



WHAT CONSTITUTES WORKPLACE HARASSMENT & BULLYING?

- WorkSafeBC [defines](#) workplace bullying and harassment “as **any inappropriate action** (conduct or comment) by a person towards a worker “that he or she knew or reasonably ought to have known would cause that worker to be humiliated or intimidated”.
 - Perpetrators can be an individual or a group and may include clients, other co-workers, managers or supervisors.
 - Bullying and harassment in the workplace can be in “[many forms, including verbal aggression, personal attacks, and other intimidating or humiliating behaviours](#)”.
 - Bullying often starts with **micro-aggressions of micro-incivilities**, “**subtle yet harmful forms** of discriminatory behavior experienced by members of oppressed groups” due to their gender, race, age, etc., often subconsciously. ^(1,2)
 - Microaggressions can be “subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures and tones” (xvi).⁽³⁾ The subtlety of microaggressions makes them difficult to address.
 - Perpetrators can also bully their targets through technology, what is called [cyberbullying](#), including on online platforms at work and at home.
- **Sexual harassment**, one common type of harassment occurring in the workplace, is “engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought to be known to be unwelcome.” (e.g., *sexual jokes and innuendo, or unwanted and repetitive gestures of affection*). ⁽⁴⁾ It serves to reinforce heteronormativity.
 - **Gender-based harassment** is a form of sexual harassment that refers to “any behavior that ... reinforces traditional heterosexual gender norms” that are not generally motivated by sexual interest or intent. ⁽⁴⁾
- Bullying and harassment at work are very common problems in Canada:
 - [37 per cent of \(all\) workers in Canada have been bullied](#), and [18% of public servants have been the target of harassment on the job](#).⁽⁵⁾
 - [A Statistics Canada survey](#) reported that 19% of women respondents and 13% of men respondents had experienced harassment in their workplace in the past year. The most common type of workplace harassment was verbal abuse followed by humiliating behaviour.
- Bullying and harassing behaviours may not always be seen by others, but when they do and go unchecked, it creates a toxic workplace.

BULLYING & HARASSMENT DIFFER BETWEEN VARIOUS GROUPS

- Some groups of people are more likely to be bullied and harassed at work and are at risk for specific types of harassment.
 - **Women:** Ninety-four (94) percent of those who reported experiencing sexual harassment in [an Employment and Social Development Canada survey](#) were women.
 - Women are at greater risk for sexual harassment and bullying where they are in the minority in a workgroup and/or workplace, where the organizational climate condones sexual aggression, and because of poor leadership. ⁽⁶⁻⁹⁾
 - Women do not report sexual harassment in all cases. They fear retaliation, ostracism, isolation by colleagues, and job loss. This is more likely in [male-dominated work contexts](#).
 - [Indigenous women](#) are more than twice as likely to report having experienced sexual harassment (10% versus 4%).
 - **Gender diverse individuals:** Diverse individuals often experience micro-aggressions which are targeted at their sexual orientation/gender identity.^(10,11)
 - [Only a third of LGBTQI2S individuals reported harassment or discrimination](#) to their employer, mostly due to fear of retaliation.
 - **Racial minorities:** According to the 2019 Race at Work survey, [one in four](#) black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) employees in the UK had experienced bullying and harassment.
 - **People with disabilities:** [One Canadian study](#) based on General Social Survey on Canadians at work and home finds that the likelihood of reporting workplace harassment was 23% among individuals who had a mobility limitation – 7 percentage points higher than those who did not report a mobility limitation.
 - Disabled persons' perceptions of their organization's inability to address bullying may lead to their [reluctance to disclose their disability to their employer for fear of being further bullied and victimized](#).

