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license**VOICES FROM WITHIN: EXPLORING
COLLABORATION, COMPETITION AND COPING
MECHANISMS AMONG FEMALE EMPLOYEES IN
FEMALE-DOMINATES WORKPLACE****Lungisile Lorraine Simelane^{1*}, Thobeka Nkomo²**¹Department of Social Development, 448 Mabalane and
Dingaan Street, Phiri, Soweto 1818, South Africa²University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South
Africa*Correspondence E-Mail: lungisile.simelane762@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.30598/baileofisipvol4iss1pp252-273>**ABSTRACT**

Workplace bullying among women remains an underexplored sociological phenomenon, particularly within female-dominated professional environments where gender similarity does not necessarily produce solidarity, support, or protection. This study aims to explore how female employees experience, interpret, and respond to workplace bullying, with particular attention to the dynamics of competition, interpersonal conflict, and coping mechanisms among social workers in a female-dominated workplace in Gauteng, South Africa. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed to examine participants' lived experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively selected female employees and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns in their accounts. The findings indicate that workplace bullying is experienced as both overt and subtle behaviour, including verbal confrontation, gossip, patronising treatment, exclusion, undermining, and misuse of organisational power. Participants perceived women as particularly vulnerable to bullying because of persistent gender stereotypes, internalised sexism, interpersonal competition, jealousy, and expectations surrounding women's workplace and social roles. Coping responses varied from direct confrontation, boundary-setting, avoidance, and informal negotiation to reporting through supervisors, human resource channels, and employee support services. However, limited awareness and inconsistent use of formal mechanisms encouraged reliance on individual coping strategies, which sometimes intensified conflict or prolonged exposure to harm. The study's novelty lies in conceptualising female-to-female workplace bullying as a relational and structural phenomenon shaped simultaneously by gendered expectations, competition, power relations, and organisational practices. The study recommends strengthening organisational awareness, standardising reporting and intervention mechanisms, and fostering gender solidarity and supportive workplace cultures. For sociology, the findings contribute to understanding how gendered power relations are reproduced within ostensibly gender-congruent workplaces and how employees negotiate, resist, and cope with these relations.

Keywords: Bullying, Bullyism, Patronising, Female-Dominated Workplace, Employees

INTRODUCTION

Work is not only a means of securing income but also an important social arena in which individuals construct professional identities, develop relationships, negotiate recognition, and experience power. Employment relationships therefore involve complex forms of interaction shaped by organisational structures, interpersonal expectations, competition, and unequal

access to authority and resources (Isufaj, 2022; Udin, 2023). Although workplaces are expected to provide environments that support professional growth and social well-being, they may also become sites of exclusion, intimidation, humiliation, and interpersonal hostility (Olagunju & Lindert, 2024). Workplace bullying is particularly important because it is not simply an isolated disagreement between employees; it involves repeated negative behaviours that can undermine an individual's dignity, well-being, professional identity, and ability to participate fully in organisational life (Afolaranmi et al., 2022). Its consequences may extend to job satisfaction, psychological health, absenteeism, organisational commitment, and turnover.

The problem becomes more complex when workplace bullying is examined through gender. Research has traditionally framed workplace bullying as a manifestation of male power over women, reflecting broader structures of gender inequality (Aunger et al., 2024; Inam & Ahmed, 2025; Kılınc & Yücel, 2026). However, this perspective may obscure an important dimension of women's workplace experiences: bullying perpetrated by women against other women. A review of the literature by Hlatywayo & Imbuwa (2024) found that women's experiences of workplace bullying remained comparatively underexamined despite growing scholarship on gender-based workplace harassment. Gender, moreover, does not operate as a simple predictor of bullying exposure. Peng et al. (2025) found that the relationship between gender, bullying, and mental health is more nuanced than conventional assumptions suggest. Their findings demonstrate that gender must be considered together with the type of bullying, organisational context, and individual vulnerability rather than being treated as a straightforward distinction between male perpetrators and female victims.

This issue is particularly significant in female-dominated occupations. Numerical representation does not necessarily eliminate unequal power relations or create solidarity among women. In environments where women compete for promotion, recognition, managerial approval, desirable assignments, and professional status, relationships between female employees may involve both cooperation and competition. Boström & Österman (2022), examining workplace bullying among nurses, demonstrate that gendered expectations can shape bullying through indirect and passive-aggressive behaviours that may become normalised as ordinary forms of women's workplace interaction. Similarly, research on nursing has shown that workplace bullying is associated with organisational culture, interpersonal relationships, and individual characteristics rather than being attributable to a single source of conflict (Bourgeault et al., 2025; Shymko, 2024; Vasilyeva & Sidorenko, 2025). These findings are relevant to social work, where professional practice depends heavily on interpersonal relationships, emotional labour, teamwork, and sustained interaction with colleagues and service users.

