

BEHIND THE SILENCE: UNDERSTANDING MALE EMPLOYEES' EXPERIENCES OF BULLYING IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying affects workers' physical and mental health and remains common worldwide. Most research focuses on how bullying harms women's dignity and professional identity, but men's experiences remain underexplored, especially gender. This study examined 16 men in Sri Lanka's service industry. Through interviews, I explored the bullying they faced, their responses, and their silence. The focus is "gendered silence" – why men hesitate to report it. Men faced performance pressure, public blame, character attacks, and forced after-hours work to control them beyond the workplace. Many saw the pain as a "test of strength", and admitting to the struggle felt like failure. Because of the "male ego" and the idea that a real man does not complain, they kept it to themselves. Bottling it up caused stress, anger, overthinking, headaches and loss of trust. Silence followed. No one wanted to be ridiculed, called weak, or face career risks. Society tells men to be tough and not show weakness. Research needs to include gender as a variable. Companies must recognise public humiliation and work overload as bullying, and support systems must be implemented for both men and women to ensure that individuals can speak up safely. Theoretically, this requires a gender lens.

1. Introduction

Workplace bullying is an increasingly recognised phenomenon that undermines organizational functioning and exerts adverse effects on global and public health. Workplace bullying is characterised by the persistent mistreatment of one or several employees by other workers or organizational agents (Einarsen, 1999). Such unacceptable behaviors are manifested through humiliation, excessive criticism, exclusion, and unrealistic expectations, among others, which ultimately challenge the victim's dignity and status in the workplace (Einarsen et al., 2020).

Several studies have demonstrated that workplace bullying has adverse mental and physical health consequences, including psychological stress,

anxiety, depression, insomnia, and poor job satisfaction (Högh et al., 2011; Rosander, 2025). Professionally, bullying experiences among nursing and medical personnel have been linked to compromised professional identity and pessimistic perceptions of occupations (Tong et al., 2025; Vidanapathirana et al., 2025). Despite the deleterious effects of bullying, it is ubiquitous in all industries and geographical regions. Workplace bullying is primarily attributed to organizational power dynamics and related cultural practices that normalise unacceptable behaviour among organizational agents (Akella, 2020). In particular, subordinate employees find it difficult to report or challenge the unacceptable behaviours of managers and other superior cadres because of their influential roles in career progression, performance evaluation and feedback, and general supervision

(Yang et al., 2025).

Such an observation is particularly common in South Asia, including Sri Lanka, where employees exhibit fear and avoidance in reporting bullying due to societal expectations and conflict avoidance (Jayaratne & Wijewardena, 2025). Additionally, the literature on workplace bullying has been dominated by female victims, with most empirical studies emphasising the adverse effects of bullying on dignity, career prospects, and professional identity (O'Donnell & MacIntosh, 2016). Although such information is crucial for developing gender-responsive bullying interventions, there is limited information on male bullying experiences and attitudes towards the phenomenon (Pranitha et al., 2025). Workplace bullying not only limits men's career purpose but also affects their psychological well-being, with men finding it difficult to report due to society's expectations of showing emotional stability and internal problems (Adikaram & Weerakotuwa, 2024).

The issue of workplace bullying among men has not been studied, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka. Previous studies on bullying have focused on the general employee population or female victims, and there are gaps in understanding male-specific bullying experiences and responses. Some recent literature has explored bullying among interns, but there is a lack of data on men's bullying experiences in the service and corporate industries (Vidanapathirana et al., 2025). Additionally, there is limited information on how Sri Lankan men perceive bullying in the context of societal expectations regarding masculinity. Given the prevalence of patriarchy in Sri Lankan societal and organizational cultures, understanding men's bullying experiences is crucial for developing effective organizational interventions. Specifically, men experience pressure to maintain family livelihoods and uphold professional status, which influences their attitudes towards bullying (Jayaratne & Wijewardena, 2025). Therefore, qualitative studies are needed to explain men's bullying experiences and perceptions in Sri Lankan workplaces.

Workplace bullying is a widespread issue characterised by multiple harmful effects on victims and organisations. Most past studies have discussed how bullying affects women. However, little is known about how men experience bullying and how they deal with it. However, the situation is different for men. Historically, society has long held the social norm that men should be stronger than women (Allen, 2025; Martin & Yoo, 2025). Moreover,

company rules to stop bullying often do not work well. Many men say that the policies are unclear and that no one really helps when they report (Akella, 2020).

This is a significant problem in Sri Lanka. We barely understand how men face bullying. Therefore, we need solutions that actually consider men's experiences, and the dearth of literature on bullying experiences among Sri Lankan men contributes to the overall 'deafening silence' that characterizes employees' attempts to address the issue (Pranitha et al., 2025). If most studies on workplace bullying focus on the general or female employee population, organizational responses and policies are not male-friendly, thus exacerbating bullying experiences among men (O'Donnell & MacIntosh, 2016). Specifically, male victims are unable to utilise existing institutional avenues for redress due to gender-specific bullying responses, such as avoidance of the issue due to fear of losing employment (Pranitha et al., 2025). Therefore, there is a need for qualitative literature examining male bullying experiences in the Sri Lankan context.

