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## Workplace Bullying and Psychological Distress in Public Institutions in Ghana

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### Abstract

Sex differences and psychological distress associated with workplace bullying were investigated in a total of 1,273 employees in three public institutions in Ghana. The effect of level of occupation (junior vs. senior) was also explored. Victimization from bullying was measured with an abbreviated version of the Work Harassment Scale (WHS-7), and mental health associations with workplace bullying were assessed with an indicator of psychological distress (General Health Questionnaire, GHQ-12). 19.1% of the respondents had been bullied “often” or “very often”. There were no sex differences in frequency of victimisation from bullying. Occupational status was significantly associated with bullying: junior staff members reported higher levels of victimisation from bullying and higher levels of psychological distress than senior staff members. Workplace bullying appears to be common in public institutions in Ghana, and has significant negative outcomes for individuals, especially junior staff members. The findings have implications for policy-makers, employers, and employees.

**Keywords:** workplace bullying, sex differences, public institutions, Ghana

## Introduction

In the past two decades, workplace aggression has attracted a great deal of public attention (Barling, Dupre, & Kelloway, 2009) due to its far-reaching consequences for employees' wellbeing (Bowless, 2012; Francis, 2013). Exposure to workplace bullying from different sources (supervisors, co-workers, and outsiders) has been found to be associated with increased intent to turnover, emotional exhaustion, depression, interpersonal and organisational deviance, decreased job satisfaction, decreased affective commitment, and psychological and physical well-being (Carter, Thompson, Crampton, Morrow, Burford, Gray, & Illing, 2013; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010b).

Although the phenomenon has most commonly been referred to as workplace bullying, other terms with a similar connotation have been used: e.g. intimidation, harassment, victimisation, aggression, emotional abuse, psychological harassment, and mistreatment at the workplace (Ariza-Montes, Muniz, Montero-Simo, & Araque-Padilla, 2013).

Although there is a lack of agreement on a single definition of workplace bullying (Spector, 2011), most researchers agree upon that workplace bullying encompasses a range of aggressive behaviours that occur between individuals, and are repeated systematically and over a period of time at the workplace (Ireland, Archer, & Power, 2007; Vartia-Väänänen, 2013). Bullying differs from usual conflicts in the sense that there usually is a power imbalance between bully and victim, and the behaviour is persistent and, if unchecked, tends to escalate until the victim is forced out of the work force. In research, however, it is often difficult to ascertain whether aggressive behaviour at the workplace is bullying or "regular" aggression.

Most definitions have focused on the essential characteristics of the phenomenon (Branch, Ramsay, & Baker, 2013; Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2008). Research typically focuses on the perceptions and experiences of the victim, and operationalisations of the concept may differ with regard to duration, frequency, intent to harm, and behaviour included to understand workplace bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011).

As indicated above, workplace bullying can take many forms, and is sometimes difficult to perceive. Forms of workplace bullying may be direct, indirect, verbal or nonverbal, and they involve "overt acts" – such as threats or actual aggression, demands for resignation, and verbal assault, or "subtle acts" such as teasing, gossip or banter (Frances-Louise, 2015). In the context of the workplace, indirect aggression may be the preferred type of aggression since it is, in cost-benefit terms, a cheaper form of aggression than direct forms (Björkqvist, 1994; Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1992). However, a bullying senior staff member might like his presence to be felt by victims, e.g. by overloading them with tasks, or by refusing to give them meaningful assignments, just to show his power.

Explanations for workplace bullying are classified into three categories: (1) enabling structures (e.g. perceived power imbalances, low perceived costs, and dissatisfaction and frustration), (2) motivating structures or incentives (e.g. internal competition, reward systems, and expected benefits), and (3) precipitating processes or triggering circumstances (e.g. downsizing and restructuring, organizational changes, changes in the composition of the work group) (Salin, 2003). Oftentimes, there is an interaction of these factors.

### **Prevalences of Workplace Bullying Worldwide**

Workplace bullying is undoubtedly common (Branch et al., 2013). Depending on how questions are put and which definition of bullying is provided (Carter, Thompson, Crampton, Morrow, Burford, Gray, & Illing, 2013), discrepancies with regards to the prevalence of the phenomenon have been reported; e.g., in Northern Europe, 4% to 5% of employees are estimated to have experienced workplace bullying (Nielsen, Skogstad, Matthiesen, Glaso, Aasland, Notelaers, Einarsen, 2009). This is in stark contrast to Southern Europe, where approximately 15% of employees report having been bullied (Nielsen, Hetland, Matthiesen, Einarsen, 2012). In South Africa, as many as 31% report experiences of workplace bullying (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012).