IMPACT OF BULLYING AND HARASSMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH

- Bullying and harassment in the workplace are related to worker well-being, job dissatisfaction, motivation to perform at one's best, and sense of belonging to one's current organization.
- Bullying and harassment and micro-incivilities at work may result in stress-related health problems, including anxiety, panic attacks, and clinical depression among those targeted. ^(12,13)
 - The impact of workplace bullying on perceived job stressors and psychological distress is greater for women and persons of colour. ⁽¹⁴⁾
 - Sexual harassment and other threats/harassment on the job were both significantly related to [a greater chance of reporting career suicidal ideation and reporting more severe psychiatric symptoms among women workers](#). Bullying and harassment experienced in the workplace by gender diverse individuals can, result in stress, depression and other mental health issues. ^(15,16)
- Targets of harassment can also experience withdrawal from the organization.
 - In a 2018 [Statistics Canada](#) study, 47% of men and 34% of women who had been harassed by a supervisor or manager had a weak sense of belonging to their current organization, compared with 16% of both women and men who said they had not been harassed at work in the past year.

PROMISING SGBA INFORMED PRACTICES TO ADDRESS BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

UNDERSTAND AND ACT IN ACCORDANCE WITH RELEVANT LEGISLATION

- Employers have a legal duty to protect employees from risks at work, including bullying and harassment, both of which contravene labour standards in Canada.
 - To date, while only some Canadian jurisdictions have occupational health and safety (OHS) legislation specific to bullying, almost all jurisdictions have [legislation pertaining to workplace violence and/or harassment](#).
 - Federal and provincial *human rights laws* prohibit harassment related to race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, and other categorizations. These laws may apply to bullying.
 - Division XV.1 of Part III of the [Canada Labour Code](#) establishes [an employee's right to employment free of sexual harassment and requires employers to take positive action to prevent of harassment and sexual violence in the work place](#) (Bill C-65).

ESTABLISH STRATEGIES TO RECOGNIZE, PREVENT AND REDUCE BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

- Adopt or adapt **training for management and occupational health and safety (OHS) representatives and workers** to prevent and reduce bullying and harassment in the workplace. This is [especially important for managers as it enables them to recognize and respond to issues before they escalate](#).
 - The Cultural Human Resources Council has gathered professional human resources (HR) experts to work with a select group of trainers from different disciplines to create and deliver 3 hour-long workshops on [Maintaining Respectful Workplaces](#) for employers and workers.
- Adopt [anti-harassment](#) and **anti-bullying policies** or revise existing ones to make sure they are strong. Some templates, such as [Workplace Anti-harassment Policy](#), developed by the Canadian Human Rights Commission, have been created to assist employers in meeting their human rights obligations.
 - **Sexual harassment and assault policies** [should be developed as separate from general workplace employee conduct/harassment policy](#) as they are different and need special expertise and approaches.
- Make use of **government and other anti-harassment and bullying strategies and resources** to address harassment and bullying in the workplace, some of which focus on sex and gender-based harassment and bullying.⁽¹⁷⁻¹⁹⁾
 - [It's Time: Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence](#) is the first federal strategy of its kind. In addition to the creation of the Gender-Based Violence Knowledge Centre within Women and Gender Equality Canada (Status of Women Canada), a whole-of-government approach and collaborations across all levels of government in Canada have resulted in complementary work in finding solutions to prevent harassment in the workplace.⁽¹⁷⁾
 - [Bullying In The Workplace](#) is a booklet created by the Public Services Health & Safety Association that offers practical suggestions for the employer, supervisor and worker to reduce bullying in the workplace.
 - A video focusing on sexual harassment in the workplace, called [Climb the Hill](#) has been developed by the Ontario Federation of Labour. The video presents the stories of women who have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, and offers strategies to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace.

