

WORKPLACE BULLYING, THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVES: A CASE STUDY FROM ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT: Psychological harassment in the workplace represents a significant occupational risk, with direct consequences on employees' mental health, organizational performance, and institutional stability. This paper provides a theoretical and empirical analysis of workplace harassment, with particular emphasis on bullying and mobbing. The research combines a review of the legislative and conceptual framework with an empirical case study conducted on a sample of 75 employees from Romania. The results indicate a generally low perceived level of workplace harassment, although isolated yet relevant cases of psychological pressure, marginalization, and verbal intimidation persist. A high degree of awareness regarding employees' rights was also identified, suggesting a potential protective factor against harassment. The findings highlight the importance of preventive organizational policies, managerial responsibility, and continuous employee education in reducing workplace bullying.

KEY WORDS: workplace harassment, bullying, mobbing, psychological well-being, labor rights.

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: J28, J81, J83.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Psychological harassment in the workplace has become an increasingly visible topic within labor studies, organizational psychology, and public policy debates. Contemporary workplaces are characterized by high performance demands, organizational restructuring, and intensified competition, factors that may generate psychosocial risks for employees. Among these risks, workplace bullying and mobbing represent persistent forms of non-physical violence that undermine employees' dignity, mental health, and professional stability (Leymann, 1996).

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The concept of workplace harassment generally refers to unwanted conduct that has the purpose or effect of violating an employee's dignity and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive working environment. Such conduct may take verbal, non-verbal, or behavioral forms and can be directed at an individual or a group of employees (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). Unlike isolated conflicts or legitimate managerial actions, psychological harassment is defined by repetition, duration, and power imbalance, which gradually place the targeted individual in a position of vulnerability (Leymann, 1996, pp. 165-168).

In the specialized literature, the terms workplace bullying and mobbing are frequently used interchangeably, although certain conceptual distinctions exist. Bullying is commonly used in Anglo-Saxon research to describe repeated hostile behaviors perpetrated by one individual or a small group against a colleague, subordinate, or superior (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). In contrast, the term mobbing is more prevalent in continental European literature and emphasizes collective harassment processes, organizational dynamics, and systematic exclusion of the victim from the professional environment (Leymann, 1996; Zapf, et al., 1996). Despite these nuances, both concepts converge in describing persistent psychological pressure capable of producing serious emotional, social, and occupational consequences.

From a socio-economic perspective, workplace harassment is closely linked to occupational stress and organizational inefficiency. Empirical evidence indicates that stress-related factors account for a substantial share of absenteeism, reduced productivity, and increased employee turnover (Cowie, 2002). In the European context, it has been estimated that occupational stress contributes to 50-60% of workplace absenteeism, generating significant financial losses for employers and public systems (European Commission, 2002). Moreover, organizations affected by bullying often face indirect costs such as reputational damage, legal disputes, recruitment expenses, and decreased employee engagement (Hoel, et al., 2001).

Beyond its economic impact, psychological harassment represents a public health concern. Victims frequently report symptoms of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, reduced self-esteem, and psychosomatic disorders (Einarsen, et al., 2011). These effects may persist long after the harassment has ceased, influencing not only professional trajectories but also family relationships and social integration. Consequently, workplace bullying is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional phenomenon situated at the intersection of individual vulnerability, organizational culture, and broader labor market conditions (Hoel, et al., 2001).

At the policy level, international and European institutions have emphasized the importance of ensuring working conditions that respect human dignity, mental well-being, and equality of treatment. The right to fair and just working conditions is enshrined in Article 31 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which explicitly includes respect for workers' health, safety, and dignity (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012). These principles provide a normative framework for addressing psychological harassment as a violation of fundamental labor rights rather than merely an interpersonal issue.

Against this background, the present article pursues three main objectives. First, it aims to clarify the conceptual boundaries of workplace harassment by integrating insights from organizational psychology and labor studies. Second, it seeks to contextualize psychological harassment within current socio-economic realities, emphasizing its links to occupational stress, absenteeism, and organizational costs. Third, the paper contributes empirical evidence from a Romanian case study, offering insight into employees' perceptions of workplace bullying and their awareness of labor rights.

The contribution of this study lies in combining theoretical and legal perspectives with empirical findings from a heterogeneous sample of employees. By doing so, it highlights both the persistence of subtle forms of psychological harassment and the potential protective role of rights awareness and organizational prevention measures. In line with previous research, the article argues that effective prevention of workplace bullying requires not only legal regulation but also proactive organizational policies, transparent management practices, and continuous employee education (Einarsen, et al., 2011; Cowie, 2002).

2. THEORETICAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical analysis of psychological harassment in the workplace originates at the intersection of organizational psychology, sociology of work, and labor law. Early research emphasized that workplace bullying is not an isolated interpersonal conflict, but a systematic process of hostile communication that unfolds over time and places the targeted individual in a disadvantaged position (Leymann, 1996). According to this perspective, harassment becomes analytically relevant when behaviors are repetitive, persistent, and asymmetric in terms of power relations.

Leymann's theoretical contribution remains foundational, as it conceptualizes mobbing as a process consisting of successive phases: initial conflicts, escalation into systematic harassment, organizational mismanagement, and eventual stigmatization or exclusion of the victim (Leymann, 1996, pp. 170-173). This process-oriented understanding highlights that workplace harassment is not merely the result of individual pathology but is deeply embedded in organizational structures and cultures.

Subsequent research expanded this framework by distinguishing between work-related bullying, which targets professional performance and task allocation, and person-related bullying, which focuses on personal attributes, social exclusion, or reputational damage (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). These dimensions often coexist, reinforcing each other and amplifying negative outcomes for the victim. Empirical studies have shown that prolonged exposure to such behaviours is associated with increased risks of anxiety, depression, burnout, and reduced work ability (Einarsen, et al., 2011).

Another influential theoretical contribution emphasizes the role of organizational antecedents, such as authoritarian leadership styles, role ambiguity, excessive workloads, and poorly defined performance criteria (Hoel, et al., 2001). From this perspective, bullying is understood as a symptom of organizational dysfunction, rather than solely as deviant individual behaviour. This approach supports

the argument that effective prevention must address structural and managerial factors alongside individual coping mechanisms.

Theoretical consensus increasingly supports a behaviour-based approach, focusing on exposure to specific negative acts rather than subjective self-labeling as a victim. This approach reduces reporting bias and allows for more accurate cross-national and sectoral comparisons (Einarsen, et al., 2011). Nevertheless, subjective perceptions remain important, as individual interpretations of hostility are influenced by personal resilience, social support, and awareness of labour rights.

At European level, workplace harassment is primarily addressed through anti-discrimination law, occupational safety provisions, and fundamental rights instruments. Council Directive 2000/78/EC establishes a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation and defines harassment as unwanted conduct which has the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment (Council Directive 2000/78/EC, 2000). A similar definition is provided in Council Directive 2000/43/EC, extending protection against harassment based on racial or ethnic origin (Council Directive 2000/43/EC, 2000).

These directives introduced two essential legal principles with direct relevance for national systems, including Romania. First, they adopt an effects-based approach, whereby the decisive criterion is the impact of the conduct on dignity and workplace climate, rather than the subjective intention of the alleged perpetrator. Second, they require Member States to ensure effective, proportionate and dissuasive remedies, encouraging accessible complaint mechanisms and flexible evidentiary standards.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union further strengthens this framework by explicitly recognizing the right to working conditions that respect health, safety, and dignity (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2012). This normative orientation frames workplace harassment as a violation of fundamental rights, rather than merely an interpersonal dispute.

European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence has reinforced these standards through the doctrine of positive obligations. In *C. v. Romania* (judgment of 30 August 2022), the Court found that ineffective handling of a workplace sexual harassment complaint violated Article 8 of the Convention, emphasizing the duty of domestic authorities to provide effective protection against serious attacks on personal integrity (*C. v. Romania*, 2022). This case is particularly relevant for national practice, as it highlights procedural effectiveness and the avoidance of secondary victimization in harassment cases.

Romanian legislation traditionally addressed workplace harassment indirectly through general anti-discrimination provisions. Government Ordinance no. 137/2000 defines harassment as conduct creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading or offensive environment and applies regardless of the specific discrimination ground invoked (Romanian Government, 2000). A major legislative development occurred with the adoption of Law no. 167/2020, which explicitly introduced the concept of moral harassment at the workplace, aligning national law with European standards (Romanian Parliament, 2020).