Prevalence rates vary considerably across studies (Carter et al., 2013) and the culture in which the study is conducted; e.g., the majority of studies within Europe show that between 10% and 15% of the workforce are exposed to workplace bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011), and North American studies report similar prevalence rates (Keashly & Jagatic, 2011). Venetoklis and Kettunen (2015) reported that 20.3% of public sector employees working in 12 Finnish ministries experienced work-related bullying multiple times per month, whereas 11.3% reported experiencing personal-level bullying. A review of 88 prevalence studies across 20 European countries found a huge variation, reporting prevalences between 0.3% to 86.5%, depending on the question and definition used (Zapf, Escartín, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2010).

A South African study of bullying in the mining industry found that 27% of employees were bullied over the previous 6 months, and 39.6% reported a negative act over the previous week (South African Board for People Practices, 2018).

### **Cultural Differences in Workplace Bullying**

The prevalence of workplace bullying varies not only according to employees' perceptions (Ireland, 2006), but also according to their national culture (Moayed, Daraiseh, Shell, & Salem, 2006). A 2011 survey of workers worldwide including 16,517 respondents found that overall 35% had experienced some form workplace violence.

Cultural characteristics and social change can partly explain these variations in the prevalence rates, e.g., countries such as those in Southern Europe (e.g., Spain), characterised by a higher power distance and more uncertainty avoidance, show a

high rate of bullying (Moreno-Jimenez, Rodriguez-Munoz, Salin, & Benadero, 2008), whereas countries in Northern Europe, which are characterised by negative attitudes towards signs of abuse of power, low power distance, feminine values, and individualism, are more likely to have a lower threshold for reporting inappropriate behaviours (Einarsen, 2000). Nations that rank high in power distance and low in uncertainty avoidance will be more inclined to bullying. If so, workplace bullying would be expected to be more common in African and some Asian societies in comparison with European countries. For instance Malaysia ranks high in power distance and low in uncertainty avoidance, and the country reports high levels of workplace bullying at the corporate level (Kwan, Tuckey, & Dollard, 2014). Accordingly, to understand workplace bullying, it is necessary to also take into account the cultural context in which it occurs.

### **Victim's Rank and Victimization**

Bullying occurs in most organisations and industries and at all levels, e.g. as managers against subordinates (downwards bullying), and among colleagues (horizontal bullying).

The majority of perpetrators of bullying have been found to be managers, where males formed 62% of bullies (Cobb, 2012). In a survey conducted by Namie (2017), 61% of perpetrators had a higher rank than their targets; 33% of perpetrators were peers with the same rank as their targets, and 6% of perpetrators were subordinates who bullied targets with a higher rank than themselves. In 7% of cases, the bullying was generated by a combination of perpetrators operating at different levels of the organization – bosses, peers, and subordinates.

In Finland and Sweden, perpetrators of workplace bullying are more often colleagues than individuals higher in rank, whereas superiors and colleagues at the same level in the organisation bullied their targets in approximately equal numbers in Norway (Vartia-Väänänen, 2013). However, British studies constantly find superiors and line-managers to be the main perpetrators; 52% of respondents in the transport and communication sector were bullied exclusively by their superiors; in 19 European countries, 65.4% of targets were bullied by superiors.

### **Sex Differences in Workplace Bullying**

Despite extensive studies conducted into sex differences in workplace bullying, results concerning sex differences have often been inconsistent and unclear; e.g., in a study conducted in the EU-27 countries, women reported being bullied or slightly bullied more often (4.4%) than men (3.9%) e.g., in the Netherlands (females 9.4%, males 6.3%), Finland (females 8.2%, males 4.2%), and in Denmark (females 3.9%, 2.5% males). In some countries, no sex difference was found, e.g., Germany (both females and males 4.6%). However, in a few countries, men reported being bullied at least to some extent more often than women, e.g., France (females 8.4%, males 10.5%) and Greece (females 2.8%, males 3.7%) (Vartia-Väänänen, 2013). These differences

could indicate that gender-related experiences of workplace bullying may be cultural and country-specific.

