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# Lived Experiences of Workplace Bullying at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

### Abstract

*Bullying was traditionally associated with the playground, but it is becoming a real menace in the workplace in the new millennium. It is usually a complex problem which requires a pragmatic solution. This is because bullying as behaviour is not always obvious. It can be irrational, subtle and devious, taking place when there are no witnesses, inflicted on colleagues and subordinates to cause maximum humiliation. Bullying takes place in almost all workplaces; UEW is no exception. This research paper brings to the fore, lived experiences on “bullying in the workplace” of fifty (50) members of staff. It ends with suggestions to administrators to help reduce this behaviour at UEW. The writer has the conviction that there is no place for bullies in any well-run organization such as our universities.*

### Introduction

The International Labour Organization (ILO) report (2002), defines bullying within the workplace in focus as “any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work”. The report went on to explain that these behaviours would originate from customers or co-workers at any level of the organization. It further mentioned that bullying includes all forms of harassment, victimization, assaults and physical threats among others. It highlights that the new profile of bullying at the workplace is one which gives equal emphasis to the physical and psychological, and one which gives full recognition to the significance of minor acts of violence. The ILO report believes that workplace bullying constitutes “offensive behaviour through vindictive cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or groups of employees”. It concludes that such bullying behaviour may pose threat to one’s professional status, personal standing and lead to isolation, overwork or destabilization or resignations.

Kromoah (2005) augments the above definitions by stating that bullying at the workplace may be used to describe a wide range of behaviours from single attacks of violence to repeated acts of covert ill treatment at the workplace. The author divides workplace bullying into three parts namely ‘overt’, ‘covert’ and ‘hostile’ behaviour between co-workers. Kromoah explains that overt bullying includes abusive language, yelling and screaming, unexplained acts of rage, unjustified criticisms and insults, constant humiliation and unjustified threats of transfer and dismissal or any other disciplinary procedures. Covert bullying on the other hand includes sabotaging an employee’s work by withholding information which is required to fulfill tasks, hiding documents or equipment, constantly changing targets or work guidelines, overloading an employee with work, giving impossible deadlines, not providing appropriate resources and training and isolating or ignoring an employee on a consistent basis. Hostile behaviour includes all forms of violent behaviour – assault, persistent harassment and sexual abuse.

In effect, bullying in this context connotes misuse of ‘power’ by an individual or group from their positions, seniority, physical attributes and gender against other people at the work place. Bullying also includes any incident, in which an employee is threatened, abused or assaulted during the course of his/her employment, which includes application of force, threats with or without weapons, severe

verbal abuse and persistent sexual and racial harassment. However, bullying in this context, excludes transfers made to ensure productivity, denial of promotion due to non-performance, trying to correct or coach a non-performing or lazy staff.

It is worth pointing out that while harassment and assault can result from a single incident or small number of incidents, bullying tends to be an accumulation of many small incidents over a long period of time. Each incident tends to be trivial, and on its own and out of context does not constitute an offence or grounds for disciplinary or grievous action. As an administrator, there is the need to be informed of lived experiences of bullying on workers at UEW.

### **The Research Problem**

Bullying is becoming a real menace at the workplace especially at the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Observations have shown that UEW as a large educational organisation is no exception. Records from our quarterly 'Documenter' constantly show resignations and vacation of posts, some of which may be results of bullying. Resignations and vacation of posts are adversely affecting productivity in one way or the other.

It is therefore necessary to delve into lived experiences of bullying at UEW. The main research question is: what are the lived experiences of bullying at UEW?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose is to delve into personal experiences of bullying at UEW as well as effects of the menace on the individuals and the organisation.

### **Research Questions**

- Is bullying practiced in UEW Workplace?
- What forms of bullying are practiced in UEW?
- What are the characteristics of the bullies?
- What are the effects of bullying on staff at UEW?
- How can bullying be managed at UEW?

### **Significance**

The study is expected to contribute to the understanding of bullying in terms of meaning, symptoms and management. The knowledge on workplace bullying at UEW will help reduce the menace and guide management strategize to help bullies and victims adjust better thereby increasing productivity.

### **Methodology**

The findings of lived experiences of fifty (50) staff on bullying at UEW contributed to this paper. The study was conducted at Winneba campus of the University of Education, Winneba. The research design was phenomenological in nature, where people narrate their personal experiences on the concept of bullying at their workplace (UEW). The instrument for the study was mainly interview using an interview guide.