The South African context adds further importance to this issue. Steele et al. (2022) phenomenological study demonstrated that workplace bullying in South Africa may take the form of lack of recognition, discrimination, obstructionism, and isolation, with both male and female managers identified among perpetrators. This evidence challenges the assumption that bullying is necessarily associated with male authority. It also indicates that workplace bullying can be

reproduced through everyday organisational interactions and hierarchies (Auweiler et al., 2023; Maran et al., 2023; Wolbring et al., 2025). The experience of women is particularly important because gender intersects with organisational status, professional experience, and broader social inequalities. Consequently, a female-dominated workplace may simultaneously provide women with opportunities for professional participation while reproducing competition, exclusion, and unequal access to recognition.

The consequences of such experiences are substantial. Longitudinal evidence has established an association between workplace bullying and psychological distress (Amanda et al., 2024; Deikus & Vveinhardt, 2024; Lodhe L et al., 2024), while research focusing specifically on women demonstrates that bullying can influence women's engagement with the workforce and their capacity to remain psychologically and professionally invested in employment (Knight et al., 2026; J.-Z. Zhou et al., 2025). Research involving female nurses has further linked workplace bullying with depression and different forms of bullying exposure (Nasarullah et al., 2025; Vrublevskaja & Bagdžiūnienė, 2025). These findings suggest that bullying should not be understood solely as a human-resource problem. It is also a sociological issue because it affects how individuals experience belonging, authority, recognition, identity, and social relationships within institutions.

How employees respond to bullying is equally important. Workplace bullying does not produce uniform responses because employees possess different levels of power, organisational support, confidence, and access to formal mechanisms. Some confront perpetrators, establish interpersonal boundaries, seek assistance from supervisors, or report incidents through human resource structures (Au et al., 2026; Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021a; Salik & Salik, 2026). Others choose silence, avoidance, emotional withdrawal, or informal coping because they fear retaliation, do not trust organisational procedures, or believe that reporting will have little effect. The ability to defend oneself is therefore an important component of the bullying process. Rosander and Diaz et al. (2024) demonstrate that perceived ability to defend oneself differs according to gender and the type of negative treatment experienced. Similarly, research on workplace bullying suggests that bystander intervention and supportive workplace relationships can influence both the experience of the target and the well-being of those who intervene (Ervasti et al., 2022; Jigjiddorj et al., 2025; S. Zhou et al., 2022).

From a sociological perspective, these processes can be interpreted through conflict theory, which directs attention to competition over scarce resources, power, recognition, and organisational opportunities. Bullying may emerge when ordinary workplace competition becomes personalised and develops into persistent forms of exclusion, intimidation, or degradation. This perspective is especially useful in female-dominated workplaces because it avoids interpreting female-to-female bullying as evidence of an inherent absence of female solidarity. Instead, it asks how organisational structures and gendered expectations create conditions in which women may simultaneously support and compete with one another. Research using feminist perspectives has similarly shown that lateral violence among women in

caring professions can be connected to broader structural and historical relations of power rather than simply individual hostility (João et al., 2025; Mahantesha & Agarwal, 2025; Makarem et al., 2025).

Despite this growing body of research, an important dimension remains insufficiently developed. Existing studies have substantially examined the prevalence, health consequences, and general forms of workplace bullying, while gender research has frequently compared men's and women's experiences (Faraji et al., 2025; Lomotey, 2025). Less attention has been given to the everyday social processes through which women bully, experience bullying, compete with, support, and cope with other women within female-dominated workplaces, particularly in the South African context (Akella & Seay, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The problem is therefore not merely whether female employees experience bullying, but how gendered expectations, interpersonal competition, organisational power, and available coping mechanisms interact to shape those experiences. Addressing this dimension allows workplace bullying to be understood as a relational and institutional process rather than solely as an individual behavioural problem.