The amended legal framework defines moral harassment as systematic conduct related to employment relations, exercised by superiors, subordinates or colleagues, which affects dignity, mental or physical health, or professional future. Crucially, Romanian law clarifies that proof of intent is not required, focusing instead on the objective effects of the conduct. Employers are placed under a positive obligation to prevent and combat harassment through internal regulations, disciplinary procedures, and preventive measures.

Romanian jurisprudence illustrates the practical application of these norms. In Bucharest Court of Appeal, Decision no. 2681/02.05.2017, the court qualified professional isolation, restriction of access to internal systems, and systematic marginalization as psychological harassment and awarded EUR 50,000 in moral damages. The court emphasized that compensation must be assessed in light of factors such as the employee's professional status, salary level, duration of harassment, and impact on personal life, rather than through a fixed statutory formula (Appeal Court, Bucureşti, 2017).

Judicial remedies available in harassment cases include:

- (a) orders compelling the employer to cease the harassment;
- (b) reinstatement of the employee in the previous position;
- (c) compensation for lost wages;
- (d) moral and compensatory damages;
- (e) payment of psychological counselling costs; and
- (f) correction of disciplinary records affected by discriminatory conduct (Romanian Government, 2000; Romanian Parliament, 2020).

Practice shows that reinstatement alone does not necessarily eliminate harassment risks. CNCD decisions from 2022 document situations in which employees were reinstated following unlawful dismissal, yet subsequently faced continued isolation or exclusion. These cases demonstrate that reinstatement must be accompanied by effective reintegration measures and active employer monitoring in order to ensure compliance with the obligation to provide a harassment-free work environment (CNCD, 2022). Taken together, Romanian jurisprudence up to 2022 reflects a gradual shift toward a substantive protection model, combining cessation, compensation, and prevention. This approach is consistent with European human rights standards, which require not only formal remedies but also effective protection against workplace harassment and secondary victimization (C. v. Romania, 2022).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The empirical component of this study is based on a quantitative research design, aiming to explore employees' perceptions of psychological harassment at the workplace and their awareness of labour rights. The methodological approach was selected in order to capture the prevalence of negative acts associated with workplace bullying, as defined in the theoretical literature (Leymann, 1996; Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). The main objectives of the empirical research are: to identify the perceived level of psychological harassment at the workplace; to assess the frequency of specific negative behaviours associated with bullying and mobbing; to examine employees'

awareness of their legal rights in relation to workplace harassment; to explore potential differences related to gender, employment sector (public/private), and work environment (urban/rural).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, adapted from the Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT), one of the most widely used instruments for measuring workplace bullying (Leymann, 1996). The adapted questionnaire consisted of 16 items, measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”), as well as several dichotomous questions (“yes/no”). Additional items captured socio-demographic variables, including gender, sector of employment (public or private), and work environment (urban or rural). The behaviour-based approach adopted in this study is consistent with methodological recommendations in the literature, which emphasize measuring exposure to specific acts rather than relying solely on self-labeling as a victim (Cowie, 2002; Einarsen, et al., 2011).

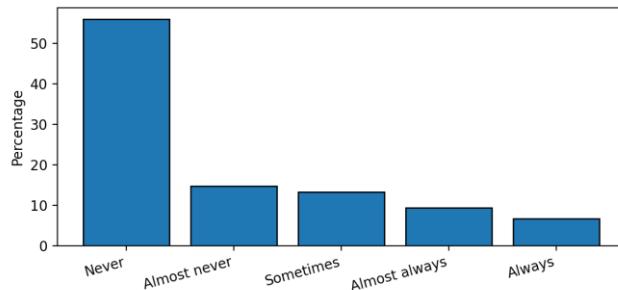
The research sample consisted of 75 respondents, employed in various occupational sectors. Of these, 58 were women and 17 men; 62 worked in urban environments and 13 in rural areas; 43 were employed in the private sector and 32 in the public sector. Data were collected online, using a secure electronic form, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. The online distribution method allowed access to a heterogeneous group of respondents, enhancing the diversity of professional experiences represented in the sample. Although the sample size does not allow for broad generalization, it provides relevant exploratory insights into workplace harassment perceptions, consistent with similar empirical studies in the field (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results indicate that, for most respondents, exposure to severe forms of psychological harassment is relatively low. A majority reported that behaviours such as verbal aggression, systematic criticism, or professional marginalization occurred “never” or “almost never.” These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that extreme forms of workplace bullying affect a minority of employees, while milder and more subtle negative acts are more widespread and socially tolerated (Hoel, et al., 2001). Nevertheless, a non-negligible proportion of respondents reported experiencing specific negative behaviours. Verbal threats were reported by 10.7% of respondents, while 5.3% indicated having been threatened with job loss.

