills, and legal costs. Psychological impacts, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and ongoing fear, can be even harder to recover from. Beyond the immediate damage, organizations can suffer from a damaged reputation, which can make it harder to attract and keep both employees and customers (Hoel, Cooper, and Einarsen 2020). The mere possibility of violence can create a constant sense of unease, affecting everyone's engagement and productivity.

Bullying and violence in the workplace are often discussed separately, but they can overlap in many ways, especially in places where conflicts are not well managed. For example, if bullying goes unchecked, it can sometimes escalate into more serious, even violent, incidents. Conversely, a violent incident might lead to more bullying behaviors afterward, such as intimidation or exclusion (Kumari et al. 2020). This overlap can be particularly problematic in workplaces that do not have strong systems in place for managing conflicts or where there is a culture of tolerance for bad behavior.

In workplaces where communication is poor, leadership is weak, or policies for dealing with conflicts are lacking, the lines between bullying and violence can become blurry. Both bullying and violence can feed off each other, contributing to an overall culture of negativity and hostility. Employees in such environments often feel helpless and unsupported, making both bullying and violence more likely to occur (Hershcovis, Cortina, and Robinson 2020). The effects of workplace bullying and violence on employees are well-known and have been studied extensively. People who are bullied often suffer from anxiety, depression, trouble sleeping, low self-esteem, and burnout (Nielsen et al. 2020; Zapf and Einarsen 2020). These psychological impacts do not just stay at work—they spill over into personal lives, affecting relationships and overall well-being.

Workplace violence, especially physical violence, can have even more immediate and severe consequences, such as injuries and, in extreme cases, even fatalities. But psychological violence, like threats or verbal abuse, should not be underestimated either. Studies show that non-physical violence can also lead to serious psychological stress and can often be a warning sign of more severe aggression if not addressed (Hoel, Cooper, and Einarsen 2020).

These are not just personal problems—they affect the whole organization. Workplaces with high levels of bullying and violence often see a drop in productivity. People who are bullied or who experience violence might take more sick days, be less engaged, and feel less committed to their jobs. This can lead to higher turnover rates, where valuable employees leave to find a safer, more supportive work environment (Salin 2021). High turnover disrupts the

organization's functioning and comes with costs related to hiring, training, and lost productivity. Moreover, an organization's reputation can suffer greatly if it is known for not handling these issues properly. In today's digital age, news about workplace bullying or violence can spread quickly, harming the organization's image and making it difficult to attract top talent or retain clients (Branch et al. 2021). Companies that do not address these problems effectively may struggle to build trust with both employees and customers.

Given the serious impact of workplace bullying and violence, it is crucial for organizations to take proactive steps to prevent and address these issues. Effective solutions usually involve a combination of clear policies, proper training, and a shift in workplace culture. It is not enough to have policies against bullying and violence on paper—they must be actively enforced, and leaders at all levels must show they are committed to creating a safe and supportive workplace (Hoel, Cooper, and Einarsen 2020).

Training programs that teach conflict resolution, effective communication, and how to intervene as a bystander can help employees recognize and deal with bullying and violence early on (Escartin et al. 2021). Leadership training is especially important; leaders need to set a good example, step in when problems arise, and foster an environment where employees feel safe reporting concerns without fear of retaliation.

Building a supportive workplace culture is not a one-time effort; it requires continuous work and commitment from everyone. Encouraging open communication, promoting psychological safety, and recognizing positive behavior are essential strategies for preventing bullying and violence from taking root. By focusing on employee well-being and fostering a culture of respect and inclusion, organizations can not only prevent the negative impacts of bullying and violence but also boost overall productivity and morale.

To improve the understanding of workplace bullying and violence, it is crucial to acknowledge how deeply cultural norms shape workplace interactions. The methods we use to build a supportive work environment need to consider these cultural differences. In any workplace, what's seen as respectful or inappropriate can vary greatly across cultures. Understanding these differences is key to crafting effective anti-bullying policies. As workplaces become more culturally diverse, including a variety of cultural insights can make anti-bullying strategies more robust. This approach not only helps in pinpointing and tackling bullying more effectively but also ensures that prevention efforts are meaningful and inclusive for everyone involved.

