ISSN 2029-1701
ISSN 2335-2035 (Online)

Research Journal
PUBLIC SECURITY AND PUBLIC ORDER
2026, Vol. 38, Nr. 1

WORKPLACE MOBBING: GENDER DIFFERENCES AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

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DOI: 10.13165/PSPO-25-38-01-07

Abstract. *This article examines differences in workplace mobbing across genders and employment sectors, based on quantitative data from 387 Lithuanian employees. The study aims to identify how the prevalence, intensity and consequences of mobbing differ between men and women, as well as between the public and private sectors. Data were collected via an anonymous online survey, statistical analyses included χ^2 tests, Mann–Whitney U tests and Spearman's correlation. The results indicate that men reported experiencing mobbing significantly more often and rated its intensity higher, whereas women were more likely to experience horizontal, socially mediated forms of mobbing. Employees in the public sector experienced mobbing significantly more frequently than those in the private sector and the negative outcomes - such as decreased motivation, reduced work performance, career setbacks and distrust in the organization - were particularly pronounced in the public sector. These findings confirm that mobbing is a structurally conditioned phenomenon linked to hierarchy, proceduralism, power relations, organizational culture, suggesting that prevention should focus on institutional rather than individual interventions.*

Keywords: *mobbing, public sector, private sector, gender, organizational culture, power relations.*

Introduction

In contemporary organizational research, workplace mobbing is increasingly analyzed not as an isolated interpersonal conflict, but as a structural phenomenon shaped by governance, organizational culture and power relations (Einarsen et al., 2020; Tight, 2023; Hodgins et al., 2024). Studies indicate that mobbing arises not from individual employee characteristics, but from the interaction of institutional hierarchies, role ambiguity, leadership quality, communication processes and organizational justice (Blomberg et al., 2024; Farley, 2023). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the public sector and higher education organizations, where formalized procedures, limited autonomy, vertical decision-making, power asymmetries dominate.

The gender dimension in mobbing research highlights distinct mechanisms of professional devaluation, social isolation and power conflict. Empirical evidence shows that women are more likely to experience symbolic devaluation, emotional pressure, horizontal social exclusion, whereas men are more often subjected to overt forms of power competition (Hollis & Wilson, 2023; Bunce et al., 2024). These differences are further amplified by precarious employment, project-based work and institutional dependency, particularly in the public sector and academic environments (Solomon & Tynan, 2023; Humbert et al., 2024).

Another significant area of analysis concerns the differences in mobbing between the public and private sectors. In the public sector, mobbing is often subtle and embedded in work

processes and rules: employees may be assigned inappropriate tasks, restricted from accessing information, experience delayed decisions or face psychological pressure justified through formal procedures (Hodgins et al., 2024; Michulek et al., 2024). In contrast, the private sector, characterized by clearer accountability structures and a results-oriented focus, tends to experience destructive behaviors episodically and less institutionally.

Based on these theoretical considerations, the main research question of this article is: what are the differences in the prevalence, forms and consequences of mobbing between men and women, between public and private sector employees in Lithuania? The study aims to empirically assess gender and sectoral differences in mobbing using a representative quantitative sample of 387 employees and to interpret the findings from a structural organizational perspective.

Literature review

The concept and characteristics of mobbing

Mobbing is increasingly analyzed not only as a problem of individual relationships or personal conflicts, but as a structural phenomenon of organizational culture and governance, particularly in the public sector and higher education institutions. Contemporary research emphasizes that its emergence is determined not by the characteristics of individual employees, but by the interaction of institutional power, hierarchies, ethics and governance mechanisms within the context of public administration and universities (Einarsen et al., 2020; Tight, 2023; Hodgins et al., 2024). This perspective allows mobbing to be examined as a process related to the organizational environment, role clarity, leadership quality and the level of psychological safety in public sector organizations.