Employees bully an individual of the same sex more often than an individual of the opposite sex: Namie (2017) found that females bullied other females in 67% of cases, and males bullied other males in 65% of cases.

In cases where males are the minority at a workplace, they tend to report being bullied more than the female majority, while female exposure to workplace bullying was reduced when working with male superiors (Wang & Hsieh, 2015). The sex of perpetrator and victim have interactive impacts on the level of downward bullying. However, victims in within-sex dyads report higher levels of overall downward workplace bullying than those in between-sex dyads (McCormack, Djukovic, Nsubuga-Kyobe, & Casimir, 2018).

Studies that explored sex differences in perceptions and victims' reactions found that women were more likely than men to label their negative experiences as bullying (Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004; Salin, 2003), and rated negative acts as more severe than men did, especially when items were related to emotional abuse, social isolation, and professional discrediting (Escartin, Salin, & Rodriguez-Caballeira, 2011).

When men experience workplace bullying, they are more often than women likely to challenge their bullies, and do not ask for help, whereas women are more often than men likely to use avoidance strategies (e.g., absenteeism), look for social help, or take no action (Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004).

Women tend to report higher scores for coping dimensions as a reaction to workplace mistreatment (Cortina, Lonsway, Magley, Freeman, Collinsworth, Hunter, & Fitzgerald, 2002). This could be interpreted to indicate that women feel more strongly affected than men by negative acts. Verbal abuse has been shown to be related with decreased confusion in men, but with increased confusion in women (Brotheridge & Lee, 2010), an indication of an active coping strategy among men and a more passive one in women.

These studies underline the importance of sex in how experiences of workplace bullying are interpreted, evaluated, and reacted to. Women tend to perceive more bullying than men in their workplace, which perhaps is an indication of women being more sensitive to bullying than men, or more eager to report behaviours that male bystanders would not describe as bullying. This fact raises the question as to whether perceptions and emotional responses accurately measure frequencies of workplace bullying.

Gender-role socialisation theory (e.g. Eagerly, 2007) highlights the difference of roles and norms of accepted behaviour for men and women, i.e. of what society expects from them. Applied to bullying, men are traditionally expected and permitted to exhibit more direct aggression than women; hence there may be a higher number of

men among bullies (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011), while women's choice of more indirect forms of aggression, such as social manipulation, falls within gender stereotypes.

Consistent with gender and power theory, all societies comprise power hierarchies, where one or more social groups dominate other groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Men have better access to resources and a better social standing in society. More men than women have managerial and superior positions, and given that bullying is more often a downwards than an upwards process (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011), the gender and power theory explains how men and women have different access to certain bullying techniques and defence strategies, and how bullying may be used to maintain existing structures.

The social identity theory of intergroup discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) also helps to highlight differences in the interpretation of bullying between males and females. By identifying with a male perpetrator, they make judgements that favour a member of the in-group (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005).

### **The Impact of Workplace Bullying**

Experiencing systematic and lengthy non-physical and non-sexual aggressive behaviours at work is highly injurious to the victim's health (Einarsen, 2000). Victims of workplace bullying experience significant negative effects, not only from individual perpetrators but also from the organisation; workplace bullying is a significant source of work-related stress characterised by emotional exhaustion, interpersonal and organisational deviance, decreased job satisfaction, and low affective commitment (Carter et al., 2013; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010b), as well as increased psychological distress, typically including anxiety and depression (Carter et al., 2013; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010).

The human cost of workplace bullying has consequences also for organisations, since victims experiencing emotional and psychological impairments are more likely to be absent due to sickness (Kivimäki, Elovainio, & Vahtera, 2000; Sprigg, Martin, Niven, & Armitage, 2010), lack affective commitment, and more often have intentions to quit (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Carter et al., 2013; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010b).

No sex differences have been found in the health impact of victimisation from bullying; e.g., Vartia and Hyyti (2002) found that gender did not influence levels of stress experienced by victims. Similar results were found by Cotina et al. (2002) in a study on incivility. However, in a study on ostracism and exclusion in the workplace – an important aspect of bullying – Hitlan, Clifton, and DeSoto (2006) concluded that high levels of exclusion had a more negative impact on men's psychological health than women.