Participants in the study were senior members, senior and junior staff working in academic and administrative departments. The study used purposive sampling technique where initial people observed to be victims of bullying were contacted and with their consent agreed to participate in the research. The sample size was made up of ten (10) senior members, twenty (20) junior staff and twenty (20) senior staff. It was very difficult getting information from participants since most of them feared victimization should the results be made public

### **Data Collection**

The stem question for the interview was: What are your lived experiences of bullying at your workplace? The duration of the study was one (1) year as enough informal sections were spent with each participant. Participants were taken through all the questions to elicit information from them.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Due to the nature of the study, the researcher had to get information informally most of the time hence the strict adherence to ethics was not observed.

### **Instrumentation**

Apart from an interview guide there was desk research where attendance records hospital cards and hospital claims among others were cross-checked against information given by respondents. The interview guide focused on the following:

1. Lived experiences on bullying
2. Effects of bullying on individuals
3. Victim's description of their bullies
4. Whether victims are aware treatment amounts to bullying.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis was grounded in the qualitative framework where necessary verbatim expressions of the participants were used to illustrate issues relevant and needed to support findings.

### **Reliability and Validation of Instrument**

Cross-checks after initial interviews were done to ensure that views of the participants were recorded accurately (triangulation).

### **Results**

The interview result on lived bullying experiences yielded forty (40) items or themes. Checking for duplication reduced the items to thirty (30). The fifty (50) participants who were used ranged in age from 23 – 59years comprising twenty (20) women and thirty (30) men. Twenty-nine (29) relevant statements on bullying were extracted from the stem interview data. The results were as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Statements on bullying experiences and its corresponding meanings – Males/Females.

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>MEANING</b>	<b>MALE</b>	<b>FEMALE</b>
1	Fault-finding and criticism – constantly	Nit-Picking	55%	45%
2	Refusing to acknowledge persons contributions, achievement, existence and or value.	Ignoring	50%	40%
3	Undermining a person, his/her position, status, value, etc.	Belittling	46%	54%
4	Singling out a person and treated differently – for instance everyone else can get away with an offence except that person (eg. With coming to work late except that person – action is taken immediately).	Discrimination	45%	55
5	Being sidelined, overruled or separated from colleagues.	Isolation	61%	39%
6	Being belittled in front of others – shouted at or threatened.	Verbal abuse or threat	60%	40%
7	Overloaded with work without any sympathy.	Abuse	51%	49%

*Work place bullying*

8	Most work taken away and replaced with menial tasks or none at all.	Made redundant	40%	60%
9	Denied annual, casual or sick leave without any justification.	Selective treatment	55%	45%
10	Ones responsibility increased while authority is taken away.	Dumping of ones spirit	52	48
11	Denied training necessary to fulfill ones duties while others are given the chance.	Concealed favouritism	70%	30%
12	Setting unrealistic goals for one which changes as one is near completion of that goal.	Humiliation	30%	35%
13	Deadlines changed at short or no notice to initial deadline	Intent of destroying ones image	30%	29%
14	Twisting distorting or misrepresenting everything one says.	Painting one black	15%	20%
15	Aggressive eye contact/glaring at one.	Assault	10%	20%
16	Excessively or criticizing harshly.	Humiliation	20%	30%

ITEM	EXPERIENCE	MEANING	MALE	FEMALE
17	Ensuring that target does not have resources to work with (equipment stationery). The aim was not to check pilfering.	Depriving one of work – tools, equipment or materials	10	10
18	Using lies or half truths to intimidate victim.	Intimidation	11%	11.5%
19	Giving wrong or misleading information to victim	Humiliating to destroy	30%	22%
20	Making new rules outside statutory ones for victim to observe.	Misuse of power	15%	10%
21	Using verbal, written warnings for trivial or fabricated offences without proper investigation.	Overuse of power	41%	30%
22	Being coerced into abandoning job through constructive dismissal or transfer.	Denial of right	40%	20%
23	Unnecessary delays in promotion when it is obvious that others have had it smooth.	Concealed favoritism	35%	30%
24	Using ones position to make one do ones private work with little or no remuneration.	Abuse of office	50%	30%
25	Holding information from someone whom that information is meant for.	Denial of right	40%	30%
26	Spreading gossip on victim	Gossiping to destroy ones image	40%	60%
27	Purposeful information of victim ending in serious verbal assault	Assault	5%	2%
28	Demanding for part of benefits due to the worker	Extortion	5%	5%
29	Transferred without consultation/others brought in without previous information.	Disrespect for person in question.	10%	7%

*Adrah*

### **Duration of the Experience**

Generally, the experiences of participants were between 1 year and 10 years.