The Universal Lithuanian Encyclopedia provides the following definition: “mobbing is repeated group behavior based on psychological terror, coercion, intimidation and harassment directed at an individual in the family, school, workplace, neighborhood or online environment”. The term *mobbing* was first used in 1958 by the Austrian scientist K. Z. Lorenz. Literature describes mobbing as a planned, long-term process with a clear objective - to force a specific employee or groups of employees, through malicious and intentional actions, to experience psychological tension, humiliation and stress in the workplace. Most often, the aim of mobbing is to make the targeted employee leave the organization. This may be encouraged by organizational structure and processes, unequal distribution of positions, competition among employees, reward systems oriented toward financial achievements within the organization (Karosaitė, 2020, pp. 207–208).

In her analysis of mobbing in organizations, Karosaitė (2020) introduces the concept of “organizational cynicism”. This concept encompasses aspects of employees’ distrust in management and colleagues, such as deception, lying and a sense of loneliness within the organization. Organizational cynicism may develop from various experiences that employees encounter themselves in the workplace or from observing unethical behavior by the organization toward other employees. According to Guobaitė-Kirslienė and Blažienė (2020), hostile behavior at the initial stage may be difficult to identify, but over time it can evolve into a highly aggressive form. The use of power, harassment, intimidation, bullying, humiliation, verbal abuse, work-disrupting criticism and various forms of persecution have a negative impact on an individual’s spiritual, psychological, moral, social, physical functioning.

Organizations exhibit different types and manifestations of mobbing. Negative actions are not directed solely at one group of employees; they may occur among employees holding

equal positions, from managers toward their subordinates or from subordinates toward managers. The literature also describes mixed cases in which mobbing occurs between employees and management. Recently, public attention has been drawn to cases in which managers, exploiting their power advantage, abuse their victims until they leave the organization or even withdraw from life altogether (Fig. 6).

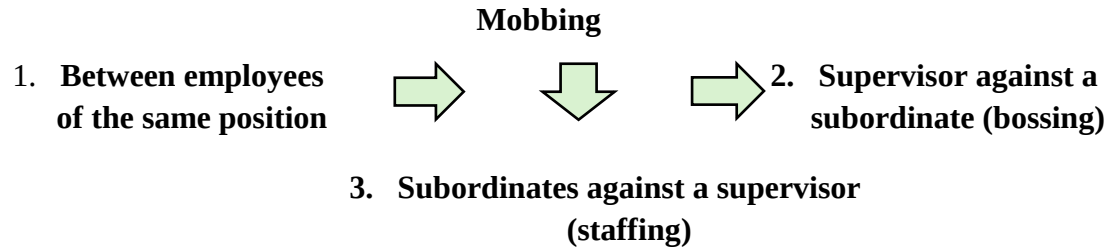


Fig. 1. Types of mobbing in organizations
(compiled by the authors based on Veinhardt, 2009; 2015; 2018)

Workplace mobbing manifests in stages. The initial phase of the mobbing process is characterized by the obstruction of an employee's professional development and restrictions on communication. Subsequently, limitations on social relationships emerge, along with the devaluation of the individual's reputation and achievements. In the final stage, the victim is subjected to direct attacks, which affect personal life, work performance and health (Yilmaz, 2021, p. 632).

It is important to note that different types of organizations experience varying levels of mobbing prevalence. Research indicates a particularly high incidence of bullying and negative behavior in public sector institutions, such as hospitals, educational institutions, sports organizations. Mobbing tends to be more widespread in large organizations, as they provide greater opportunities for the formation of informal groups engaging in unethical behavior.

Serhat (2021, pp. 291–292) analyzes the factors that distinguish mobbing-affected organizations from "healthy" work environments. The characteristics of healthy and mobbing-influenced work environments are presented in the table below (see table 8).