1.1 Problem Statement

Workplace bullying has attracted especial attention, yet the literature is focused on women's experiences, particularly around sexual harassment and cyberbullying (Lewis, 2004; Salin, 2021). This pattern is also observed in Sri Lanka. Even if studies include both genders, women's voices receive more space. Men's stories are few, spread out, and usually described rather than explained (Einarsen et al., 2020; Workplace Bullying Institute [WBI], 2024). Simultaneously, men also face verbal abuse, unfair pressure, and hostile work environments. This leads to mental stress, loss of confidence, and poor performance in the workplace. However, these problems are rarely discussed in academic papers or company rules.. Male employees may tolerate verbal and nonverbal aggression, unreasonable performance pressure, and hostile working conditions that produce psychological distress, reduce self-esteem, and lower work performance; however, these experiences rarely surface in either academic literature or organisational policy. This silence raises pressing questions: why does male bullying remain unexplored, why do men downplay their experiences, and what are the psychological and physical effects of that silence?

Therefore, the core problem addressed in this study is the shortage of evidence and contextual understanding regarding how male employees in Sri

Lanka experience workplace bullying, how they respond to and cope with it, and which organisational and cultural factors contribute to the continued invisibility of male victims in modern workplaces.

1.2 Research Questions and Research Objectives

Research Question

1. How do male employees describe the forms of workplace bullying?
2. How do the victims of workplace bullying in male employees act and respond?
3. Why is male bullying a hidden issue?

Research Objectives

1. Determine the various ways in which bullying takes place in the environment and its effect on the bullied employees.
2. Ascertain various ways in which the victims of bullying respond towards being trolled at work.
3. Discuss the reasons why male bullying is not a topic that is openly discussed and addressed.

1.3 Research Gap

Although workplace bullying is a well-established field of study, a gap remains in relation to men's experiences, particularly outside Western contexts. Existing Sri Lankan research Primarily highlights female victims within education, healthcare, and other service sectors, while male experiences across workplaces remain largely undocumented. Furthermore, few qualitative studies have analysed why male employees choose silence over disclosure or how cultural perceptions of masculinity intersect with organisational hierarchy, job insecurity, and weak reporting systems to sustain silence. This study addresses this gap by generating context-specific, firsthand evidence of male employees' lived experiences of bullying in Sri Lankan workplaces.

2. Literature Review

Workplace bullying is usually defined as repeated negative behaviour aimed at one person who cannot easily defend themselves because someone in the company has more power (Einarsen, 1999). What makes it different from normal workplace conflict is

that it does not stop. This is not the only argument. This pattern continues and slowly damages the person's mental health, work performance, and relationships at work. This power difference can stem from a boss's position, from someone being popular in the office, or from belonging to a stronger group. Because of this power, the victim finds it hard to fight back or stop the behaviour (Salin and Hoel, 2013).

Researchers have divided bullying into several categories that interact with each other. Verbal and nonverbal bullying includes shouting, insults, sarcasm, and humiliation. It can also be hostile gestures, being left out, or people hiding information from you on purpose (Einarsen et al., 2020). Social or relational bullying occurs when someone damages your relationships at work. This occurs through gossip, rumours, or being left out of meetings and office groups. This is harmful because it makes people feel like they do not belong (McCormack et al., 2018). Work-related bullying affects your ability to perform your job. For example, giving too much work, deadlines that cannot be met, or unclear instructions on purpose. Person-related bullying is different. It attacks you as a person, not your work, said one participant. This means mockery, humiliation, or people questioning whether you are capable (Akella, 2020).. Threatening behaviour represents a further category in which fear is used to silence or control the target (Salin & Hoel, 2013). Digital or cyberbullying has emerged as technology increasingly mediates workplace communications. Research in Sri Lanka's medical sector, for instance, found that messaging platforms were sometimes used to publicly criticise junior staff, intensifying humiliation (Vidanapathirana et al., 2025).

2.1 Male Employee Experience

Although early studies on bullying focused on female victims, existing research provides increasing evidence of the prevalence of bullying among men. O'Donnell and MacIntosh (2016) conducted a qualitative study of male bullying victims who survived workplace bullying and demonstrated that males are more likely to normalise the experience in terms of cultural rules about being strong, silent, and self-sufficient. Such a response mechanism is associated with the increased likelihood of shame and embarrassment that male victims feel when they consider their options for seeking help and reporting bullying (O'Donnell & MacIntosh, 2016). Therefore, men usually try to handle bullying on their own and keep quiet about it instead of asking

colleagues for help.

In addition, men are bullied more in male-dominated workplaces. In these places, the company culture normalises aggression and dominance (Akella, 2020).. Finally, intersectionality may be particularly relevant for male victims of bullying, especially when it involves concepts such as colorism. Spady's (2023) article focuses on the African American male community and provides evidence on how colorism may be exacerbated by the power dynamics in organizations. As take overall it shows male victims stay silent and deal with it alone instead talking about it openly with others (O'Donnell & MacIntosh, 2016) Due to this, They try to continue solve themselves but it most affect for their performance, self - esteem and other feelings.. Vidanapathirana et al. (2025) provide cross-sectional evidence from an internship of doctors in Sri Lanka, demonstrating that verbal abuse, humiliation, and extreme criticism are the main contributors to such outcomes for both females and males.

Overall, the research shows that men do face serious bullying at work. But because of how society expects men to act, and because of the culture in many workplaces, they usually don't speak up. That probably means we're underestimating how many men are actually going through this. If companies really want to protect everyone, they need to acknowledge this. Policies shouldn't just be made for the kinds of victims we expect to see based on gender.