### **Some of the Personal Comments Were:**

*“My boss locks equipment, tools and materials in the office while away but expect work to be done. He even counts sheets of paper for me. Anytime the paper gets finished, I stop until he comes” – (junior staff). This behaviour was not to check pilfering but an evidence of bullying.*

*“My boss expects me to walk or take taxi for official errands while the official vehicle is available, so I just do what I can do within a period” – (senior staff).*

*“I feel sick anytime I am coming to work. My boss is a critic, never satisfied with any work I do and will not tell me anything when going out”. In the best mood, all that will be said is (I will be back)” – (senior member).*

*“My boss will not listen to me before jumping to conclusion anytime I engage in a conversation. Any decision taken when not around is turned down” – (senior member).*

*“I am relaxed when my boss is away, but upon hearing his foot-steps coming to the office, my heart starts beating faster than normal” – (junior staff).*

*“I am saddled with work most of the time without any extra remuneration while my colleague next door is always sleeping because she has little or no work to do” – (junior staff).*

*“My boss has no patience at all. Barks at me on the least mistake. Most often is misled to believe it was a mistake. Usually the blame turns to be that of someone else. What baffles me is my boss keeps on repeating the same behaviour even if got to know the truth later” – (senior member).*

*“My promotion was delayed while some of my colleagues whom I mentored rather had theirs fast tracked” – (junior staff).*

*“My boss uses my services – collecting money from the bank, collecting children from school while I go hungry” – (junior staff).*

*“My boss is a lecturer turned administrator who knows not office practice. Instead of letting support staff offer guidance, boss messes up and blames me threatening me most of the time. I hear rumours of misconduct on me from outside. Most of my responsibilities are taken away from me” – (senior member).*

*“My colleague gets on my nerves anytime he comes to the office. He/she talks with authority and commands or confronts me on minor issues in addition, gives instructions without enough guidance. Just as one is about to complete one assignment counter instructions are given.” – (senior member).*

*“I am blamed for errors made by my boss. I am excessively and or harshly criticized. My boss barks, screams and shouts at the least mistake I make. I feel being devalued” – (senior staff).*

*“I am perpetually under attack and criticism at the least offences. Everybody in my office wishes to move to another office. The boss does not agree with subordinates on very many*

*things, condemning almost everything the subordinates do. The boss condemns subordinates before anybody, including students and visitors. “I hate my boss but I can’t show it. I’ve lost interest in the job because of my boss” – (senior staff).*

*“When I was first employed, I was proud that I was going to work in a university. I felt a sense of responsibility, ensuring that I did everything right to please my boss and to gain promotion. Now I don’t care much. I see others doing the wrong things and get away with them. “Why must I care any longer? I was willing to work overtime, even for free but now hmn...” – (senior staff).*

Further investigations also revealed that most (70%) of the victims were mostly non confrontative and dedicated staff.

**Effects of Experiences on Victims**

Participants were asked to indicate some of the effects of their experiences on them. Results were as shown in Table 2 in order of severity:

**Table 2**  
**Effects of Experiences on Victims**

<b>Symptoms</b>	<b>Percentage (s)</b>
Headaches	60%
Nervousness	50%
Dizziness	42%
Profuse sweating	40%
Feeling of shame/embarrassment/guilt	40%
Tiredness	30.5%
Loss of appetite	30%
Excessive thirst/dry throat	29%
Easily irritated/angry	28%
Palpitation	24.8%
Backache	24.3%
Shoulder pain	20.7%
Feel of being devalued	20%
Desire to proceed on leave	18%
High or low blood pressure	15%

*Adrah*

Being fearful	15.5%
Sleeplessness	15%
Fatigue	14.5%
Increased use of alcohol/smoking.	5%
Suicidal tendencies.	01%

As can be observed in Table 2, victims provided multiple responses. The effects can be described as health, social and psychological in nature. Further inquiries revealed that such victims were adversely affected in one way or the other by the experiences they went through.

Headache is the most frequent (60%) while suicide tendencies are the least problem experienced by respondents. Nervousness, dizziness and profuse sweating were also sources of concern as shown in Table 2. Out of fifty respondents ten had resigned or vacated their posts for better jobs elsewhere.

**Description of Bullies by Victims**

The victims were asked to describe their bullies and the result is as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Victims' Description of their Bullies**

Description
Very pleasant at first sight but mostly power drunk – females/males.
Pleasant one moment and opposite the next second – females
Displays power when people are around – mostly males.
Easily irritated on trivial issues – females
Appear pleasant but treacherous – females
A lion in sheep skin – females/males.
Too authoritative, bossy and arrogant “do it as I command” person – Males/females
Does not trust anybody – Males/females
The only intelligent person and all others are fools – mostly males.
Demonstrates book knowledge but lacks common sense – mostly males
Portrays self as a wise person but lack wisdom – males/females.
Appear to have answers to all problems but in actual fact, knows little – males/females.
A braggart who ends up doing nothing himself – Mostly males.
Displays inferiority complex but always defensive – Females/males.