Although these percentages appear limited, they are significant from a legal and organizational perspective, as even isolated incidents may indicate structural vulnerabilities within the workplace environment and power asymmetries between employees and superiors (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). Figure 1 illustrates respondents’ perceptions regarding limitations on freedom of expression at the workplace. The graphical distribution shows that the majority of respondents selected the categories “never” or “almost never,” indicating that overt restrictions on expressing opinions are not widespread. However, a relevant minority reported frequent or very frequent limitations.

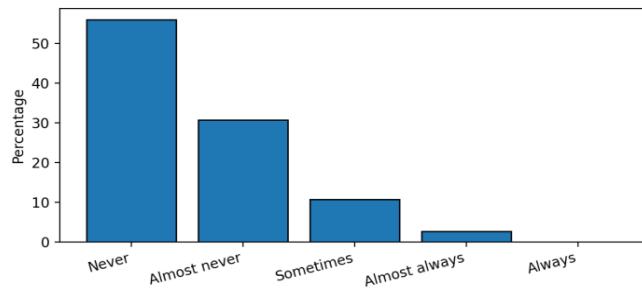
These results suggest that, while most employees do not experience explicit communication constraints, a subgroup is exposed to conditions that may facilitate early-stage bullying dynamics. In the Romanian organizational context, such limitations are often associated with hierarchical management styles and a reluctance to tolerate dissent, particularly in public institutions and traditionally structured organizations.



Source: Author's own research

Figure 1. Limitations on freedom of expression at the workplace

Figures 2 and 3 present the frequency of verbal aggression (raised voice or shouting) and work-related criticism. Figure 2 shows that overt verbal aggression is relatively rare, while Figure 3 indicates that work-related criticism occurs more frequently. This pattern confirms that severe forms of psychological harassment affect a limited number of employees, whereas milder negative acts are more prevalent and socially tolerated (Hoel, et al., 2001).

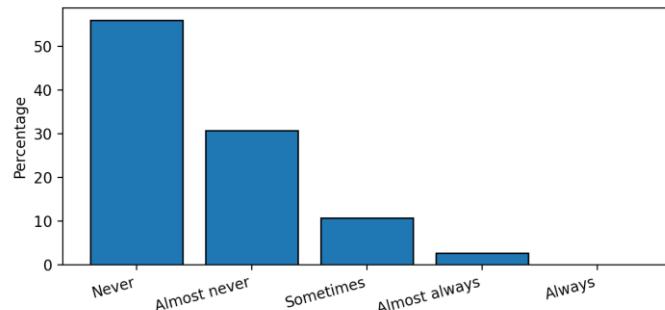


Source: Author's own research

Figure 2. Raised voice / shouting at the workplace

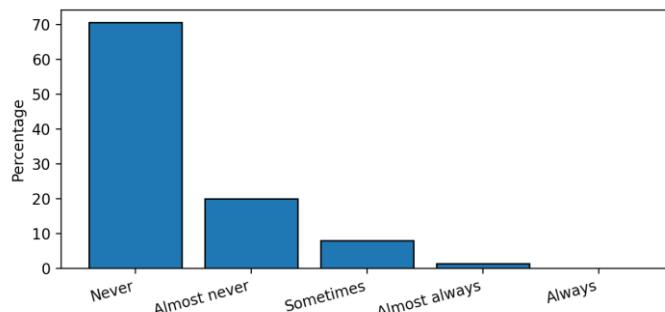
Figures 4 and 5 address experiences related to social exclusion, marginalization, and invisibility at the workplace. The graphical data indicate that most respondents did not experience these behaviours frequently; however, a small but consistent group reported repeated exposure. Figure 4 highlights experiences of ridicule or marginalization, while Figure 5 focuses on feeling treated as "invisible."

Although the percentages are relatively low, these behaviours are particularly relevant due to their cumulative effect over time.