## **The Current Study: Workplace Bullying among Ghanaian Employees**

Over the past decades, an increasing number of studies emanating from the Scandinavian and Anglo-American nations have shown the extent to which workplaces offer an environment in which bullying can thrive.

Although sexual harassment in the workplace has been extensively studied in Ghana, unfortunately, there is no official record indicating the extent of other forms of bullying in Ghanaian workplaces, not to mention sex differences in these behaviours (Asamani, 2010). There have been some studies exploring violence in the health sector, specifically against nurses (Boafo, Hancock & Gringart, 2015; Boafo & Hancock, 2017). For these reasons, little is known about workplace bullying in Ghana.

Elsewhere on the African continent, a cross-sectional field study explored the prevalence of workplace bullying in South Africa in a sample comprising 13,911 employees, and found that 31.1% of the sample had experienced workplace bullying (Cunniff & Mostert, 2012). In another South African study, the nature and prevalence of workplace bullying were investigated in two distinct workplaces, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and Power Group, in the Western Cape, South Africa. Kalamdien (2013), found that between 30% and 50% of respondents had been bullied in the respective workplaces. More men than women were reported as perpetrators, and those in leadership positions were more often reported to be perpetrators of workplace bullying than colleagues/peers, subordinates, or clients.

When Jacob and Wet (2013) conducted an exploratory study on South African teachers exposed to bullying with self-report questionnaires in a sample of 999, they found that as many as 90.8% of participants had been victims of workplace bullying in the 12 months that preceded the study, and 89.1% of victims had been exposed to the two most common types of bullying, namely behaviours that undermine their professional status, and behaviour causing isolation. These are extraordinary high bullying rates, which may be due to how bullying was operationalised.

Owoyemi (2010) describes workplace bullying in Nigeria, as an undiagnosed antisocial problem which may be endemic, and which occurs as a result of unequal power between two individuals or a group of people, and another individual and/or a group of people in the workplace, but did not provide percentages of prevalence.

Some researchers (e.g., DeKeseredy, 2011; Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009) suggest that in a patriarchal society, males use violence against females as a way of preserving male dominance, since individual male domination is crucial for maintaining patriarchal domination at the societal level. Therefore, in Ghana, a patriarchal society, one can expect to find a higher frequency of males' aggression compared to that of females. Although intimate partner aggression is contextually different from workplace aggression, females in Ghana have been found to be more likely than males to use low intensity aggression, including physical, indirect, nonverbal, and cyber aggression types against their male partners (Darko, Björkqvist, & Österman, 2018).

This gives a context to understand the complexity of sex differences in aggression in Ghana.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Eight experienced research assistants, all of whom had completed their Master's level studies in psychology at the University of Ghana, Accra, and who had experience in conducting research, were employed to assist in the data collection. They were well-informed about the importance of getting a representative sample.

The sample was drawn from individuals from five different ethnic groups in three different cities in Ghana, representing the main ethnic and religious groups forming the fabric of Ghanaian society, and drawn from the public sector (teachers, nurses, and office staff). The sampling technique was based on approaching participants in person. No questionnaire was sent by mail. Two main principles were applied: (1) to identify individuals who were employed within the public sector; (2) to reach out to as varied societal strata as possible, in order to ensure representativeness. The inclusion criterion was to reach a variety of participants as wide as possible to make the sample representative for the employees in public institutions in the cities of Tamale, Nsawam, and Accra; the exclusion criterion was to exclude individuals who would create an imbalance in representation.

To allow respondents to complete the questionnaires independently, without any influence or fear from their bullies, the research assistants asked participants individually and privately if they would like to answer some questions about workplace bullying.

A total of 1, 273 (654 females, 618 males) employees from three different cities in Ghana: Tamale, Nsawam, and Accra, filled the criteria and were selected to represent the various ethnic and religious groups forming the fabric of Ghanaian society. Tamale is the fourth largest city of Ghana, with most residents being either Christians or Muslims. Nsawam is situated in the southern part of Ghana and populated mostly by the largest ethnic group of Ghana, the Akans. Data were also collected from the capital, Accra. Participants were selected from the five main ethnic groups in Ghana: Akan - 260 females, 264 males; Ewe - 114 females, 80 males; Mole-Dagbani - 79 females, 85 males; Guan - 91 females, 94 males; Ga - Adangbe 110 females, 96 males. In addition to this, 31 females and 28 males with disability also participated. Therefore, the sample should be relatively representative for Ghanaian society of today.