RECOGNIZE & STOP THE REPETITION OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Scenario	Microaggression	Why not?	What to say instead	What to say as a bystander
A woman colleague tells you that she has been selected for a leadership role in the Canadian Headache Society.	“Are you sure you can do this? You have two small children. You don’t have time for this”	Saying this to a colleague leaves her feeling that you think she is less capable because she has children. She may feel you are imposing your own values on difficult work/family balance decisions. She should be the one to decide for herself if something is too much for her. She doesn’t want her colleague to assume what she cannot do or what she cannot handle. People rarely make this sort of statement to a man.	“I know you will be great at this. Let me know how I can support you	“Really? What did you just say?” “I’m really looking forward to seeing Dr. X in this role” “I have three young children and no one ever says this to me”
A Black woman colleague is speaking at a conference about her experience of racial discrimination. After the conference, you and another white woman colleague meet up with the speaker.	“Dr. X, I never see you as a Black woman. I just don’t see colour.”	This statement implies that you consider your colleague to be an exception to what you consider as a rule: that Black women are less intelligent or competent than white women. This reinforces racist stereotypes. Saying “I don’t see colour” implies that, as a white person, you are the racial norm. It also sends a message that you haven’t stopped to understand the lived experience of race and racism.	“Thanks for sharing your experience. I hadn’t considered how racism affects your life. I need to do my own work to learn more.”	“Dr. X’s experience as a Black woman is different than mine, and it’s important to understand all parts of people’s experiences.”
A young Latina woman heard this on numerous occasions after displaying an ‘extensive’ vocabulary or use of grammatically correct English.	“Why do you sound so white?” “You talk white.”	This signals an idea that: you’re not like the rest of them.” The Latina woman who reported this said “I felt angry, sad, despondent. I would go talk to my mom afterwards in my frustration and luckily she would tell me how wrong what they said was and that being intelligent was NOT exclusively ‘white’, supported with many examples of educated people of color.” This example comes from Microaggressions.com .	Don’t say anything. Reflect on your prejudices, and learn more about how to counteract them.	“That’s an offensive thing to say.

Adapted from [Eleven Things Not to Say to Your Female Colleagues](#).

JOIN BROADER ANTI-BULLYING AND ANTI-HARASSMENT CAMPAIGNS AND PROGRAMS

- A nation-wide campaign in Norway ‘The Bully-Free Workplace ([Jobbing uten mobbing](#))’ has significantly reduced the rates of bullying in Norway during the past two decades.⁽²⁰⁾
- In 2010, the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU) established the [Working Toward Bully-Free Workplaces](#) program that includes employee education on bullying, and employer feedback; 98% of participants recommend the program.⁽²¹⁾

COVID-19 AND WORKPLACE BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

- It might have been assumed that the transfer of work location from workplace to home as a result of Covid-19 social and physical distancing measures, might have resulted in much elimination of harassment and bullying. However, some (mostly anecdotal) evidence suggests that these destructive behaviours – which are often gendered and racialized - seem to persist and may even have increased in an online environment.⁽²²⁻²⁴⁾
- Online meetings and communication have become a new hidden venue for virtual and visual incivility, sexual advances and inappropriate and disrespectful comments and behaviours.^(22,23)
 - One UK-based employment lawyer reported ‘a distinct uptick in complaints of gender harassment and racial intimidation’ during the Covid-19 lockdown. (24) Clients experienced being excluded from meetings and bullied over video conferences. Some managers “have used furlough as a form of bullying minorities, either by forcing them to take it or by denying the option when it’s been requested”.⁽²⁴⁾
- Some evidence shows that women who work in the health sector (about two-thirds of the health and social workforce worldwide are women) face a greater risk of workplace harassment and bullying, and violence.⁽²⁵⁾⁽²⁶⁾ Moreover, [one informal survey](#) has shown that 50% of people perceived that they have been subjected to unfair treatment by co-workers due to fears of spreading the virus. People of Asian descent or those who come from highly affected areas are more likely to be victims of such behaviour.
- Despite the Covid-19 changes, human rights legislation and occupational health and safety legislation still require employers to ensure a workplace that is free of harassment and bullying.⁽²⁷⁾
- Some recommendations that respond to the Covid-19 context in particular include: [managers look for warning signs that might indicate the situation](#) (e.g., an employee who is suddenly quieter on Zoom or withdraws on Slack could be an indication that sexual harassment has occurred); employers take the necessary precautions “[not to isolate, segregate or adversely treat employees solely because the employee has ancestral roots or originates from a high-risk area, or another area where the virus has spread](#)”; [and employers investigate claims made by any employees of harassment based on nationality and take appropriate disciplinary action against any employees found to be in breach of the policy.](#)