2.2 Forms of Workplace Bullying

Gender is also a factor that may influence bullying, either directly or indirectly. The reviewed literature suggests that bullying is a phenomenon reflecting gendered power relations in organisations: men are supposed to be assertive and unyielding, and women are supposed to be supportive and sensitive, and those who fail to conform to these stereotypes are likely to become victims (Escartín et al., 2018). In line with the findings of McCormack et al. (2018), the gender of the perpetrators and victims is also relevant, with female victims being more likely to be exposed to exclusion and rumour-telling and male victims to verbal abuse, intimidation, and public humiliation. At the level of organisational culture, gender norms may also serve as a possible factor contributing to workplace bullying: gendered power relations are often reinforced by informal mechanisms, so that those who attempt to transcend the preset gender roles are exposed to

bullying from their colleagues (McCormack et al., 2018). For example, female leaders may become victims of workplace bullying because of their attempts to assert authority, whereas men may be ridiculed for expressing vulnerability at work.

Evidence from Sri Lanka is similar to international trends.. A critical analysis of bullying and turnover intentions among higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka revealed that organisational politics, together with hierarchical and reporting structures, contribute to sustaining bullying practices towards both genders, though with differences related to social roles and power (Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology et al., 2024). Gender-specific norms of masculinity lead men not to seek help even when victimised, which may exacerbate adverse psychological outcomes (O'Donnell & MacIntosh, 2016). This may partly explain the tendency for male bullying to occur discreetly compared to female cases.

2.3 Responses of Bullying and The Cultural of Silence

People do not respond to bullying in the same way. It really comes down to the situation, what is going on in their personal life, and whether they trust the organisation; some employees go the formal route. They report it to their managers, HR, or senior leaders. Others lean on informal support instead – talking to friends, family, or a colleague they trust who is not in their reporting line – and some people just silently deal with it. They may ignore the person, avoid them, confront them, or avoid working with them in any capacity (Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2025). The research suggests an evident gender difference in terms of how bullying is reported. Men were significantly less likely to report bullying through formal channels. They are more likely to avoid and cover up issues (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004).

The theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity helps explain this phenomenon. Martin and Yoo (2025) explain that hegemonic masculinity dictates that men should be unemotional, self-sufficient, and hardworking in the workplace community and avoid seeking help from others while facing challenges at work, with the absence of these features leading to questioning masculinity. Jayaratne and Wijewardena's (2025) qualitative research on gender-based violence against men in South Asia illustrates that negative social expectations, gender power dynamics, and gender stereotypes contribute to hegemonic masculinity and prevent men from seeking social support when subjected to workplace

bullying, making it comparable to other forms of gender-based violence. However, the reluctance to report bullying incidents stems not only from negative connotations associated with hegemonic masculinity but also from practical reasons, including the risk of termination, responsibility for family members' well-being, the possibility that human resource departments would take no action against aggressors, and unawareness that verbal abuse, exclusion, and unequal distribution of tasks constitute workplace bullying (Al Shaikh Abubakar, Rahman, & Osman, 2025). Such practical reasons for staying silent on bullying incidents are explained by the lack of legal protection and the ambiguity around the definition of bullying in general, with many workers associating it only with physical violence and thus failing to realise that psychological abuse can also be harmful.

2.4 Coping Strategies

The coping strategies employees choose to address bullying affect not only their well-being but also the continued occurrence of abuse. Strategies such as avoidance and suppression may protect employees in the short term but leave them exposed to prolonged and repeated harm and delay any organisational response (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004). Informal support from friends, partners, or colleagues can be effective in providing comfort, even if such support does little to actually address mistreatment and may include counsel to simply accept the situation. Formal reports can successfully stop bullying when managers act, but they can also fail or even worsen the situation if the bully has more power or if human resource management is biased (Rashid, Karim, & Hassan, 2025). Self-management, such as careful documentation of tasks, conscious modification of behaviour, or increased alertness, can allow some employees to reduce the risk of being blamed without directly confronting the bully. In more serious cases, maladaptive coping mechanisms such as drug abuse can provide an indication of how seriously the harassment is being taken (Hogh et al., 2011).

Since coping responses can differ depending on the organisational context, relationship with the perpetrator, and individual circumstances, researchers increasingly argue that organisations should take primary responsibility for preventing and addressing workplace bullying (Rosander, 2025).

Gender differences in coping mechanisms have received increased attention in recent men's health

literature. Üzümcüker's (2025) meta-analysis uncovered a persistent negative association between traditional masculine norms and willingness to seek professional or psychological help. This finding has important implications for the present study, as men who strongly identify with ideals of toughness and self-reliance are likely to be less receptive to seeking counsellors, human resource officers, or trustworthy colleagues' advice when facing bullying situations. In a similar vein, Mokhelepa and Sumbane's (2025) systematic review revealed that adherence to traditional masculine norms could predict psychological distress disclosure avoidance. Finally, Tong et al.'s (2025) study on male nurses also implied the deleterious impact of bullying on professional identity and engagement. This could be particularly true for men who are concerned about being negatively judged by their peers for their feelings of vulnerability. Cumulative evidence suggests that men's responses to psychological stress are largely informed by gender-specific social norms. The findings of the present study suggest that similar norms may account for male employees' reactions to bullying in Sri Lanka.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity was chosen as an interpretive framework to examine the social expectations of masculinity that may contribute to men's encounters with workplace bullying. The tendency for men to conform to societal expectations of being strong, independent, unemotional, and self-sufficient can contribute to avoiding seeking help or reporting bullying (Martin & Yoo, 2025).