The participants were over 18 years of age and all were employed in the public sector. They all voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Data on the level of occupation (junior vs senior staff member) were collected.

The age difference between males (mean age 40.4 yrs.,  $SD = 11.6$ ) and females (mean age 40.2 yrs.,  $SD = 11.3$ ) was not significant. Females formed 52.4 % of the participants



compared to males forming 47.6%, and there were more male (52.3 %) than female (47.7%) senior staff members.

### Instruments

The experience of workplace bullying was measured with the Work Harassment Scale (WHS-24) (Björkqvist & Österman, 1994). The instrument was introduced in Björkqvist, Österman, and Hjelt-Bäck (1994) and in Björkqvist, Österman, and Lagerspetz (1994). Participants assessed how often they felt they had been exposed to 24 types of degrading and oppressing activities by their colleagues during the last half year, on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 1 = seldom, 2 = occasionally, 3 = often, and 4 = very often). In the instructions, it was emphasised that these activities must have been clearly experienced as a means of harassment, not as normal communication, or as exceptional occasions. The 24 items are presented in Table 1.

When the reliability of WHS-24 in the current sample was assessed with Cronbach's alpha, it did not reach a sufficient internal consistency ( $\alpha > .70$ ). It was obvious that a detailed item analysis had to be conducted and the number of items had to be reduced. An exploratory factor analysis with a three-factor solution (principal component, varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation) was conducted, explaining 29 % of the variance. The three factors are presented in Table 1. Factor loadings  $> .40$  are highlighted.

**Table 1. Factor Loadings Based on Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation of the Original Work Harassment Scale (WHS-24) (N = 1, 272).**

WHS-24 Item Description	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Unduly reduced opportunities to express yourself	0.60	0.15	0.14
Lies about you told to others	0.05	0.75	0.95
Being unduly disrupted	0.09	0.07	0.06
Being shouted at loudly	0.11	0.33	0.11
Being unduly criticised	0.72	0.06	0.06
Insulting comments about your private life	0.16	0.67	0.28
Being isolated	0.10	0.02	0.20
Having sensitive details about your private life revealed	0.06	0.00	0.09
Direct threats	0.05	0.07	0.04
Insinuating glances and/ or negative gestures	0.13	0.05	0.14
Accused wrongly	0.02	0.31	0.14
Being sneered at	0.12	0.21	0.02

Refusal to speak with you	0.04	0.29	0.02
Belittling your opinions	0.63	0.04	0.26
Refusal to hear you	0.07	0.28	0.66
Being treated as non-existent	0.01	0.23	0.59
Words aimed at hurting you	0.12	0.22	0.59
Being given meaningless tasks	0.69	0.18	0.14
Being given insulting tasks	0.16	0.02	0.51
Malicious rumours spread behind your back	0.15	0.47	0.08
Ridiculed in front of others	0.76	0.16	0.11
Having your work judged incorrectly and in an insulting manner	0.63	0.17	0.21
Having your sense of judgement questioned	0.48	0.43	0.13
Accusations of being mentally disturbed	0.13	0.04	0.07

Note: Factor loadings over .40 appear in bold. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation..

The items with high loadings in factor 1 were selected for a revised version of WHS, a seven item version, here referred to as WHS-7, which yielded an internal consistency score of  $\alpha = .79$ . This version was used in the present study. The items in this revised version are presented in Table 2.

To examine the association between workplace bullying and mental health, the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12, Goldberg, 1988) was added to the test battery, as an indicator of psychological distress. The GHQ-12 has been used extensively in various settings across different cultures (Kim, Cho, & Park, 2013). The GHQ is usually scored as a Likert scale (Goldberg & Williams, 1994; Politi, Piccinelli, & Wilkinson, 1994). The psychometric properties of GHQ-12 have been examined (Glozah & Pevalin, 2015), and it has been used in studies in Ghana (Abledu & Abledu, 2012; Kekesi & Badu, 2014), and in South Africa (Bernstein & Trimm, 2016). In the current study, the  $\alpha$ -score of the measure was .76 (cf. Table 3).

