

## CAREER

# BREAKING THE SILENCE

## The reality of workplace bullying and the need for change



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA



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## TAZRIN RASHID PRITHA

Contrary to popular belief, bullying isn't confined to high school corridors; it extends into the adult world, where the consequences can be much more severe. In the United States alone, approximately two million people experience workplace bullying each year, according to the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI). The situation in Bangladesh is similarly alarming, where the issue often remains unaddressed, leaving countless employees to suffer in silence.

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Shabab Junayed, an HR intern at a reputed mobile financial services (MFS) company, shares a similar experience. “My first encounter with workplace bullying happened during my first job out of college. A senior colleague would constantly criticise my work in front of others, often in a mocking tone, mostly because I was much younger than the rest of the team. Some co-workers would occasionally join in, seemingly to gain favour with the senior colleagues.”

While verbal bullying is not uncommon in the workplace, covert actions are often more prevalent.

“I was assigned tasks that were impossible to complete within the given timeframe,” Shabab recalled. “Additionally, I was denied access to the information I needed to finish my work. I was being set up for failure.”

Adding to Shabab's experience, Borsha shared, “I had never felt so lonely and isolated in my life. It had become clear that having a different perspective from the group was an easy way to get outcast. What hurt me the most was that they didn't even include me in the group chat before an office trip.”

Moreover, when bullying is targeted at women, it introduces an additional layer of complexity to this already pervasive issue. Mayesha Rahman, a lecturer at a public university said, “The concept of pseudo-equality is widespread in today's workplace. As a society, we are still struggling to accept women in leadership roles. There is a fine line between assertiveness and arrogance, but an opinionated woman is often mischaracterised as arrogant by her colleagues.”

Mayesha added, “I was shocked to discover that my colleagues were speaking about me behind my back. I was simply focused on doing my job and ensuring the well-being of my students.”

The aftermath of workplace bullying is complex, affecting both the mental health of victims and the overall efficiency of an organisation. Shabab explained, “Bullying took a severe toll on my mental health. I developed anxiety, especially about going to work. I had trouble sleeping, often felt depressed, and questioned my abilities and self-worth. This impacted my job performance significantly. I became anxious about presenting my work, second-guessed my decisions, and spent extra hours perfecting everything to avoid criticism. My productivity decreased because I was constantly stressed and distracted.”

Borsha added, “My negative experiences at work also affected my personal life. I lacked the mental strength to interact with my family when I got home, and I was too burned out to socialise with friends, even on weekends.”

Most organisations have established HR protocols to address workplace bullying. Raisa Haque, an HR Executive at an industrial conglomerate, explained, “Our goal is to foster a workplace where everyone is treated fairly. Victims are encouraged to file a written complaint with detailed information about the incident. Depending on the situation and severity of the complaint, HR will initiate an investigation with a dedicated committee. If the investigation determines that bullying occurred, disciplinary actions may be taken, potentially including termination. Both parties involved are given the opportunity to appeal the decision.”

However, the effectiveness of these policies in combating workplace bullying remains a subject of debate. Mayesha noted, “It's very challenging to support allegations without sufficient proof to prompt HR to initiate an investigation. Additionally, raising complaints without evidence can put the victim at a disadvantage. Not only might they face social exclusion, but they could also struggle to find a new job, as HR departments often contact previous employers to verify employment history.”

Complications remain in the current protocols to combat workplace bullying, thus more needs to be done to ensure a streamlined and secure work environment for all.

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