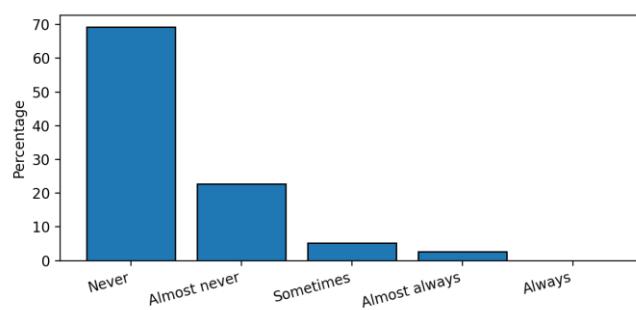
Source: Author's own research

Figure 3. Work-related criticism by colleagues or superiors



Source: Author's own research

Figure 4. Perceived ridicule or marginalization at the workplace

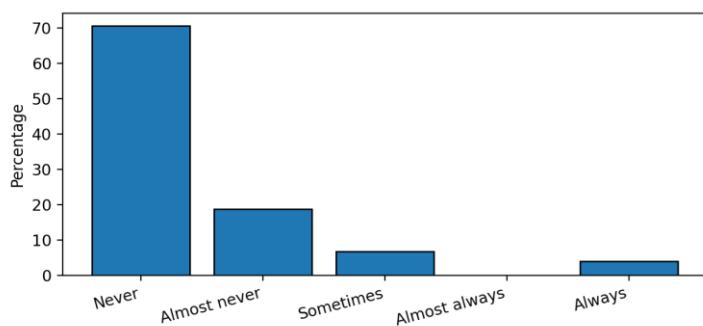


Source: Author's own research

Figure 5. Perceived invisibility and social exclusion

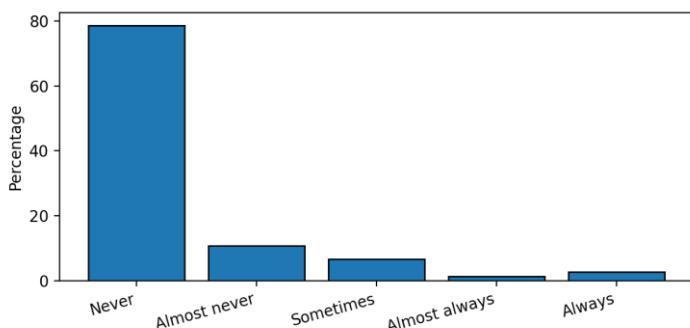
In the Romanian work environment, social exclusion often manifests in subtle forms, such as exclusion from informal communication channels or decision-making processes. These practices may remain invisible at the organizational level but can gradually deteriorate professional identity and mental well-being. The graphical results thus support the argument that workplace harassment frequently operates through indirect and normalized behaviours rather than overt aggression (Zapf, et al., 1996).

Figures 6 and 7 present respondents' answers regarding inappropriate task allocation and denial of access to information. The data show that the majority of respondents selected "never" or "almost never," suggesting that these organizational forms of pressure are less common than interpersonal negative acts.



Source: Author's own research

Figure 6. Assignment of inappropriate tasks as a form of pressure



Source: Author's own research

Figure 7. Denial of access to work-related information

Nevertheless, Figure 6 indicates that a small proportion of respondents experienced task assignments below or above their qualification level, while Figure 7 shows isolated cases of information withholding. In the Romanian context, such practices are particularly difficult to identify and contest, as they often fall within managerial discretion. When applied selectively and repeatedly, they may constitute moral harassment by undermining professional performance and credibility.

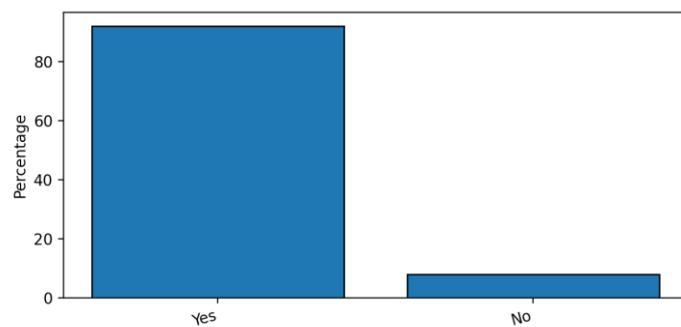
These findings underline that even low-frequency organizational pressures should not be disregarded, as their impact may be substantial when combined with other negative behaviours and power imbalances.

An important finding of the study is the high level of awareness of labour rights among respondents: 92% declared that they were familiar with their rights as employees. This result suggests that legal awareness may function as a potential protective factor, reducing tolerance for abusive practices and increasing employees' ability to recognize inappropriate conduct.