Table 1. Differences between a healthy and a mobbing-affected organizational environment
(compiled by the authors based on Serhat, 2021, p. 292)

Characteristics of a healthy work environment	Characteristics of a mobbing-affected work environment
Job roles and position descriptions are noticeably clear	Unclear job roles and position descriptions
A culture of collaboration prevails	A culture of non-collaboration prevails
Goals are shared and common	Goals are unclear
Open communication within the organization	Communication is unclear and closed
Proper organizational structure	Organizational structure has deficiencies
Occasional conflicts and friction arise within the organization	Persistent unethical behavior is observed
Organizational strategies are clear and transparent	Strategies are unclear and meaningless
Conflicts, discussions, and arguments are encouraged	The existence of conflicts is viewed negatively and concealed
Communication is direct	Indirect communication prevails

Mobbing in organizations often manifests subtly, making it difficult to identify and label. However, clear and observable differences exist between a healthy work environment and one affected by mobbing. A healthy organizational environment is characterized by an appropriate organizational structure, clear networks, values, roles, position descriptions. In such environments, a culture of collaboration, open and direct communication and the encouragement of opinion expression predominates.

Mobbing affects not only the individual victim but also the organization, disrupting its overall functioning. Serhat (2021, p. 292) identifies key organizational and administrative causes of mobbing: "excessive hierarchical structure, reduction of human resource expenditures, inadequate leadership and management, inefficient personnel recruitment and hiring processes, lack of internal communication and the use of harassment as a means to enforce discipline and efficiency". The most effective way to manage mobbing is to prevent it from arising and spreading. According to Veinhardt (2017), a favorable organizational climate, employee engagement and leaders who care about their employees' dignity and relationship quality create conditions that are unfavorable for the development of mobbing within an organization. Under Lithuanian law (Labor Code, Art. 30), employees have the right to protection from psychological violence in the workplace. Employers are legally obligated to ensure a safe and dignified working environment (Guobaitė-Kirslienė & Blažienė, 2020, pp. 111–113).

In summary, mobbing in organizations is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that involves not only interpersonal relationships but also the broader organizational structure, management practices and ethical culture. The mobbing process gradually develops, starting from communication restrictions and professional devaluation to reputational damage and psychological coercion. Its consequences affect not only the individual employee but also organizational functioning, climate and reputation. Literature highlights that the highest risks arise from unclear roles and responsibilities, weak leadership, ineffective communication and competition-driven structures, which create conditions for entrenched long-term unethical behavior. Therefore, mobbing prevention cannot be understood merely as addressing isolated conflicts - it requires a systemic approach focused on transparent governance, clear organizational processes, a culture of respectful relationships and the protection of employee dignity as essential prerequisites for organizational well-being, sustainable functioning.

Characteristics of mobbing manifestations in public sector organizations

Recent studies indicate that mobbing in public sector organizations exhibits specific structural and cultural characteristics that distinguish these institutions from the private sector. In the public sector, dominant hierarchical management structures, extensive regulation, limited operational autonomy and political accountability create conditions not only for overt but also for covert, procedurally masked forms of mobbing (Hodgins et al., 2024; Tight, 2023). In these organizations, negative behaviors often manifest through task allocation, restriction of information, delays in decision-making, reputation undermining or symbolic devaluation practices, which are formally presented as administrative decisions but, in practice, generate psychological pressure and social isolation (Blomberg et al., 2024; Farley, 2023).

Organizational justice is particularly significant in the public sector. Empirical studies show that employees' experiences of mobbing are more often linked to a lack of procedural and interpersonal justice, where decision-making is unclear, evaluation criteria are ambiguous and communication is fragmented and selective (Michulek et al., 2024; Blomberg et al., 2024). These conditions foster a "culture of silence" in which employees avoid expressing criticism or

reporting experienced harassment for fear of losing status, position or access to resources. Mobbing in the public sector is also influenced by gender and social roles. Research indicates that women more frequently experience symbolic devaluation, challenges to professional reputation, social isolation and emotional pressure, whereas men more often face open competition and power conflicts (Hollis & Wilson, 2023; Bunce et al., 2024). In public sector institutions characterized by formal hierarchies and limited career mobility, these experiences often become long-term and systemic, particularly among employees in middle-management or service delivery roles.

Another relevant specificity concerns employment forms and job status. Studies in higher education and educational institutions reveal that temporary contracts, project-based employment and dependence on managerial decisions increase employee vulnerability and reduce their willingness to report negative behaviors (Solomon & Tynan, 2023; Humbert et al., 2024). Such structures create a field of institutional asymmetry, in which mobbing becomes a mechanism for maintaining control and power.