Furthermore, the theory offers a comprehensive basis for understanding how expectations of masculinity may affect men's tendency to tolerate bullying, stay silent, avoid formal reporting, and engage in alternative coping mechanisms. Notably, this study does not presuppose uniform responses among male employees when faced with bullying behaviour. Instead, the Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity is employed to elucidate how men's experiences, coping strategies, help-seeking behaviours, and reporting tendencies may be influenced by their perception of masculinity.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study is based on an interpretivist research philosophy that acknowledges that social reality is

created by individuals and cannot be objectively measured. It is applied to the current context of workplace bullying as it considers the role of organisational culture, beliefs, and social elements, making it subjective and difficult to measure (Salin, 2013). Gender roles and cultural expectations that influence men's perceptions and responses to workplace harassment are likely to be present in the work environment.

3.2 Research Approach & Strategy

A qualitative research design was chosen to understand participants' individual experiences, perceptions, and interactions, rather than focusing on quantifying the occurrence of bullying incidents. This approach was selected because of the sensitivity of the issue and potential difficulties in defining bullying behaviours for male participants, influenced by gender norms (Lewis, 2016). Qualitative interviews provided an opportunity for participants to narrate their bullying experiences and allowed researchers to obtain in-depth information. Moreover, an inductive method was applied to explore potential connections and relationships within the dataset, instead of postulating a theory before collecting data. This was justified by the insufficient number of qualitative studies on the prevalence of workplace bullying among male employees in Sri Lanka (Escartín et al., 2018). A case study design was used to analyse workplace bullying in male employees, which comprised a cross-sectional study. This study utilised a cross-sectional design to collect data from

participants at a particular moment. The research sample consisted of male employees working in diverse industries and organisational tiers in Sri Lanka.

3.3 Participant and Sampling

Interviews were conducted with 16 male employees. They came from nine different sectors: banking, apparel, IT, healthcare, education, recruitment, media, corporate services, and construction. Their roles were also diverse. Some were interns. Some were assistants, officers, and executives. We also interviewed one project manager. Their work experience ranged from 6 months to 5 years. Random sampling was not used; purposive sampling was used. That just means choosing people who were willing to talk about sensitive workplace stuff and who could give me different perspectives – different jobs, different seniority levels, different industries. The idea was not to study one company but to hear a range of experiences, which is acceptable for qualitative research. We are not trying to be statistically representative here. We are trying to understand experiences in depth (Escartín et al., 2018). So 16 people from different backgrounds was enough. One thing stood out: quite a few participants were interns or junior staff. They depended on their supervisors for everything – training, tasks, performance reviews, and even references for future jobs. This kind of dependence probably made them more vulnerable. This likely made them less likely to push back or report mistreatment.

Table 1: Participant details

Participant code	Industry	Position	Work experience
P01	Banking	HR Executive	1 year
P02	Apparel	Quality Assurance employee	1 year
P03	SaaS / Digital Marketing	Junior Graphic Designer	1.5 years
P04	Healthcare	Management Assistant	5 years
P05	IT	Software Engineer Intern	6 months
P06	Corporate services	Marketing Executive	1 year
P07	Corporate services	Payroll Assistant	1 year
P08	Recruitment	Operations Intern	6 months
P09	IT	Customer Success and Project Manager	3.5 years

P10	Education	Marketing Officer	1 year
P11	Banking	Account Opening Officer	More than 1 year
P12	IT	Intern Software Engineer	6 months
P13	Television / Media	Assistant Producer / Radio Programmer	2 years
P14	IT	Business Analyst Intern	6 months
P15	IT	HR Assistant	1 year
P16	Construction	Machine Operator	2 years

3.4 Data Collection Method

The research was based on semi-structured interviews with approximately 16 male employees from different industries. The interviews will be either face-to-face or online, depending on what works best for the participants. I chose semi-structured interviews because they give people space to talk openly in their own words, but they also ensure that I cover the key topics I need to (Salin, 2013; Lewis, 2016). Before each interview, I will obtain consent. With your permission, I will record the conversation and then transcribe it word-for-word later. For analysis, I will use thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Basically, this means that I will go through the transcripts, look for patterns, and pull out the main themes. This is a good fit for this study because I am trying to understand how these guys actually experience and make sense of workplace bullying.

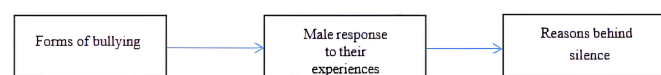
3.5 Ethical Consideration.

This topic is sensitive because it discusses human feelings. Therefore, when doing the above-mentioned a-z about research, purpose and how it would be done. Participants provided their consent verbally or in writing, and participation was voluntary. If they are not comfortable during the interview, they can withdraw and leave. They have the right to request protection of their details. This can affect their emotional well-being. Some questions can be sensitive, and can lead to upsetting, avoidance of answering questions, and discomfort. Participants could skip any question they did not want to answer. The participants were referred to using codes. (P1-P2). This protects the confidentiality of data. If any details could identify any person, they were removed or changed. Finding details perform honestly and accurately, no collected only secondary data or falsehood data.

This research was conducted with sensitivity and respect for the participants' well-being.