Culture shapes how people perceive and respond to bullying and violence in the workplace. Hofstede's cultural dimensions, such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus femininity, provide a useful lens to understand these behaviors in different contexts (Hofstede 1984; Pheko, Monteiro, and Segopolo 2017; Grimard and Lee 2020). In cultures with high power distance, where hierarchy and authority are highly valued, behaviors that might be considered bullying in other cultures may be more normalized or go unreported (Wright 2020; Salin 2021). For example, in collectivist cultures, maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict is often prioritized. As a result, employees may be less likely to report bullying or may perceive it as less severe compared to those in more individualistic cultures where personal rights and self-expression are highly valued (Grothaus 2024). In South Korea, a collectivist culture, research shows that employees are more likely to tolerate workplace bullying to avoid social friction and maintain group harmony (Lee, Smith, and Monks 2021).

Similarly, workplace violence can be perceived and handled differently across cultures. For instance, in cultures where masculinity is emphasized, aggression might be seen as a sign of strength, potentially leading to a greater tolerance for violent behaviors (Ringrose and Renold 2020). On the other hand, cultures that value feminine traits, such as caring and cooperation, may have lower incidences of overt workplace violence but may still face challenges with more subtle forms of psychological harassment (Singh 2024).

The context of Uzbekistan offers unique insights into how workplace bullying and violence are perceived and managed. Uzbekistan with its post-Soviet, collectivist culture provides a backdrop where hierarchical relationships are prominent, and authority often goes unquestioned (Majidi et al. 2015). This can affect the way workplace mistreatment is perceived and reported. For instance, behaviors like verbal abuse or social exclusion might be tolerated or underreported because they align with traditional views of authority and maintaining social order (Khoury and Prasad 2012).

Recent studies in Central Asia indicate that workplace bullying and violence may be compounded by rigid gender norms and expectations. In Uzbekistan traditional gender roles often influence both the experience and reporting of workplace mistreatment (Agadjanian, Oh, and Menjívar 2021). Women may be more vulnerable to psychological harassment in workplaces dominated by patriarchal values, while men might be more exposed to physical violence, particularly in sectors like production and logistics (Agadjanian, Oh, and Menjívar 2021). Furthermore, the cultural norms around conflict resolution in Uzbekistan—where indirect communication and non-confrontation are preferred—may contribute to a lack of effective resolution mechanisms for workplace bullying and violence. This cultural context underscores the need for interventions that are not only effective but also culturally sensitive and respectful of local social dynamics (Xu et al. 2020; Salin 2021).

This study aims to investigate how cultural and organizational factors influence workplace bullying and violence in Uzbekistan, focusing specifically on the education, production, logistics, and sales sectors. The main objectives are:

1. To identify common forms of workplace bullying and violence in these sectors.
2. To explore the role of cultural factors—such as attitudes toward authority, gender roles, and conflict resolution—in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to these behaviors.
3. To provide practical insights into how organizations can develop culturally appropriate strategies to address and reduce workplace mistreatment.
4. To contribute to the broader understanding of organizational culture and management practices in Uzbekistan, offering recommendations for leaders, policymakers, and researchers.

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative findings from interviews. A total of 92 participants, drawn from the education, production, logistics, and sales sectors, were involved in the study. They were divided into two groups of 46 participants each. Participants were selected using convenience sampling and gave their consent to participate. The data was gathered in April 2024 through two surveys conducted in Tashkent. Participants completed the surveys in the presence of the researchers to ensure they could ask questions or seek clarification if needed. After completing the surveys, participants were also interviewed to provide deeper insights into their experiences. The first group was asked about workplace bullying, while the second group focused on workplace violence.

The first survey explored various forms of workplace bullying, such as verbal abuse, social exclusion, and undermining of work. Participants were asked to describe their experiences and how these behaviors impacted them. The second survey concentrated on instances of workplace violence, including physical and psychological aggression, and how participants responded to these situations.

For better understanding in the surveys, we explained the differences between workplace bullying and psychological aggression to the participants. Although these behaviors often overlap, workplace bullying generally includes ongoing actions that demean or sabotage someone over time and can involve psychological aggression as a method. Psychological aggression, on the other hand, is specifically about using words or actions to hurt someone's mental health or emotional state. This distinction was important for the participants to grasp so

they could accurately describe and report their experiences, helping us address these issues more effectively in the workplace.