VIGNETTE: HARASSMENT & BULLYING

Gasira is a black woman who works as an administrative assistant in a small government service department. Her manager for the past eighteen months is a white man in his late 50s. While she loves her work and gets on well with her co-workers, she often thinks about moving to a different unit or quitting because the way that her manager treats her makes her feel down and anxious: the constant barrage of demands, microaggressions and insults is starting to interfere with her work. He often yells at her and criticizes her work in meetings in front of her colleagues, threatens her job privately in his office, calling her names and insulting her based on her race and gender (e.g., “You are so slow, so typical of all you black women”). Her self-confidence and her overall mental health are suffering as a result of her manager treating her like this, and she feels that her colleagues are now seeing her as the problem. She would like to report the manager, and has contemplated writing a letter to HR many times, but she is afraid this will result in a blot on her file. While she thinks moving to a different unit or quitting her job is the only way to solve her situation, she cannot afford to leave.

Box 1: List of questions/important considerations for managers/supervisors

Applying an SGBA lens to the issues of workplace bullying and harassment faced by an employee is one step towards resolving the situation described in the vignette. It will help you to better understand the issue, address it appropriately, and ensure solutions that are fair.

Based on the case and using the evidence you have just read:

- Think about how Gasira’s experience of workplace bullying and harassment are impacted by her different roles and identities (*being Black and a woman*).
 - How do her manager’s and co-workers’ responses to her different identities shape the way they treat her?
- How might workplace culture that tolerates bullying and harassment encourage these issues, and in turn causes mental health issues among affected employees (e.g., *black woman who works in a male-dominated sector/department with no anti-bullying and harassment policies or guidelines might easily become a victim of bullying and in turn experience mental health issues*);
 - Victims can be more profoundly affected because the bully may solicit support from colleagues who end up blaming the victim.
- Think about what the evidence shows in terms of the impact of sex/gender and other identity factors on harassment and bullying and in turn on the mental health of the employees.

As a manager/supervisor think about **your employee’s life as a part of a larger context** before you and your employee make any plans to deal with the situation.

Consider:

- How might the wider context, including societal processes (e.g., cultural norms/ traditions) influence employees’ mental health (e.g., *Gasira’s culture might not be accepting of confronting superiors*).
- In addition to sex/gender, how might other individual factors (e.g., age, disability, race, indigeneity), factor into the experience of being bullied and harassed.

GLOSSARY

Bullying and harassment: any inappropriate action (conduct or comment) by a person towards a worker “that he or she knew or reasonably ought to have known would cause that worker to be humiliated or intimidated”.⁽²⁸⁾ In some countries, the term “mobbing” is used to refer to workplace bullying.

Gender-based harassment: a form of sexual harassment that refers to “any behaviour that polices and reinforces traditional heterosexual gender norms” that is not generally motivated by sexual interest.⁽⁴⁾

Gender-based violence: violence some individuals experience due to their gender, gender expression, gender identity or perceived gender. “GBV can take many forms: cyber, physical, sexual, societal, psychological, emotional, and economic. Neglect, discrimination, and harassment can also be forms of GBV” (p.8).⁽¹⁷⁾

LGBTQ: an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. In Canada, LGBTQI2S, adds intersex and Two-Spirit. Seen on occasion, the use of the + encompasses sexually diverse people who do not identify with the aforementioned labels.⁽²⁹⁾

Micro-aggressions or micro-incivilities: subtle yet harmful forms of discriminatory behavior experienced by members of oppressed groups” due to their gender, race, age, etc., often subconsciously (e.g.- being ignored, being talked over).^(1,2)

Sexual harassment: “engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought to be known to be unwelcome.” (e.g. sexual jokes and innuendo).⁽⁴⁾

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