3.6 Mind Map

Figure 1: Regression model results



4.0 Finding & Discussion

The findings below are based on interviews with 16 male employees, P01 to P16. They worked in banking, apparel, IT, healthcare, education, recruitment, media, corporate services, and construction, and most had 6 months to 5 years of experience. Many were interns, assistants, or junior officers. In these roles, training, work tasks, evaluations, and even future job references depended on their supervisors, and in several cases, the same supervisors took part in the mistreatment, which may explain why many participants chose to remain silent, tolerate the situation, or cope independently instead of formally reporting the issue, despite the severity and persistence of the mistreatment. Four themes emerged from the analysis: types of bullying, participants' responses, reasons for not reporting bullying, and coping mechanisms. The analysis also revealed several patterns. The most common concern was a lack of trust in the reporting system (93.8 %), followed by shame or fear of judgement linked to masculinity (81.3 %). Other factors included unfair blame (68.8 %), heavy workloads (62.5 %), staying silent (50.0 %), formal reporting (37.5 %), and not seeing non-physical bullying as real bullying (18.8 %). These numbers only apply to this group and should not be used to represent all male employees in Sri Lanka's garment industry.

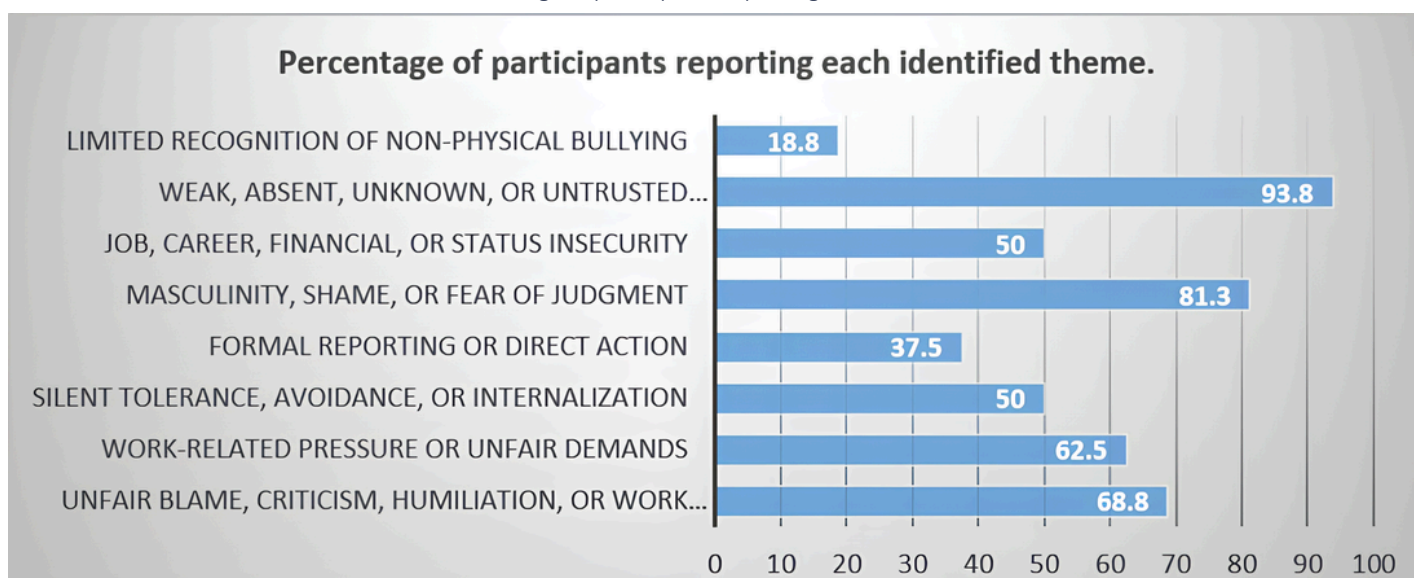
Table 2: Percentage of participants reporting each identified theme

Table 2 shows that the greatest number of participants—93.8%—reported that the reporting system was weak, absent, unknown or not trusted, then 81.3% said that masculinity, shame or fear of judgment was a factor. From participant , 68.85 mentioned unfair blame, criticism, humiliation or work obstructions, and 62.5% said they had experienced work-related pressure or unfair demands. Silent tolerance, avoidance or internalisation was reported by 50.0% of the participants, while 37.5% said they had carried out formal reporting or taken direct action. Limited recognition of non-physical bullying was noted by 18.8% of the participants.

4.1 Discussion

4.1.1 Forms of Workplace Bullying

Participants described many types of bullying, most of which were not physical. The most common problems were rude talk, too much work, blame, misuse of power, unfair treatment, jokes about gender and appearance, and damage to reputation. Rude talk and bad behaviour were common. P01 stated that in his first job, his coworkers made comments about his skin colour. This made him feel alone as a new person in the workplace. P08 was mocked for his gender when he declined to work overtime. A coworker told him, “You are not a mama's boy, you are a boy, why can't you stay?” Such comments were not jokes. They were used to pressure people into doing extra work without pay. Too much work and unfair demands were also reported frequently, especially by interns and junior staff. P03 stated that he was given tasks at midnight and told to finish them immediately. P04 had to work overtime and without pay. P10, P12, and P15 said they had to answer work calls after office hours,

work on weekends, and meet targets even when it was impossible. P05 and P14 said that even though they were interns, they were expected to work like experienced staff and were always under heavy pressure. Other participants spoke about blame and harsh criticism. Some were blamed for mistakes that were not their fault. Supervisors would shout in front of others or criticise small errors very badly. This made people feel embarrassed and stressed. The misuse of power was another issue. Some supervisors used their positions to control their staff. They changed shifts without notice, assigned the hardest tasks to certain people, and threatened them with performance reviews and future job references. Unfair treatment was also mentioned by some participants. The work was not equally divided. Some coworkers received special treatment while others were ignored. Chances for promotion were also unfairly given. A few participants faced jokes about their gender and appearance. P08 and others said they were teased for looking “weak” or for not acting “man enough.” Comments about their bodies, clothes, and behaviour made them uncomfortable. Finally, some people had problems with damage to their credit and reputation due to their gambling. Their work was taken by others and presented as someone else's work. In other cases, rumours were spread to make them look bad in front of their managers and coworkers.