In summary, mobbing in public sector organizations often takes the form of structural and institutionally masked pressure. This means that mobbing manifests not only as an interpersonal conflict but also because of organizational governance, ethics and power relations, with intensity and types of manifestation varying according to gender, job function, sector-specific conditions (Hodgins et al., 2024; Farley, 2023; Spagnoli et al., 2024). This perspective provides a theoretical foundation for empirical research analyzing mobbing experiences by gender and across different public sector activity areas.

Gender dimension and differences in mobbing experiences in public sector organizations

The gender dimension in the phenomenon of mobbing in public sector organizations manifests through different mechanisms of power, social roles and professional recognition, which result in unequal mobbing experiences for women and men. Research shows that mobbing in public sector organizations is not distributed evenly between genders; it is closely linked to social roles, career-related power asymmetries and evaluation norms across different professional groups. Empirical data indicate that women more frequently experience symbolic professional devaluation, social isolation, challenges to reputation, emotional pressure, whereas men are more likely to face open competition and hierarchical power conflicts (Hollis & Wilson, 2023; Bunce et al., 2024). These differences are particularly pronounced in areas of the public sector characterized by formalized procedures, limited career mobility and vertical decision-making processes.

The gender inequality aspect is closely associated with organizational culture and informal power networks. Studies in higher education and educational institutions show that women are more often assigned unpaid emotional labor, given supporting roles and have their professional achievements minimized or attributed to the collective (Hodgins et al., 2024; Manuel et al., 2023). Such practices create institutional disempowerment, transforming mobbing from an individual conflict into a structural mechanism of dependency.

Conversely, men's experiences are more often linked to status competition, challenges to authority and conflicts over decision-making power, typically expressed through open confrontation, pressure to achieve results or organizational discrediting (Spagnoli et al., 2024; Farley, 2023). These situations are more common in managerial or higher-responsibility positions, where conflicts take the form of struggles for status and influence. In the public sector, these differences are further reinforced by employment forms and career precarity. Research indicates that women are more often employed in temporary, project-based or less

stable positions, increasing their dependence on managerial decisions and institutional control (Solomon & Tynan, 2023; Humbert et al., 2024). This reduces the likelihood of filing complaints and encourages adaptation and silence strategies, allowing mobbing to establish itself as a long-term social process.

In summary, the gender dimension in mobbing operates through mechanisms of power distribution, cultural expectations and organizational roles. This underscores the need to analyze mobbing experiences according to gender and sector type, as different public sector contexts reveal unequal risk structures and distinct mechanisms of psychological harm (Hollis & Wilson, 2023; Bunce et al., 2024; Hodgins et al., 2024). This theoretical perspective provides a foundation for empirical analyses aimed at understanding how gender and institutional context shape the nature and intensity of mobbing experiences.

Differences in mobbing manifestations across public sector fields

Public sector organizations are not homogeneous structures. Different sectors are characterized by varying governance logic, professional roles, types of responsibilities and dynamics of social relationships, which result in mobbing manifesting in different forms. This differentiation allows mobbing to be understood as an institutionally conditioned social process, dependent on the sector's functions, power distribution and principles of operational organization (Hodgins et al., 2024; Tight, 2023).

In the healthcare sector, mobbing most frequently manifests through status hierarchies, professional dependency and pressures related to work intensity. Medical institutions operate within highly structured teams where decision-making power is concentrated at higher levels of professional hierarchy. Consequently, common forms of mobbing - such as demonstrative questioning of competence, public devaluation, information withholding or manipulation of workload - are often formally justified by patient safety or procedural requirements (Farley, 2023; Bunce et al., 2024). Such environments are particularly risky for lower-level specialists and junior staff.

In the education and higher education sector, mobbing more often takes symbolic and institutionally masked forms of pressure. Academic institutions are characterized by competition for research outcomes, career advancement, project resources and reputation; thus, negative behaviors frequently manifest as disregard for authorship, suppression of recognition, restriction of participation in decision-making processes, social isolation or informal reputational pressure (Hollis & Wilson, 2023; Solomon & Tynan, 2023). Weak responses to complaints and fear of losing career opportunities often give rise to "institutional silence" mechanisms.