### **Ethical considerations**

The study adhered to the principles concerning human research ethics of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013), as well as the guidelines for the responsible conduct of research of The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012). Participation was voluntary without any form of economic or other incentive; all participants were adults, and the research was conducted with informed consent, strict anonymity, and confidentiality.

**Table 2. Cronbach’s Alpha and Items of the Scale Measuring Workplace Bullying with an Abbreviated Version of the Work Harassment Scale (WHS-7) (N = 1,287)**

WHS-7, $\alpha = .79$
Unduly reduced opportunities to express yourself
Being unduly criticised
Belittling of your opinions
Being given meaningless tasks
Being ridiculed in front of others
Having your work judged incorrectly and in an insulting manner
Having your sense of judgment questioned

**Table 3. Cronbach’s Alpha and Items of the Short Version of General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12, Goldberg & Williams, 1988) (N = 1,287)**

GHQ-12, $\alpha = .76$
Have you recently been able to concentrate on whatever you’re doing
Have you recently lost much sleep over worry
Have you recently felt that you were playing a useful part in things
Have you recently felt capable of making decisions about things
Have you recently felt constantly under strain
Have you recently felt you couldn’t overcome your difficulties
Have you recently been able to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities
Have you recently been able to face up to problems
Have you recently been feeling unhappy or depressed
Have you recently been losing confidence in yourself
Have you recently been thinking of yourself as a worthless person
Have you recently been feeling reasonably happy, all things considered

**Results**

The means and SDs of scores on WHS-7 and GHQ-12 by female and male junior and senior staff members are presented in Table 4. Of the total sample, 19.1% scored  $\geq 3$  on WHS-7, implying that they at an average scored “often” or “very often” on the items measuring workplace bullying. It should therefore be safe to conclude that about 19% of the sample experienced themselves as victims of workplace bullying.

The two measures correlated highly with each other: .45 for females, and .52 for males. This finding shows that there is, indeed, a clear association between scores on workplace bullying and psychological distress.

A two-way multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed, with sex (male vs. female) and staff status (junior vs. senior) as independent variables, and WHS-7 and GHQ-12 as dependent variables. The multivariate analysis revealed that there was no effect of sex on the two dependent variables [ $F_{(2, 1267)} = 0.139, p = .871, \eta_p^2 = .000$ ]; neither was the interaction effect between sex and staff status significant [ $F_{(2, 1267)} = 0.118, p = .889, \eta_p^2 = .000$ ]. However, the multivariate effect of staff status was significant [ $F_{(2, 1267)} = 6145.546, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .890$ ].

The univariate analyses revealed a staff status effect on both WHS-7 scores [ $F_{(1, 1268)} = 4624.231, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .785$ ] and on GHQ-12 scores [ $F_{(1, 1268)} = 3315.025, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .723$ ]. In both cases, junior staff members scored higher than senior staff members.

**Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations of the WHS-7 and GHQ-12 in a Ghanaian Workplace Sample (Females = 654, Males = 681)**

	Level of Occupation							
	Junior Staff				Senior Staff			
	Females		Males		Females		Males	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Work Harassment	2.58	0.49	2.57	0.50	0.44	0.32	0.44	0.33
GHQ	2.85	0.40	2.87	0.33	1.47	0.28	1.48	0.33

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to assess possible sex difference in experiences of workplace bullying, as measured with WHS-7, among employees of public institutions in Ghana. A second aim was to examine whether there was a difference between junior and senior level staff members regarding experiences of workplace bullying. A third aim was to investigate whether there was an association between scores on workplace bullying and symptoms of psychological distress, as measured with GHQ-12.

Until now, there has been no official record on workplace bullying in Ghana, although the prevalence has been thought to be “alarming” (Asamani, 2010).

The findings showed no sex differences in experiences of workplace bullying in the examined sample. In comparison with other studies conducted worldwide, it is consistent with some of them, such as findings from Germany (Vartia-Väänänen, 2013). However, women have been found to be victimised slightly more than men in Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands (ibid.).

This result is intriguing, because Ghana is considered to be a highly patriarchal society, and previous studies (DeKeseredy, 2011; Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009) have argued that in such societies, males use violence against females to preserve their dominance. However, in a recent study conducted by Darko et al. (2019), more males than females were found to be victimised from low intensity aggression in intimate partner relationships. Therefore, the current study, which found that male and female employees were equally often victimised at both junior and senior staff levels, may reflect a trend in Ghana where victims of workplace bullying were victimised based on other factors than sex per se.