This study consequently examines the lived experiences of female employees in a female-dominated workplace in Gauteng, South Africa, focusing particularly on the interaction between collaboration, competition, workplace bullying, and coping mechanisms. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study seeks to understand how female employees interpret bullying, how they respond to challenging interpersonal relations, and how these experiences influence their capacity to remain productive and professionally engaged. By placing women's own voices at the centre of the analysis, the study contributes to sociological scholarship by showing how gender solidarity and competition can coexist within the same organisational environment and how employees negotiate these contradictory social relations in everyday working life. The findings also provide a basis for developing organisational responses that move beyond formal policy provision towards greater awareness, accessible reporting mechanisms, effective conflict management, and workplace practices capable of strengthening professional solidarity among female employees.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design to explore how female employees experience, interpret, and respond to workplace bullying within a female-dominated organisational environment. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study was concerned not with measuring the prevalence of bullying but with understanding how participants made sense of their experiences, relationships, and coping practices in their everyday working lives. Phenomenological inquiry is particularly suitable for examining lived experience because it places participants' subjective accounts at the centre of the research process and seeks to identify the meanings they attach to a shared phenomenon (S. Gupta & Sandhu, 2026; Hassan et al., 2023; Toh et al., 2023).

The study was conducted among female social workers employed by the Department of Social Development in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The research setting comprised the Gauteng regional office and three cluster offices in Soweto. The study focused specifically on female social workers because their work requires sustained interpersonal engagement, emotional labour, collaboration, and interaction with colleagues and service users. The target population consisted of female social workers aged 30–45 years who had between two and more than five years of work experience in the organisation. Employees working in human resources, security, cleaning, transportation, and other administrative functions were excluded because their occupational roles and workplace interactions differed from those of the social workers targeted by the study.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. This approach was appropriate because the study required information-rich participants who had direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling enables researchers to deliberately select participants according to characteristics relevant to the research question rather than seeking statistical representativeness (Ramlan et al., 2024; Soudan & Galal, 2023). The final sample consisted of 10 female social workers. Participation was voluntary, and recruitment was conducted without direct pressure from organisational supervisors. Information about the study was distributed through recruitment pamphlets containing the researcher's contact details and information about the study. Interested employees contacted the researcher directly, thereby reducing the possibility that participation would be perceived as an organisational requirement. Recruitment continued until the researcher obtained sufficiently rich and relevant accounts to address the research objectives.

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews. An interview guide was developed around four broad areas: participants' experiences and perceptions of workplace bullying; the interpersonal and organisational circumstances surrounding bullying; the ways participants responded to and coped with these experiences; and perceived consequences for professional relationships and work productivity. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it provides sufficient consistency across participants while allowing the researcher to follow unexpected issues emerging from individual narratives. This flexibility is particularly important in phenomenological research because participants may attach meanings to experiences that cannot be anticipated entirely through predetermined questions (Nielsen et al., 2024). Interviews were conducted in a private setting to protect confidentiality and encourage participants to speak openly. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in the research records and reporting.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the methodological principles developed by Braun & Clarke (2013, 2021a, 2021c, 2021b; 2017). Reflexive thematic analysis is appropriate for identifying patterned meanings across qualitative accounts while recognising the active interpretive role of the researcher in constructing themes. Analysis

proceeded through six interconnected phases: familiarisation with the interview data; generation of initial codes; construction of candidate themes; review and refinement of themes; definition and naming of the final themes; and production of the analytical narrative. Rather than treating themes as merely descriptive categories, the analysis examined how participants' accounts reflected broader social processes involving gender expectations, competition, power, solidarity, organisational hierarchy, and coping. Particular attention was given to similarities, differences, contradictions, and less visible forms of bullying across participants' narratives.

The analytical process was iterative. Interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed alongside the developing codes and themes, allowing interpretations to be refined as patterns became clearer. The researcher maintained analytic notes throughout the process to document emerging interpretations, questions, and decisions. This process helped distinguish participants' accounts from the researcher's analytical assumptions and strengthened the transparency of interpretation. In keeping with reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher did not seek to eliminate subjectivity entirely; instead, reflexivity was treated as an integral component of qualitative knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2021b)

Methodological quality was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the interview material, careful probing during interviews, and repeated comparison of emerging themes with the original transcripts. Dependability was supported by maintaining a transparent record of recruitment, interview procedures, coding decisions, and thematic development. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive notes and the use of participants' own accounts as the evidentiary basis for interpretations. Transferability was supported through detailed description of the organisational setting, participant characteristics, and social context, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to comparable female-dominated workplaces. These practices are consistent with contemporary guidance that emphasises methodological coherence and transparency in phenomenological qualitative research (Dartey et al., 2026; P. Gupta & Chaudhary, 2026; Rosander & Nielsen, 2026).