Blame and criticism came up a lot and caused a lot of stress. P03 said his supervisor blamed him for problems even when he had done nothing wrong, and even took the complaints to the CEO. P07 said he was blamed for attendance issues in the whole office and was unfavourably compared to a former employee in front of others. P11 said that a manager shouted at him in public after a customer complaint.

P16 also said that he was blamed for small problems just because he was near when something went wrong. Power and control were also misused. P03 said plainly, "I did not have the opportunity to voice my opinions and ideas", and explained how a supervisor stopped him from sharing his design ideas. P06 said a senior colleague purposely interfered with his work and made him slower. Unfair treatment showed up as well. P02 said he was not given information and did not receive credit after he had a disagreement with a supervisor. P04 said he kept getting extra work even after his official workload was reduced. Gender and appearance also worsened the situation for some individuals. Along

with comments about his skin colour, P01 said people also talked about his body, which made him feel even more left out. P08 felt that there was a double standard because he was expected to stay later than female colleagues just because he was male. It worsened when he was mocked for pushing back against it. Finally, participants discussed the damage to their credit and reputation. P09 stated that there was gossip and that senior staff purposely left him out of professional circles. P13 said that juniors' successes were usually given to seniors, but when something went wrong, the blame went to juniors.

Table 3: The forms of workplace bullying

Theme	Category	Possible Codes	Preliminary interpretation
Forms of Workplace Bullying	Verbal / interpersonal mistreatment	Insulting comments, humiliation, harsh communication, inappropriate jokes	Men may experience bullying through repeated negative communication that undermines dignity and confidence
	Excessive workload	Work overload, unreasonable deadlines, after-hours work, weekend work	Work tasks may be used as a method of pressure, control, or punishment
	Blame and criticism	Unfair blame, public criticism, repeated blaming, being blamed for mistakes	Participants may perceive criticism as bullying when it is repeated, unfair, humiliating, or connected to unequal power
	Power and control	Excessive supervision, restricting opinions, interference with work	Supervisors or senior employees may use organizational authority to control and silence junior workers
	Unfair treatment	Unequal treatment, unfair workload, comparison with others	Participants may experience bullying through unfair treatment rather than direct verbal abuse
	Gender/appearance-based treatment	Skin-colour comments, gender stereotypes, gender-based expectations	Some bullying appears related to social stereotypes and personal identity
	Credit and reputation	Taking credit, gossip, creating a bad image	Bullying may harm employees' professional reputation and reduce their standing within the organization

4.1.2 Responses to Workplace Bullying

Participants dealt with bullying in different ways. Some asked for support from friends, ignored them, or reported them to seniors. They tried to avoid problems. Some managed their own way or remained silent. P03 reported his supervisor to

senior management and the CEO. P04 complained about too much work, and his manager reduced his duties. P07 spoke to the chairman about payroll and attendance issues and received a clear explanation. P15 and P16 also reported their concerns to senior executives, and P15 received real support. However,

formal reporting does not always work. P03 stated that the mistreatment continued even after he reported it. P16 felt that the management was not on his side. P10 told a senior colleague who was close to retirement, so that the latter could not take action. Informal support was common and often felt better than going through official channels, even if it did not solve the problem. P01 spoke to a friend and his girlfriend. P03 shared his stress with his girlfriend, who was supportive. P09 relied on close friends and mentors. P02 and P13 spoke to colleagues or friends outside their company. Some friends told them to be patient. Even though the advice came from a good place, bullying did not stop. Many participants chose to tolerate the side effects. P04 decided to ignore the bully and be patient with the situation. P06 avoided working with

that person and kept his frustration to himself. P11 stated that he simply put up with it and moved on. For some people, avoidance went further. P01 became distant from her colleagues and eventually resigned. P10 considered resigning. P13 stated that he lost interest in the industry. P14 had trouble focusing and felt physically fatigued. Only a few people confronted the bullies directly. P03 publicly challenged his supervisor. P07 provided a practical solution to the chairman instead of staying quiet. However, speaking up was risky because people could be called disobedient or face backlash. Finally, some participants managed the situation by changing their behaviour. P04 focused on time management and patience, while P07 kept detailed records and obtained signatures to protect himself from blame regarding attendance and payroll.