Generally, as can be observed from Table 3, bullies are people who want to show that their position is important.

**Awareness of Bullying by Victims and Bullies**

The Participants were further asked whether they were aware that their experiences amounted to bullying. The result indicated that majority (almost 80%) of participants were aware their experiences amounted to bullying, and were not comfortable with the treatments. According to them, they usually complained to colleagues. They were also aware that the treatments have adverse effects on them.

However, fifty-one percent (51%) of the bullies seem not to realize that their behaviour was nuisance to the victims.

### **Discussion**

The results of the study have revealed a lot of information on the state of bullying at UEW. The themes identified by participants involved issues of nit-picking, ignoring, belittling, isolation, verbal abuse, denial, concealed favoritism and assault among others. It appeared that one type of the bullies were people who have personality defects and may use power to boost their own self esteem. On the other hand there were others who were overloaded or stressed themselves. Such group of bullies may not perceive their actions as bullying (Cooper, 2000). Institutions like UEW need to understand that both types of bullies must be helped to overcome their problems. Some of the causes of some bullying others may be due to low self esteem, job insecurity, work intensification, under-utilization or fear of being accused of failure or incompetence. The study revealed that over 70% of these bullies are superiors who exercised power for various reasons; class system; inexperience; show-off; paying back others or lack of management and administrative skills.

In the present study, it was also revealed that the bullied are mostly people with non-confrontative interpersonal style – capable, dedicated staff who were liked by other workers. Armstrong's (1998) earlier findings support the present finding that people with strong personalities, who say what they think and refuse to compromise, are those who mostly get bullied.

As pointed out by Westlake (2000), bullying affects both mental and psychological health. The study revealed that the victims suffer chronic stress, panic attacks, or depression. They exhibited symptoms of headaches, fatigue, heart palpitation, and fear among others. As Ellis (2000) pointed out, there is a potential for frequent illness for victims of bullying because they are always nervous and anxious. The basic fact is that every individual in the university system is important. The essence of management is getting people to do work efficiently. Anyone who is convinced that he/she is singled out for bullying at the workplace also needs to put up a positive stand. Bullies have also been known to exercise power attributed to their status or positions. This may include the number of years spent in the organization, personal power based on the belief that they are always right because of their relationship with authority. Most often these bullies do recognize that their behaviour is a nuisance or uncalled for and are convinced that they are serving the interest of the organization while they are not.

From the study, it is obvious that the bullies (80%) and victims (49%) were aware the treatments amounted to bullying. This calls for awareness on the part of bullies and victims. The menace of bullying at the workplace which at times appears trivial can be costly to both the organization and individual workers. Such costs include reducing the worker's capacity to safely perform the tasks required of him/her. For example, low morale; exhibition of various forms of negative attitudes such as absenteeism; low turnover rates with high hospital bills; recruitment costs as people resign or vacate their post often; increased legal costs as victims turn to sue organization. Alternately, friends and families of victims are also adversely affected. In effect, the victims may either in turn, try to bully the friends or family members or become withdrawn; posing psychological problems for these immediate members.

Bullies therefore become threats to their victims and the institution/organization. As Administrators we must fortify ourselves to fight this menace to protect our organizations. Bullies at the workplace need to be reminded that they are not mini gods, demigods or supreme gods and that they have a life to lead outside the powerful office they hold today.

The findings of this study have shown that bullying in the workplace (UEW in focus) is gradually eating into the university. The end result of this may be disastrous. For example, a boss may abuse, harass or transfer or humiliate subordinates for no apparent reason while others look on unconcerned



## *Adrah*

or sympathize with the victim only in camera. For example, victim 'A' left her former workplace and entered UEW with high hopes of better job satisfaction and better salaries. She never saw peace for the one year she worked under Boss 'B'. She became so stressed that she left UEW back to her former workplace where the salary was lower. "*I value my peace*" the victim said to herself as she arrived back at her former workplace.

As university administrators we should ask the following questions: Are you aware that bullying is present at your workplace? Are you guilty of some of such behaviour? Are you a victim? Is top management aware of the behaviours in your system? Are some officers aware but do not care what happens to others?