Ethical procedures were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their right to decline participation, and their right to withdraw without consequences. Informed consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from transcripts and publications. Because workplace bullying can involve emotionally sensitive experiences, interviews were conducted with attention to participants' psychological comfort, and participants were informed about available employee health and wellness support should participation generate emotional distress. Institutional permission was obtained before recruitment, and the research was conducted in accordance with applicable institutional ethical requirements.

The principal delimitation of the study is its focus on ten female social workers within one public-sector organisational context in Gauteng. Accordingly, the findings are not intended to

provide statistical generalisation to all female employees or all South African workplaces. Instead, the phenomenological design seeks analytic and contextual insight into how workplace bullying is experienced and negotiated within a specific female-dominated occupational setting. This bounded approach enables the study to illuminate the social meanings and relational processes that may remain invisible in larger prevalence-based studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gendered Experiences of Bullying in a Female-Dominated Workplace

The participants' narratives indicate that workplace bullying in a female-dominated environment cannot be adequately understood through a simple male-perpetrator/female-victim framework. Although previous research has produced mixed evidence regarding gender differences in workplace bullying, there is growing evidence that women may experience bullying from other women in ways that are less visible and more difficult to recognise as organisational misconduct. For example, Bret et al. (2025) and Mathisen et al. (2024) found that women were more likely to identify themselves as victims of workplace bullying and, importantly, that female employees were more frequently bullied by female colleagues than by male colleagues. This finding is particularly relevant to the present study because the participants described bullying not simply as an interpersonal problem but as a gendered social process shaped by expectations, competition, power and workplace relationships.

Nine of the ten participants perceived women as being more vulnerable to workplace bullying than men. Their explanations connected this vulnerability to persistent gender stereotypes and the social expectations attached to women's identities. RF, for example, explained:

"Yes, females are more bullied than males. I think it's because of society. You know, in the olden days there were stereotypes where society believed that women only belonged in the kitchen and had to take care of the children and husband, whereas men were believed to be the providers and breadwinners of the family. But since the dawn of democracy things have changed. Even women can now be providers and breadwinners, and you also see other women leading in high-profile positions. It is no longer the case."
(RF, female, 5 years' work experience)

RF's account illustrates an important contradiction. Women have gained greater access to employment, professional authority and leadership, yet traditional expectations concerning femininity remain socially influential. The workplace therefore becomes a space in which competing expectations are negotiated: women are expected to demonstrate professional competence and authority while simultaneously conforming to socially acceptable forms of femininity. This tension is consistent with the argument that women often operate within a narrower range of socially acceptable behaviours than men, making their professional conduct

more open to judgement and scrutiny (Abdulkarim & Subke, 2023; Nielsen et al., 2023; Savapandit & Bharathi, 2022).

The participants further suggested that workplace behaviour cannot always be separated from broader social experiences. RF explained that women may carry pressures from the domestic sphere into their professional relationships:

“As a woman, as much as you are an employee, when you get home you are also a mother, a husband’s wife, a sister—you wear different caps. The reason maybe can be that at home the male figures do not understand what this woman is doing in the workplace because they believe that a woman’s place is in the kitchen. So, those people, when they talk to her, cause stress, and she ends up taking that to the workplace. She wants to make sure that in the workplace no one is telling her anything, and therefore they end up behaving in that manner without being aware that she has things she needs to sort out. You need to differentiate where you are and what your responsibilities are.”

(RF, female, 5 years’ work experience)

This account suggests that workplace bullying is embedded within wider social relations rather than being produced exclusively inside the organisation. From a sociological perspective, gendered expectations are reproduced through everyday interactions, and the workplace can become another arena in which these expectations are negotiated, resisted or reproduced. The problem is therefore not simply that one employee behaves aggressively towards another; rather, interpersonal tensions may reflect broader inequalities concerning authority, recognition and acceptable gender behaviour.

Competition among women also emerged as an important explanation for bullying. TK described this dynamic in terms of jealousy and differences in personality:

“Yes, as females, there are many personalities which clash, so we end up being jealous. Males can be jealous, but they can’t show you, whereas with females it is happening. That is why we end up calling it bullying.”

(TK, female, 5 years’ work experience)

This perception is important because it shifts the analysis from individual personality to the social conditions under which competition develops. Where professional recognition, promotion, managerial attention and opportunities are perceived as limited, relationships among employees may become competitive. Conflict theory provides a useful lens for interpreting this pattern because competition over scarce or valued resources can generate tensions between groups or individuals. In this context, the resources are not necessarily material; they may include recognition, status, authority, career opportunities, managerial approval and professional visibility (Badenhorst & Botha, 2022; Croft & Cash, 2012).