Table 4: The responses to workplace bullying

Theme	Category	Possible Codes	Preliminary interpretation
Responses to Workplace Bullying	Internal response	Reporting to manager, reporting to CEO, reporting to chairman	A small number of participants may attempt organizational reporting, especially when the bullying becomes severe
	Informal support	Talking to friends, girlfriend, team members, colleagues	Men may seek support privately rather than use official workplace procedures
	Coping by tolerance	Staying patient, ignoring behaviour, keeping problems inside	Silence may function as a survival strategy, although it does not solve the bullying
	Avoidance	Rejecting job, resigning, continuing work without confrontation	Participants may withdraw instead of reporting because they believe confrontation will worsen the problem
	Confrontation	Verbal confrontation, questioning unfair blame	Some men may challenge bullying directly, although this may involve personal risk
	Self-management	Time management, doing work independently	Participants may try to control their own work performance instead of addressing the bully's behavior

4.1.3 Reasons for Silence

The main reason participants did not make formal reports was clear. They kept quiet because of shame, worrying about what others would think, ideas about being “manly”, fear of losing their job, money and family pressure, not trusting the company to do anything, and some not even seeing non-physical treatment as bullying. Shame was a big reason. P01 admitted feeling ashamed and had spoken about his experience only once, to his girlfriend, while P07 suggested that some men regard admitting mistreatment as dishonourable. Along with shame, there was a fear of judgement. P01 worried that

others would see him as unable to cope, P05 said that men often avoid discussing problems for fear of judgement, and P10 explained that men tend to overlook issues because they worry about how others will perceive them. Ideas about masculinity also emerged repeatedly. P03 stated, “As boys they are taught that they should never cry”, P04 explained that men often conceal their struggles to preserve an image of manliness, and P05 added that many men believe that problems must be solved alone. P09 feared appearing weak if he reported his treatment, and P11 summarised the pressure succinctly: “It looks like you are weak to report.

"Money and job worries made the silence worse. P02 believed that reporting to human resources would worsen his situation rather than resolve it, and might risk his employment; P13 stayed silent because he needed to retain his position long enough to secure required service letters; and P06 explained the underlying pressure directly: "We need to earn money. So, no matter what happens or what difficulties we face, we continue working while tolerating them." P16 noted that family responsibilities made it difficult to take the risk of leaving a job, even one involving mistreatment: A lack of trust in company systems was another key

reason. P09 explained, "We can't say anything to HR because HR is close to that person", while P03 noted that his supervisor effectively controlled the human resource function, and P12 avoided reporting because the HR manager tended to blame employees rather than investigate fairly. Finally, some participants did not see what happened to them as bullying. P05 wasn't even sure if what happened to him counted as bullying. P06 and P14 perceived it as work stress or pressure, not as mistreatment. If people do not know what "bullying" means, they will not come forward and talk about it.

Table 5: The reasons for silence

Theme	Category	Possible Codes	Preliminary interpretation
Reasons for Men's Silence	Shame and embarrassment	Feeling ashamed, feeling shy, embarrassment	Some men may see victimization as inconsistent with how they believe men should behave
	Fear of being judged	Fear of judgment, fear of looking weak	Men may avoid disclosure because they anticipate negative reactions from colleagues or society
	Masculinity expectations	Need to appear strong, "men should handle problems"	Masculine norms appear to be one of the strongest barriers to reporting
	Job security	Fear of losing job, career impact	Reporting may be viewed as risky when the bully has authority or influence
	Financial/family responsibility	Need to earn money, family responsibilities	Financial dependence may pressure men to endure mistreatment rather than leave or complain
	Lack of trust/support	Fear of no support, HR being close to bully, information spreading	Employees may remain silent because they do not believe organizations will respond fairly
	Lack of awareness	Not knowing reporting systems, not recognising behaviour as bullying	Lack of awareness may prevent employees from recognizing or naming non-physical bullying

4.2 How They Cope With It?

People cope in different ways. Most of them told someone they trusted about it. Most participants, including P01, P02, P03, P09, and P13, told a trusted person about the problem to cope with the stress and negative emotions produced by bullying.. This helped them feel slightly better. Some took practical steps. Some participants adopted a pragmatic approach to bullying by employing protective measures. For example, they stay patient or keep records to protect themselves. For instance, P04 minimised conflicts by being patient and using his managerial position to avoid confrontations. In

contrast, P07 filed his attendance and payroll records to protect himself against future allegations and hold his oppressors accountable for their actions. Similarly, the tolerance displayed by P04, P06, and P11 enabled them to retain their jobs and maintain economic stability despite ongoing bullying. Nevertheless, this strategy exposed them to adverse physiological effects, as demonstrated by the experiences of P04, P06, and P11.

Other respondents indicated that they coped with bullying by smoking, using alcohol, and other self-protective measures. In addition, some participants

responded to the stressors by displaying emotional numbness, confusion, and disinterest in their jobs and even contemplated quitting their jobs, as demonstrated by P10, P13, and P14.

The analysis indicates that most subjects responded to bullying by focusing on their problems and managing their feelings. This demonstrates that they attempted to address the situation from an individual perspective instead of engaging institutional mechanisms to stop the oppression. This finding suggests that the lack of trust in the organisation's ability or willingness to address the issue prompted workers to adopt individualistic measures to manage the stress and adverse effects of bullying.

4.3 Discussion

Together, the findings provide a clearer picture of how male employees experience bullying in Sri Lankan workplaces. It was rarely about one isolated incident. Most mistreatment was ongoing and built through supervisory control over workload, information, performance reviews, and reputation. That matches Yang, Luo, Yang, and Feng's (2025) work on leadership-related bullying in hierarchical settings, and Al Shaikh Abubakar et al.'s (2025) description of emotional, psychological, and occupational forms. The similarity across countries suggests that bullying is not just a personality conflict. It grows when supervisory power is not properly checked, and coping is mostly informal. Participants turned to friends, partners, or trusted colleagues. Many stayed patient, avoided confrontation, or continued working without reporting. Even when reporting occurred, the results depended on the organisation. Some got support. Others felt that nothing had changed. This shows that reporting only works when it is fair, confidential, independent, and quick.