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends and differences in bullying and violence across sectors and demographic groups. Interviews were analyzed qualitatively with a focus on themes such as authority relations, gender expectations, and approaches to conflict resolution. These cultural factors were explored in detail to better understand how they shape the way bullying and violence are perceived and managed in the workplace. The analysis paid particular attention to the cultural setting of Uzbekistan, looking at how societal norms and values—especially those related to governance structures like mahallas—influence workplace behavior. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this study provides a well-rounded view of workplace bullying and violence in Uzbekistan, offering practical recommendations that are sensitive to the local cultural context.

Results and discussion

Workplace bullying

The first part of the study focused on identifying the prevalence and forms of workplace bullying across various sectors, including education, production, logistics, and sales. Out of the 46 participants surveyed on workplace bullying, 71% (n = 33) reported experiencing at least one form of bullying in the past year. The most reported behavior was **verbal abuse**, with 52% (n = 24) saying it occurred frequently. **Social exclusion** was noted by 43% (n = 20), while 39% (n = 18) mentioned **undermining their work** as a significant issue.

On average, participants reported experiencing 2.7 different types of bullying incidents (SD = 1.3), highlighting the fact that many faced multiple forms of mistreatment. When looking at the results across sectors, some interesting differences emerged. In the **education sector**, verbal **abuse** was the most prevalent (68%), whereas **social exclusion** was more commonly reported in the **sales sector** (50%). In the **logistics sector**, nearly half (48%) of respondents mentioned work undermining as a frequent issue.

A regression analysis showed a clear pattern regarding gender differences in how bullying was perceived and reported. Women were 2.1 times more likely than men to report experiencing social exclusion ($p < 0.05$), with the trend being especially strong in the education sector. The regression model ($R^2 = 0.24$, $F(3, 42) = 7.68$, $p < 0.001$) also revealed that women were more sensitive to emotional and social forms of bullying, such as exclusion and manipulation, compared to men.

The qualitative data collected through interviews pointed to **cultural factors** as a major influence on how workplace bullying was perceived. Many participants described workplaces that were heavily shaped by traditional hierarchies and norms, especially in the education and production sectors. In these environments, deference to authority was expected, and behaviors like verbal abuse or exclusion were often seen as just part of the organizational culture. For example, several participants expressed that **criticism from superiors is a form of guidance** and should not be taken personally, even when the criticism was harsh. This view was especially common among older participants (mean age = 42.3), who seemed to accept verbal abuse as a normal aspect of workplace dynamics. On the other hand, younger participants (mean age = 27.1) were more likely to label such behaviors as bullying, suggesting a generational shift in how mistreatment is understood and tolerated.

Workplace violence: prevalence and forms

The second part of the study examined workplace violence, finding that 24% (n = 11) of participants had experienced **physical violence** at work in the past year, while 54% (n = 25) had witnessed or experienced **psychological harassment**. The **logistics sector** stood out with the highest incidence of physical violence, where 38% (n = 6) of respondents reported altercations between colleagues or

between employees and supervisors. The data also showed gender differences when it came to workplace violence. Men were more likely to report physical violence (OR = 3.5, $p < 0.01$), while women were more prone to psychological harassment (OR = 2.8, $p < 0.05$). A logistic regression model, with workplace violence as the dependent variable, showed that gender, sector, and age were significant predictors of violence ($\chi^2 = 16.94$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.01$).

Interviews provided deeper insight into how violence in the workplace was perceived and managed. **Cultural norms around gender roles** played a significant role here, with men tending to accept physical violence as an unfortunate but inevitable part of high-pressure work environments. Many described the workplace as a place **where men settle disputes physically**, especially in male-dominated sectors like logistics and production. Female participants, however, were more likely to express concerns about **psychological harassment**, which they felt was tied to gender-based discrimination.