### **Summary**

Bullying is now becoming a common phenomenon at our workplaces of which UEW is no exception:

1. While some people acquire the habit of bullying, others inherited it from their positions. That is by virtue of their position; they are placed in a 'class' that demand that they exercise their powers to the fullest. In other words the class system of senior member/senior staff/junior staff/senior lecturer/Doctorate/Masters' holder among others allow those on top to bully subordinates mostly.
2. Most bullying is traceable to one person, male or female, boss, supervisor or subordinate or colleague.
3. A workplace bully subjects the victim to unjustified criticism and trivial fault finding. This treatment is normally made up of little events not easily noticed as offences but does not include mentoring coaching or genuine transfers.
4. Bullying has tremendous adverse effects on both the organization and victims – kills initiative, brings no development, prevents humane atmosphere.
5. If bullies are made aware what victims go through, perhaps it might make them change their attitude so that they desist from the practice.

### **Conclusions**

Bullying has been problematic as there is no agreed definition of bullying in the workplace. Definitions seem to vary according to predominant schools of thought. However, what is obvious is that, bullying is an aggressive violent behaviour which is persistent in nature and stems out mainly from imbalance of power. The results of the study show that bullying is practiced at UEW among all categories of the staff.

The forms of bullying identified at UEW included deprivation, intimidation, humiliation, denial and extortion among others. Bullying at the workplace is an undesirable and unacceptable behaviour that administrators among others should help guard against to protect the integrity of employees as well as ensure higher productivity in all organizations including UEW. We must remember that no condition is permanent and that we should have positive influence on our subordinates today as they will also become bosses tomorrow.

Characteristics of bullying at UEW included unnecessary fault finding, lack of appreciation, undermining, sidelining, and other forms of abuse. Generally males as well as females can be bullies at the workplace. However female bullies are treacherous. The bullies are mostly superiors. Only 20% of bullies were co-workers or subordinates. One obvious thing about most of the bullies was that they can be charming one minute, vicious the next. The bully insists his/her way of doing things is right and blames others when things go wrong. They seem to be changing their instructions perhaps hoping that people will make mistakes. In effect bullies talk more and are not ready to listen to others.

The effects of bullying on the staff range from health through social and psychological dimensions of the victims as well as lowering production in the organization. Administrators should learn that it is

only when they take an interest in the goals and aspirations of their individual employees will those employees take an interest in the goals of our university and that bullying employees destroys justice and fairness in our work places and replace it with iniquity and strife.

### **Recommendations**

The need for strict anti-bullying policies at our workplaces is compelling. To achieve this, a committee made up of Management and union representatives should be established and mandated to come out with a comprehensive document. The policy must be supported and implemented to the letter. This will ensure a more peaceful and productive workplace with better decision making, less time wasting, higher staff retention and therefore higher productivity.

Universities need to have staff handbooks spelling out bullying as unacceptable behaviour. Through workshops, seminars and other informal means, all workers should be educated about their rights and responsibilities so that 'A' will understand that where his/her freedom ends is where 'B' does begin.

Targets of bullying must be helped by colleagues and unions like Teachers & Educational Workers Union (TEWU), University Teachers Association of Ghana (UTAG), Ghana Association of University Administrators (GAUA) and Federation of Universities Senior Staff Association of Ghana (FUSAG). This will help victims deal with their pain and anger while they are fortified with assertive skills. Those who get bullied must be provided with the appropriate information and options in order that they can decide on reasonable course of action.

Furthermore, Welfare Sections and Employee Relation Office such as in UEW within the universities should establish proper systems for investigation, recording and dealing with matters related to bullying. Complaints must be investigated quickly while maintaining discretion, confidentiality and protecting the rights of all individuals involved.

Research on bullying at the workplace should be an on-going activity within the university system to identify and solve problems such as bullying among workers. Such research may be participatory or action oriented focusing on both the bullies and victims.

The universities should plan and organize work so as to prevent victimization. Victimization only occurs when personal conflicts lose their reciprocity and individual employees are dangerously affected as a result. The root causes of victimization are unsatisfactory organization of work, its direction, excessive or insufficient workload levels, shortcomings of employer's policies, or employer's attitude or response to the employees.

All staff especially, senior members that are transferred promoted or rotated at one time or the other must be given proper orientation as to job specifics, performance standards as well as evaluation specifics to ensure cordial relationship among staffs of each unit.

Our universities will become centres of excellence through the development of strong interpersonal skills at all levels. Administrators must ensure through collaborative effort that there is no place for bullies in well-run organizations like our universities. This can be achieved through early detection of signs of bullying and rectification of such unsatisfactory working conditions with support of all, especially administrators. We can make a difference within the next ten years by insisting on a change of attitude and enforcement of rules that regulate our behaviour towards minimizing bullying at our workplaces and life in general.

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**Adrah**

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