In public administration and local government, mobbing is primarily associated with bureaucratic governance, formalized procedural processes and political dependency. In these organizations, mobbing frequently manifests through manipulation of tasks and responsibilities, career stagnation, restricted access to information, delayed decision-making or symbolic marginalization, presented as administrative or "organizational efficiency" measures (Blomberg et al., 2024; Michulek et al., 2024). These forms appear neutral externally but in reality create long-term psychological control and social isolation.

Sector-specific characteristics are also shaped by organizational mission and the emotional burden of work. In social services, education and healthcare institutions - where work involves emotional responsibility and a sense of professional vocation - employees are more likely to tolerate negative behavior, justifying it by public mission or "team responsibility"

arguments, thereby enabling the normalization of mobbing (Hodgins et al., 2024; Spagnoli et al., 2024).

In summary, the manifestation of mobbing varies across public sector fields according to power structures, operational logic and the nature of professional relationships. In healthcare, pressure is primarily hierarchical and status-based; in education and higher education, it takes the form of reputational and symbolic marginalization; and in public administration, it manifests as a procedurally masked model of institutional control. This perspective provides a foundation for empirical comparison analyzing how sector type shapes the nature and intensity of mobbing experiences across different employee groups (Farley, 2023; Blomberg et al., 2024; Solomon & Tynan, 2023).

Research methodology

Study participants and sample

Based on the 2021 data from the Official Statistics Portal, Lithuania had a population of 2.801 million, of which 1,280.2 thousand were employed. The sample size was calculated using the sample calculator integrated into the Anketa.lt platform. With a 0.5% margin of error and to ensure sufficient representativeness for the employed population, it was determined that at least 383 respondents needed to be surveyed. The study's target population consisted of adult employed individuals in Lithuania. The survey included randomly selected respondents aged 18–74 who were currently employed. A total of 387 employees participated in the study, slightly exceeding the minimum required sample size.

This article focuses on two primary variables: gender (male, female) and work sector (private sector, public sector). The non-governmental organization sector was represented by only a small portion of respondents; therefore, this group was excluded from comparative statistical analysis due to insufficient sample size.

Study procedure and data collection instruments

Data were collected through an anonymous online survey using the Anketa.lt system. The questionnaire gathered only the data necessary for the study, including respondents' gender (male, female), work sector (private or public) and their experiences related to mobbing in the organization. Participants were asked to indicate whether they had experienced mobbing, the intensity of these experiences, the forms in which they occurred and to subjectively assess the impact on their professional well-being and career development.

Responses were collected using Likert-type scales, enabling analysis of differences between gender and sector groups. Data collection continued until a sufficient sample saturation level was achieved, ensuring a sample size that allowed reliable comparisons between the analyzed groups and statistically valid analysis.

The study adhered to ethical research principles: participation was voluntary and respondents were informed before completing the questionnaire about the purpose of the study, the anonymity of their data and that the data would be used exclusively for scientific purposes. No personally identifiable information was collected and the responses were analyzed in aggregate form.

Data analysis

Statistical analysis of the data was conducted using SPSS 24.0 software. Initially, descriptive statistics were applied to summarize the sample, including frequencies and percentages of respondents, distributions of key variables and means (M) for certain ratings. This allowed for a detailed description of the sample composition and the overall prevalence of mobbing.

To compare groups by gender and work sector, several non-parametric methods were used. Differences in proportions (e.g., whether the share of employees who experienced mobbing differed between men and women or between the private and public sectors) were assessed using the χ^2 (chi-square) test. For ordinal variables, such as ratings of mobbing frequency, differences between two independent groups (e.g., men vs. women, private vs. public sector employees) were evaluated using the Mann–Whitney U test.

To examine the relationship between mobbing frequency and key respondent characteristics - gender and work sector (public vs. private) - Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient was applied. The strength of relationships was interpreted according to the values presented in table 1 (Janilionis, 2008).