Given that workplace bullying is more often a downwards rather than an upwards process, and considering the fact there would be more males occupying managerial positions in Ghana, the lack of a sex difference in victimisation is a bit surprising. This result may be a confirmation that the use of aggression between males and females in Ghanaian workplaces may not be influenced by sex after all. This finding, in combination with the aforementioned one by Darko et al. (2019) concerning intimate partner aggression, suggests that Ghanaian society appears to be moving towards increased egalitarianism between males and females.

Compared with senior staff employees, junior staff members were victimised by workplace bullying to a higher degree. These results are consistent with previous studies, which found managers to be perpetrators to a higher degree than others than same-level colleagues (Cobb, 2012; Namie, 2017).

For workplace bullying to occur without sanctions, there must be an organisational culture supportive of the abusive and negative acts. If victims, who more often are junior staff members, feel no action is taken when bullying is reported, managers would feel they have the support of the organisation, at least implicitly. Possibly, organisations perceive perpetrators as strict disciplinarians who make the organisation profit from their disciplinary actions. Compliance and discipline are necessary conditions for downwards directed workplace bullying to continue. Strict emphasis on power relations and discipline may make bullying and abusive acts seem acceptable and normal, and managers may even be rewarded, e.g., for promotion, for being strict.

It is clear in the Nordic countries, where organisational structure and culture enforce strict rules against bullying, abusive acts against staff members are less prevalent compared to countries in Southern Europe and especially Africa, where it might be perceived as bosses only are being 'strict'.

In many countries in the Southern hemisphere, governments have created huge public institutions which have become over-staffed and badly funded. The state ultimately becomes the biggest, single employer. Unfortunately, workplace aggression is more likely to occur in the public sector than in the private industry (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 2012).

Like in many aspects of human institutions, these organisations grow to have their own traditions, values, and institutional culture. Enabling structures such as power imbalances coupled with a colonial legacy of the authoritarian manager, allow the workplace to become a fertile ground for bullying. Social learning within these organisations makes sure bullying is learnt and continued, creating a next generation of senior staff who would victimise their junior staff members, and show poor skills of conflict resolution. Victimised individuals may be expected to report their bullying experiences to their managers; however, if the perpetrators are the managers themselves, it might feel useless for the victims to report.

Since the analysis of this study was made based on cross-sectional data, causal associations between workplace bullying and psychological distress cannot be claimed with certainty, although they appear likely. It cannot be excluded that individuals who originally might have felt a high degree of psychological distress might also see and experience bullying differently than others.

Notwithstanding, the current study highlights the prevalence of workplace bullying in Ghana and the psychological distress associated with it, in particular among junior staff members. The findings have significant implications for policy-makers and senior staff members. The clear relationship between workplace bullying and psychological distress should inform about the need to implement serious measures to eradicate workplace bullying.

To minimise the use of aggression in the workplace, both individual and organisational steps need to be taken. Victimisation occurs in the public sector more often than in the private sector; therefore, the amount of awareness amongst governments and their employees should be raised, at both organisational and national levels. Public campaigns and organisational rules, punishable by law, needs to be enforced. At the individual level, whatever barriers preventing victims from acting to protect themselves and stop workplace bullying must be removed, and victims should be encouraged to act when they experience unfair and discriminatory treatment. These measures could include anonymous reporting to prevent recrimination, and real, practical action taken after initial report. Unless organisations grasp bullying's harmful effects on the employees and work performance, it would be very challenging to overcome it.

National culture and the national gender situation may influence the experience of bullying differently; e.g., Northern Europe typically reports lower levels of exposure to negative acts than Southern Europe. Therefore, bullying behaviours that are perceived to be an acceptable price to pay for performance must be discouraged, and the cultural perception of 'boss' and 'subordinates', must be redefined through national campaigns aiming at national and cultural behaviour change. Irrespective of context, bullying is an aggressive behaviour that needs to be discouraged.

The present study on workplace bullying in Ghana needs to be followed up in both Ghana and other African nations. Future studies could widen the scope to cover what bullying means in the African context, since many nations in Africa do not even have a term for what is known as 'bullying' in the Western culture.

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