GD, however, offered a different interpretation, suggesting that bullying among women may be more difficult to identify because of its subtle nature:

“It’s equal with men, and it’s more attracted to the public than with females. Employees are not aware of female bullying, but with males it is easy to see them bullying each other and report to management. It is easily understandable, and with females it’s a bit silent as it is more about actions speaking. Some take it as a norm of how women or females behave.” (GD, female, 4 years’ work experience)

GD's account provides a particularly significant sociological insight: the visibility of bullying is itself gendered. Aggressive behaviour between men may be more readily recognised because it conforms to familiar understandings of overt confrontation, whereas bullying between women may be expressed through exclusion, gossip, undermining, dismissive behaviour or relational hostility. Such behaviours can become normalised as ordinary interpersonal disagreements rather than recognised as workplace bullying. This helps explain why some participants perceived female-to-female bullying as a “silent” phenomenon.

Power, Authority and the Reproduction of Female-to-Female Bullying

The findings further demonstrate that women may occupy both victim and perpetrator positions within the same organisational environment. This challenges an overly simplistic understanding of women as a homogeneous victim group. MM. described how gender stereotypes affected her professional interactions with clients:

“Yes, females are expected to be at home, to be a housewife, and just imagine a couple enters and they want to be assisted and they find you as their social worker. You are young, unmarried, and you are a female. Mostly, when they are assisted by males, they don’t come to that conclusion; they accept the service as it is. But if you are a female, there are a lot of things that they discriminate against us. So, we experience a lot of bullying from clients and colleagues. It’s all around us.” (MM., female, 3 years’ work experience)

This account indicates that female social workers may experience gender-based devaluation not only from colleagues but also from service users. Their professional authority can be questioned because of their gender, age and marital status. The significance of this finding extends beyond individual experiences because social workers occupy a profession traditionally associated with care, emotional labour and feminised forms of employment. When professional authority is combined with gendered expectations, female employees may have to continuously establish their legitimacy.

At the same time, the participants identified situations in which women themselves exercised power against other women. MD. observed:

“Yes, I think women are more bullied than men, especially in female-dominated workplaces because most women who are in power tend to misuse their positions to

oppress other females. I also think that women in general tend to be less supportive and tolerant of each other. They enjoy gossiping and demeaning one another unnecessarily. Therefore, those who have much softer and calmer personalities are more targeted than those with strong personalities. The same applies to why women tend to be bullied more than men. I think most men display strong personalities than women, thus making them less prone to being targets of workplace bullying.”(MD., female, 4 years’ work experience)

This narrative demonstrates that gender alone does not determine workplace power. Organisational position, authority and interpersonal resources also matter. A woman occupying a supervisory position may exercise power over another woman, while women with less formal authority may use informal mechanisms such as gossip, social exclusion or reputational damage. Research on female-to-female workplace bullying similarly cautions against treating women as a single, internally homogeneous category and points to the significance of power relations within female-dominated organisations (Du, 2024; Mabasa, 2024; Ronha & Rodrigues, 2025; Seppälä et al., 2023).

From a conflict-theoretical perspective, this finding is particularly important. Power is not simply possessed by men; it can also be exercised among women when organisational resources are unequally distributed. Competition for recognition, authority and career progression may therefore produce conflict within the same gender group. The finding supports the argument that workplace bullying should be examined as a relational and structural phenomenon rather than solely as an individual behavioural problem.

Coping, Confrontation and the Limits of Individual Strategies

The participants did not passively accept workplace bullying. They developed different strategies to protect themselves, restore professional boundaries and maintain their ability to work. However, these strategies varied considerably, demonstrating that coping was highly individualised.

Confrontation emerged as one of the most frequently reported strategies. Five participants described direct confrontation as an effective response. BD stated:

“The strategy I use is confrontation. It is very good if ever you experience bullying. Confront the person and tell them straight that their behaviour is not acceptable. Yes, that strategy works for me.” (BD, female, 7 years’ work experience)

Similarly, TK explained: “It’s not every time with me, but it once happened. I noticed that this one was bullying me, but I confronted her, although it ended up being a conflict between me and my colleague.” (TK, female, 5 years’ work experience)

These accounts demonstrate that confrontation can restore a sense of personal agency, but it can also intensify interpersonal conflict. In other words, confrontation does not necessarily resolve the structural conditions that produce bullying. It may instead move the conflict from

covert behaviour into overt disagreement.