Table 2. Scale of correlation coefficient values
(compiled by the authors based on Janilionis, 2008)

Strength of the relationship	Correlation coefficient value
Very strong relationship	- 1 and + 1
Strong relationship	From –1 to –0.7 and from 0.7 to 1
Moderate relationship	From –0.7 to –0.5 and from 0.5 to 0.7
Weak relationship	From –0.5 to –0.2 and from 0.2 to 0.5
Very weak relationship	From –0.2 to 0 and from 0 to 0.2
No relationship	0

This method allowed for the assessment of how the intensity of mobbing experiences is associated with different employee groups and whether more systematic patterns of mobbing emerge across genders and sectors. The strength of the relationships was interpreted using the correlation coefficient scale provided by Janilionis (2008) and a significance level of $p < 0.05$ was applied in all analyses.

Results

Mobbing prevalence and gender differences

The study results revealed significant differences in mobbing experiences between men and women, suggesting that mobbing is influenced not only by individual interactions but also by the dynamics of social roles and power relations within organizations. It was found that men reported experiencing mobbing significantly more often than women (64% of men vs. 39.2% of women; $\chi^2 = 19.947$; $p < 0.001$). Additionally, men's current mobbing intensity scores were higher than those of women ($M = 2.82$ vs. $M = 2.25$; $U = 11{,}153$; $p < 0.001$). This indicates that mobbing experienced by men more often takes a clear, overt or conflictual form, which is subjectively easier to recognize and identify as mobbing (see table 3).

Table 3. Prevalence and forms of mobbing by gender (compiled by the authors)

Indicator	Men	Women	p-value (χ^2 / U test)
Experienced mobbing at least once	64,0 %	39,2 %	< 0,001
Current mobbing frequency score (M)	2,82	2,25	< 0,001
Horizontal mobbing (from colleagues)	54,8 %	74,8 %	0,006
Vertical mobbing (from supervisor)	4,1 %	15,0 %	0,025
Mixed mobbing (from supervisor and colleagues)	41,1 %	10,3 %	< 0,001

(Note: significant when $p < 0.05$)

The analysis of mobbing forms revealed clear gender differences in experiences, indicating that mobbing is shaped not only by individual interactions but also by social roles and power dynamics within organizational structures. Women more frequently experience horizontal mobbing, manifested as negative pressure from colleagues, social isolation or reputational practices within the team. In contrast, men are more likely to encounter mixed mobbing, where both supervisors and colleagues contribute to the pressure. Vertical mobbing originating from supervisors was found to affect women more frequently.

These findings suggest that organizational positions and social expectations associated with gender influence distinct patterns of mobbing, which are structurally conditioned rather than random. Mobbing experiences are thus not homogeneous across genders but differentiate according to organizational roles, status dynamics and internal power structures. Men reported statistically higher rates of mobbing and rated its intensity higher, reflecting that male-targeted mobbing often takes a more direct, confrontational form, making it easier to recognize as systematic hostile behavior.

Women's experiences, by contrast, are more often horizontal, involving social isolation, reputational signals, emotional exclusion or indirect hostility. Such pressures frequently operate under a "silent conflict" principle, where negative behaviors are normalized and remain outside formal conflict resolution mechanisms, consistent with literature describing hostile behaviors as integrated into everyday organizational practices with long-term harmful effects.

Men's mixed mobbing experiences indicate involvement in formal power relations and status competitions, affecting authority, decision-making and responsibility zones. In these cases, mobbing may function as a management or disciplinary mechanism rather than purely an interpersonal conflict. The results align with theoretical perspectives emphasizing the roles of power distribution, hierarchical positions, organizational tolerance for hostility and differential vulnerability of social groups to specific mobbing forms (Özer & Escartín, 2023; Spagnoli et al., 2024; Hodgins et al., 2024). Empirical evidence confirms that mobbing is structurally linked to institutional norms, status hierarchies and access to power. Women tend to experience collective relational pressure, whereas men encounter structural power-related pressures. Additionally, men more frequently report that mobbing problems in organizations remain unaddressed, highlighting the phenomenon of institutional silence and organizational reluctance to intervene when mobbing is perceived as an "inevitable" part of structural management.