In the **education sector**, both men and women were dissatisfied with the lack of formal channels to report bullying or violence. Many described feeling **powerless** when dealing with these issues, pointing to the deeply ingrained cultural norms around respecting authority. In situations where superiors were involved, participants were often reluctant to report incidents, fearing retaliation or further isolation. One of the key findings of the present research is the influence of **cultural norms** on how bullying is perceived. In sectors like education and production, where traditional hierarchies are strong, participants tended to minimize or even accept behaviors that could be classified as bullying, particularly verbal abuse from superiors. This is consistent with previous studies on cultures with high **power distance** (Hofstede 1984), where deference to authority is expected and criticism is often interpreted as constructive rather than abusive.

There was a clear generational divide in how bullying was perceived. Older participants seemed more accepting of bullying behaviors, while younger employees were more likely to challenge these norms and view verbal abuse and exclusion as unacceptable. This suggests that workplace culture in Uzbekistan may be shifting, particularly as younger generations enter the workforce with different expectations for how they should be treated. The results also highlight significant gender differences in the experience of workplace violence. Men were more likely to report physical violence, especially in sectors like logistics and production, where physical altercations were viewed as a common way to resolve conflicts. This is in line with the notion that masculinity in certain industries is tied to physical strength and assertiveness, which can manifest in aggressive behavior.

Women, on the other hand, were more likely to report psychological harassment, often linked to gender-based discrimination. Many female participants spoke about being marginalized or treated unfairly in male-dominated workplaces. This finding aligns with broader trends in workplace violence research, which shows that women are often more vulnerable to non-physical forms of violence, such as emotional and psychological mistreatment.

Conclusions

The results of this study clearly show that addressing workplace bullying and violence in Uzbekistan requires culturally sensitive approaches. Policies that do not consider local norms--particularly those around hierarchy, power dynamics, and authority--are unlikely to be effective. In many workplaces in Uzbekistan, behaviors like verbal abuse or even physical aggression are often seen as part of the norm, especially in male-dominated sectors. This means that solutions must be carefully designed to reflect these cultural realities while still promoting more respectful and inclusive work environments.

One key recommendation is for organizations to introduce anti-bullying training programs that directly address these cultural norms (Hazler and Carney 2009). These programs should not aim to dismantle hierarchical structures, as respect for authority is deeply ingrained

in many workplaces, but they can encourage employees to adopt more constructive and respectful forms of communication. Such training could help shift the workplace culture by making it clear that while authority is respected, mistreatment in any form should not be tolerated. It is also important for organizations to establish clear reporting mechanisms for employees to voice their concerns about bullying or violence. Many participants in this study indicated that they felt powerless to report such incidents, especially if superiors were involved. Organizations can address this by developing systems that protect employees from retaliation and ensure confidentiality. In addition, providing conflict resolution training could help employees and managers learn how to address disputes in ways that do not escalate to verbal or physical aggression.

Another major finding of the study is the gender-based differences in how bullying and violence are experienced. Women, especially in male-dominated sectors, reported higher levels of psychological harassment, and their experiences often intersected with broader issues of gender discrimination. This means that organizations need to adopt gender-sensitive policies that address not only bullying and violence but also the ways in which gender dynamics can fuel these behaviors. For example, companies might implement mentorship programs for women or create female-only spaces where they can raise concerns without fear of judgment or retribution.

This study makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature on workplace bullying and violence by examining these issues in a relatively under-researched context: Uzbekistan. Most studies on these topics tend to focus on Western countries or developed economies, where workplace culture and power dynamics are often quite different. By focusing on Uzbekistan, this research highlights the importance of considering the cultural context when studying workplace mistreatment.

The study's findings also suggest several avenues for future research. One area that could benefit from further investigation is the intersection of culture and authority in shaping workplace behaviors, especially in regions where hierarchical norms remain strong. Future studies could build on this research by conducting longitudinal studies that track how attitudes toward workplace bullying and violence change over time, particularly as younger generations enter the workforce with different expectations around respect and treatment.

In addition, there is a need for more research on the experiences of women in male-dominated industries in Central Asia. This study showed that women are particularly vulnerable to psychological harassment, and future research could explore the long-term psychological impacts of these experiences. Understanding how gender plays into workplace bullying and violence will be essential for developing more comprehensive strategies to address these issues.

Organizations in Uzbekistan could create positive change by raising awareness about workplace bullying and violence, offering training that promotes respect, and implementing systems that protect employees. By doing so, they can foster workplaces where all employees, regardless of their gender or position, feel safe and valued.

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