However, the coexistence of high legal awareness with relatively low reporting of harassment experiences reflects patterns identified in previous research. Fear of retaliation, normalization of negative behaviours, and lack of trust in institutional or organizational responses often discourage formal complaints, even when employees are legally informed (Cowie, 2002; Hoel, et al., 2001).

In Romania, these barriers are reinforced by perceptions of lengthy judicial procedures, limited effectiveness of internal complaint mechanisms, and concerns about professional repercussions. Consequently, legal awareness alone does not guarantee effective protection, unless it is accompanied by organizational cultures that actively support reporting and prevention. This apparent paradox—high legal awareness alongside exposure to threats—highlights a critical issue in the Romanian context. While employees may be legally informed, fear of retaliation, lack of trust in internal complaint mechanisms, and perceptions of ineffective enforcement often discourage formal reporting. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing that legal knowledge alone does not guarantee effective protection (Cowie, 2002; Hoel, et al., 2001).

When interpreted together, the graphical results underline a significant gap between formal legal protection and practical workplace realities. Romanian legislation provides remedies such as cessation of harassment, moral damages, and reinstatement; however, the relatively low prevalence of reported severe harassment should not be interpreted as the absence of risk.



Source: Author's own research

Figure 8. Threats of dismissal in the last three months

Consistent with European human rights jurisprudence, effective protection against workplace harassment requires not only formal remedies, but also accessible procedures and safeguards against secondary victimization (C. v. Romania, 2022). The figures presented in this study suggest that psychological harassment in Romania often remains latent and underreported, manifesting through subtle, cumulative behaviours rather than overt abuse.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine psychological harassment at the workplace by integrating a theoretical and legal analysis with empirical evidence from a Romanian case study. The findings confirm that severe and overt forms of workplace bullying are not widespread among the respondents. Most participants reported low exposure to explicit verbal aggression, systematic humiliation, or organizational abuse. These results are consistent with international research indicating that extreme forms of bullying affect a limited proportion of employees, while subtler negative acts are more common (Hoel, et al., 2001).

However, the empirical evidence also reveals the persistence of latent and indirect forms of psychological harassment. A non-negligible proportion of respondents reported limitations on freedom of expression, repeated criticism, social exclusion, verbal threats, or threats of dismissal. Although these behaviours were not reported by the majority, their presence is significant, as workplace harassment is defined not by isolated incidents but by repetition, cumulative impact, and power asymmetries (Leymann, 1996; Zapf, et al., 1996).

A particularly important finding concerns the high level of awareness of labour rights among respondents, with 92% declaring that they are familiar with their legal protections. Despite this awareness, reporting of harassment-related experiences remains limited. This confirms the existence of a structural gap between formal legal protection and effective access to remedies, a gap that has been repeatedly highlighted in both empirical research and Romanian practice.

Overall, the results suggest that psychological harassment in Romanian workplaces often remains underreported and normalized, manifesting through subtle behaviours embedded in everyday organizational interactions rather than through overt hostility.

The findings of this study carry several implications for public policy, organizational practice, and legal enforcement in Romania.

First, the results highlight the need for preventive organizational policies that go beyond formal compliance with legal requirements. Employers should adopt clear internal regulations addressing psychological harassment, including transparent reporting mechanisms, impartial investigation procedures, and explicit anti-retaliation safeguards. Without such measures, employees may remain reluctant to report abusive behaviours, even when they are aware of their rights.

Second, managerial training plays a crucial role in prevention. The prevalence of repeated criticism, communication suppression, and social exclusion suggests that harassment often arises from poor leadership practices rather than from isolated

deviant behaviour. Training programs focused on ethical leadership, conflict management, and psychosocial risk prevention may reduce the normalization of harmful behaviours and improve workplace climate.

Third, the high level of legal awareness among employees indicates that information campaigns alone are insufficient. Policymakers and enforcement bodies should focus on improving trust in institutional responses, including the effectiveness and accessibility of administrative and judicial remedies. Simplified procedures, reasonable timeframes, and protection against secondary victimization are essential to encourage victims to seek redress.

The study contributes to the existing literature by offering context-specific empirical evidence on workplace bullying in Romania and by linking individual experiences to broader legal and organizational frameworks. The findings reinforce the conclusion that effective protection against psychological harassment requires not only robust legislation, but also proactive organizational practices and a cultural shift toward dignity and respect at work.

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