Relying on private coping also makes sense if formal systems feel unsafe, and indirect behaviours play a big role. Information being withheld, reduced support, exclusion, and being ignored are not as visible as verbal abuse, but they still lead to isolation, self-doubt, and stress. This supports Rashid et al.'s (2025) finding that workplace ostracism leads to silence. When behaviour is difficult to prove, reporting feels pointless. So silence is show weak organizational protection rather than not lack of concern. Masculinity influenced how participants understood the mistreatment and whether they asked for help. Participants felt strong, patient, and independent.

They thought that reporting it was weak or incapable. (Martin & Yoo, 2025; Jayaratne & Wijewardena, 2025)

However, masculinity was not alone. Financial responsibilities, job insecurity, internship status, need for service letters, fear of retaliation, low trust in support, and awareness of the issue also reinforced silence. Some participants did not label their experiences as bullying because they linked the term to physical harm. Repeated criticism, excessive workload, exclusion, and controlling supervision were considered normal stress or strict management. Al Shaikh Abubakar et al. (2025) noted that limited awareness prevents people from identifying and reporting abuse.

Without clear definitions of non-physical bullying, policies end up missing what people actually experience. Overall, fixing male workplace bullying in Sri Lanka requires more than just telling people to speak up. Organisations need to check how supervisors use power, keep workloads and information fair, set up confidential reporting that is independent and protects people from retaliation, and offer support that can actually be trusted. Awareness work also needs to push back on the idea that asking for help makes men weak. In a gender-inclusive workplace, getting support is a normal response to harmful behaviour, not a failure of masculinity.

5.0 Conclusion & Recommendation

This study helps us understand how male employees in Sri Lanka experience workplace bullying and how they respond to and cope with it. Why they keep silence. Based on the experiences shared by 16 participants across different industries, the results show primarily non-physical, reflected in unfair blame, heavy workload and unpaid, humiliation, isolation, gender-based ridicule, and harm to personal reputation. The participants experienced quite a bit of stress, anxiety, self-doubt, headaches, sleep difficulties, and strained relationships with family as a result of these experiences. The participants responded to bullying in a variety of ways, ranging from tolerating it silently to avoiding being involved in it, asking for help from others to confronting the bully, and less frequently, making a formal complaint. However, formal reporting was successful primarily when organisational leaders were serious about it and took action. A combination of masculine norms of toughness and self-reliance, fear of being perceived as weak, financial and job insecurity, distrust in the

system (human resource management), and, in some cases, failure to recognise that non-physical abuse was occurring, kept them silent. Men used both productive coping strategies, such as seeking informal social support and managing their emotions, and ineffective methods, such as tobacco use, to deal with bullying.

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The study's findings have recommendations to be incorporated into the development of anti-bullying policies by organisations which ensure that each of the following types of bullying are clearly defined: emotional, psychological, occupational, social-identity, digital, and retaliatory bullying; and exposing complaint processes in clear terms with regard to who should receive a complaint, who will be contacted to investigate, and report findings of the process. Staff should be encouraged to report incidences of bullying to one or more of the following through readily accessible formal and informal channels: Human Resource officers, ethics officers, senior executives, external counsellors, or independent committees, and not necessarily to their immediate supervisor(s), who may be the perpetrator of bullying. Employers should ensure that there is no reduction in performance rating, being denied promotion, extra workload, and social exclusion as a result of complaining or reporting bullying. The independence, fairness, and confidentiality of human resource activities must be strengthened, including the possibility of hiring an external human resource consultant when this independence cannot be ensured. The emphasis on employee relations, communication and load management, conflict management, and psychological safety should be structured training for managers and supervisors, as this study reveals that many incidents reported by the participants were linked to problems of supervisors' misuse of

authority over their employees. Interns, associates, and junior assistants should be treated as new employees and given appropriate induction, mentoring, and supervision, and not based on the assumption that they already have the same ability as full-time employees or industry practitioners. Employers could also make work distribution more even and share information to limit opportunities for control bullying and promote awareness campaigns to clearly illustrate what bullying is not – other than physical – and to enable employees to recognise and identify their bullying experiences, such as repeated criticism, blame, unreasonable workloads, withholding of information, exclusion, gossip, and gender-based pressure. Confidential wellbeing and counselling services should be provided and publicised, and anti-bullying policies should be gender-sensitive and understand that men are particularly unlikely to report mistreatment compared with women due to societal attitudes and economic pressures, and be provided discreetly and without public exposure.

This study has some limitations. The sample size (n=16) was sufficient to gain a qualitative depth of understanding of the area of study, but was not large enough to ensure generalisability, and the qualitative data obtained by asking participants about themselves was not gathered from supervisors, human resource employees, or colleagues. Possible areas of future research include a more detailed study of male bullying in specific industries, direct comparison of male and female experiences, and quantitative designs that would allow the assessment of the occurrence of silence, job insecurity, stress, and intention to quit in larger samples of male employees. However, further longitudinal research is needed to better understand the short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes of workplace bullying, and further qualitative studies of the reporting and investigation process could help to understand why some experiences of reporting workplace bullying are more successful than others in the workplace. The lessons from this study highlight the extent to which men might be exposed to extreme, though often tacit and unspoken, workplace bullying and the need for organisations to implement practical policy changes, but also to align their perceived and practical expectations of masculinity, vulnerability, and the perception of help-seeking.

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