In summary, the findings demonstrate a clear gender dimension in organizational mobbing. Differences are observed not only in intensity but also in mechanisms and social context: (1) women's experiences are associated with horizontal social tension and covert pressure patterns; (2) men's experiences involve mixed and structurally articulated pressure scenarios. This supports the view that mobbing should be understood not because of individual personalities or personal conflicts, but as a product of organizational relationships and power

structures. Consequently, preventive interventions must extend beyond individual cases to address organizational culture, leadership, communication and ethical accountability mechanisms.

The manifestation of workplace bullying across different sectors: results, interpretation and theoretical connections

The study results revealed significant differences in the experience of workplace bullying and its consequences between the public and private sectors. It was found that employees in the public sector reported having experienced or previously encountered bullying significantly more often than those in the private sector (70% vs. 39.1%; $\chi^2 = 28.170$; $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the mean score for current bullying experiences among public sector employees was significantly higher (M = 3.13) than that of private sector employees (M = 2.17; U = 8033; $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that workplace bullying in the public sector is not a random or episodic phenomenon but rather a characteristic of the structural organizational environment, associated with management practices, hierarchy and decision-making logic (see table 4).

Table 4. Prevalence of workplace bullying by sector (Compiled by the authors)

Indicator	Private sector	Public sector	p (χ^2 / U test)
Experienced bullying at least once	39,1 %	70,0 %	< 0,001
Current bullying frequency score (M)	2,17	3,13	< 0,001
Loss of motivation	48,0 %	84,7 %	< 0,001
Decline in work performance	10,1 %	68,1 %	< 0,001
Lack of trust in the organization	33,1 %	65,3 %	< 0,001
Changed career plans	11,5 %	48,6 %	< 0,001

(Note: significant when $p < 0.05$)

Additional analysis showed that workplace bullying in the public sector has more pronounced negative effects on employees than in the private sector. Public sector employees reported loss of motivation, decline in work performance, lack of trust in the organization and changes in career plans more frequently. This indicates that bullying in these organizations functions not merely as an interpersonal conflict but as a process that undermines institutional effectiveness and employee engagement.

The results support the theoretical assumptions discussed earlier, suggesting that structural factors inherent to the public sector create conditions more conducive to the entrenchment of bullying compared to private organizations. Empirical data confirms these assumptions on two levels. In the public sector, bullying occurs with greater prevalence and intensity, indicating that hostile behavior is more likely to become a “normalized” part of organizational culture rather than an isolated incident. This aligns with the “permissive culture” phenomenon described in the literature, where unethical behavior is not treated as a problem because it is considered “systemically inevitable”.

Furthermore, bullying in the public sector produces stronger psychological and professional consequences compared to the private sector. It can be inferred that employees in public organizations have less: (1) institutional security, (2) organizational support and (3) control over career opportunities. As a result, bullying becomes not only a workplace factor but also a mechanism shaping career trajectories. In the private sector, although bullying occurs, its impact on employee performance and career development is less severe.

These findings are consistent with research showing that organizational justice, transparency and participatory communication serve as protective factors against the entrenchment of bullying (Farley, 2023; EU-OSHA, 2023). While this article primarily focuses on differences in bullying prevalence by gender and sector, the data also highlight significant consequences of bullying on employee well-being and career behavior. The results indicate that bullying in the public sector is associated with more pronounced negative psychological and professional outcomes than in the private sector. Public sector employees reported loss of motivation, decline in work performance, lack of trust in the organization and changes in career plans significantly more often (see table 5).

Table 5. Effects of workplace bullying on employees by sector, % (n)
(Compiled by the authors)

Consequences	Private sector	Public sector	p (χ^2 test)
Loss of motivation	48,0 % (71)	84,7 % (61)	< 0,001*
Decline in work performance	10,1 % (15)	68,1 % (49)	< 0,001*
Lack of trust in the organization	33,1 % (49)	65,3 % (47)	< 0,001*
Changed career plans	11,5 % (17)	48,6 % (35)	< 0,001*
Hostility toward colleagues	73,0 % (108)	77,8 % (56)	0,511
Plans to leave the job	49,3 % (73)	59,7 % (43)	0,154

Note: significant when $p < 0.05$.

These results indicate that in the public sector, workplace bullying functions as a systemic psychosocial stressor that reduces employee engagement and trust in the institution. This trend aligns with theoretical insights suggesting that hierarchical structures, limited managerial accountability and a low sense of organizational justice can lead to the accumulation of long-term psychological pressure and professional demotivation, increasing career instability and the risk of employee turnover.

The data show that in the public sector, experiences of bullying are more strongly associated with declines in work performance and professional initiative. The higher prevalence of decreased performance and reduced motivation suggests that bullying here is not merely an individual conflict but an indicator of organizational functioning. This is consistent with research indicating that prolonged psychological pressure and unclear role and responsibility structures reduce employee effectiveness and work quality (Hodgins et al., 2024; EU-OSHA, 2023). The higher prevalence of changes in career plans in the public sector further suggests that bullying operates as a career-shaping mechanism, encouraging shifts in professional direction, intentions to leave or passive career withdrawal. These findings align with organizational justice theory, which posits that perceived injustice reduces career opportunities and employees' sense of belonging to the organization.

In summary, the study clearly demonstrates that bullying manifests differently across sectors and is structurally conditioned. In the public sector, bullying tends to take the form of an entrenched, long-term and systemic process associated with hierarchical power asymmetry, proceduralism, slower decision-making, limited managerial intervention in conflict situations. In these organizations, bullying functions as a "normalized" element of organizational culture, with pronounced negative effects on employee motivation, work performance, trust in the organization and career stability. In contrast, in the private sector, bullying is more fragmented and episodic and its impact is mitigated by more flexible management, clearer accountability structures, faster response mechanisms.

Gender analysis further revealed that bullying experiences are not evenly distributed across employee groups: women are more likely to experience horizontal, collective-pressure forms of bullying, while men are more likely to face mixed scenarios involving direct power conflicts. This supports the view that the manifestation of bullying is linked to the dynamics of social roles, status and power relations within organizations, rather than merely interpersonal disputes. The study also shows that bullying affects not only employee well-being but also organizational performance and career processes, highlighting the need to manage it as a strategic area of governance and organizational responsibility tied to institutional reliability, employee engagement and long-term organizational sustainability.

Conclusions

The study confirmed that workplace bullying is not merely a manifestation of interpersonal conflicts but a process embedded in organizational context, hierarchy, power relations and culture. Bullying affects not only employees - their well-being, career decisions and intentions to remain in the organization - but also the organization itself by undermining operational performance and long-term sustainability.

Statistically significant gender differences were identified in both the prevalence and forms of bullying. Men's experiences were more often associated with mixed bullying, involving pressure from both supervisors and colleagues, suggesting that bullying can function as a mechanism of organizational discipline and status control. Men also reported experiencing bullying more frequently and rated its intensity higher. Women, in contrast, were more likely to experience horizontal, socially driven forms of bullying, manifesting as devaluation, reputational pressure and social isolation.

The results demonstrated that bullying is significantly more prevalent in the public sector. In this sector, bullying often takes an institutionally masked, procedurally justified form and can become a negative, long-lasting element of organizational culture. Public sector bullying was also associated with stronger negative professional and psychological outcomes than in the private sector: employees more frequently reported decreased motivation, impaired work performance, diminished trust in the organization and altered career plans. This indicates that bullying impacts not only individuals but also organizational functioning.

While bullying was also observed in the private sector, its effects were mitigated by more flexible management and clearly defined employee responsibilities, making destructive behavior less likely to become a persistent organizational practice.

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that bullying prevention must focus on the organizational system, improving leadership quality, ensuring transparent processes and evaluation systems, enhancing communication, providing effective reporting channels to administration and consistently enforcing a zero-tolerance policy toward bullying.

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