NL combined confrontation with formal organisational intervention:

“Okay, one thing that did work for me personally was confrontation. I confronted the colleague that I felt was bullying me at that particular moment, and another way was reporting it to my supervisor. We discussed the issue as individuals, so there was mediation between us.” (NL, female, 12 years’ work experience)

When asked whether the mechanism had worked, NL responded: “Yes, it helped, although we got separated from offices.”

This experience demonstrates the potential value of supervisory mediation while simultaneously revealing its limitations. The immediate interpersonal tension was reduced, but the solution involved physical separation rather than necessarily addressing the underlying organisational relationship. From an institutional perspective, this suggests that conflict management may sometimes prioritise containment over transformation.

Not all participants felt able to confront perpetrators. MD. described a substantially different experience:

“In instances where the bullying was direct and coming from someone I once reported to, a former supervisor, I kept quiet. I remained respectful and did what was expected from me. I tried reporting the matter multiple times, but I was not taken seriously until I had suffered depression to a point of giving up. I left the organisational unit where the bullying was occurring. However, at the end I suffered consequences of an act that was initiated by me because I got left behind and the perpetrator continued with their lives without being held accountable.” (MD., female, 4 years’ work experience)

This account is analytically important because it reveals the unequal consequences of reporting. Although the participant attempted to use formal organisational mechanisms, the burden of adjustment ultimately fell on the victim. The perpetrator remained within the organisation while the victim relocated. This raises questions about the effectiveness of organisational responses when power differences exist between the victim and perpetrator.

Formal Support, Personal Coping and the Burden of Self-Protection

Two participants identified formal institutional mechanisms, particularly Human Resources and the Employee Assistance Programme, as potential sources of support. RF stated simply: “You need to talk to the bully or report the bully at the HR unit.” (RF, female, 5 years’ work experience)

However, the existence of support mechanisms did not automatically translate into their use. MM. described the difficulty of seeking professional assistance:

“My strategy usually is that we have the Employee Assistance Programme, the counselling online, those kinds of platforms, but they are hard to use because it’s like you believe you are a therapist. You take yourself as a healer, as the change agent, and for you to pick up a phone and ask for help, it’s so difficult. It’s not easy. So, for me personally, I usually destress with music. Music calms me.” (MM., female, 3 years’ work experience)

This finding is especially relevant to a profession such as social work, where employees are themselves expected to provide support, counselling and intervention to others. Professional identity may consequently become a barrier to help-seeking because seeking assistance can be interpreted as weakness or an inability to cope. The result is a paradox in which employees who are professionally positioned as caregivers may struggle to recognise themselves as legitimate recipients of care.

NDD adopted another strategy based on boundary-setting:

“I have learnt to establish boundaries and communicate them very loudly. The colleagues who used to bully me don’t anymore because I communicate my boundaries very loudly. I think sometimes when you lack boundaries, people will see that as weakness and start overstepping them. So, my strategy is that I communicate my boundaries. If someone does not communicate with respect, I do not entertain them. When I see that there is this conflict, maybe due to bullying, and I am struggling to come to common ground, I communicate with the supervisor for conflict management.” (NDD, female, 4 years’ work experience)

Boundary-setting represents an important form of individual agency. Rather than responding through retaliation, the participant attempted to establish acceptable behavioural limits and escalate unresolved disputes to a supervisor. Nevertheless, the reliance on individual boundary management again places considerable responsibility on employees themselves.

The participants also described colleagues who responded through verbal confrontation: “Some colleagues end up verbally fighting most of the time because everyone wants to be heard. Everyone wants to have the final say, so my colleagues end up being involved in verbal fights, and the supervisor has always been the final solution. When we are struggling ourselves to resolve an issue, it is taken to the supervisor.” (NDD, female, 4 years’ work experience)

Taken together, these findings reveal a continuum of coping strategies ranging from direct confrontation and boundary-setting to avoidance, self-management, informal support and formal reporting. However, the variation in responses also indicates the absence of a shared and consistently trusted institutional mechanism for dealing with bullying.

The central sociological insight emerging from these accounts is that workplace bullying among women is simultaneously an interpersonal, gendered and organisational phenomenon.

The participants' experiences demonstrate how competition, power asymmetries, gender expectations and institutional responses intersect to shape both bullying and coping. While individual strategies can provide temporary protection, they do not necessarily alter the organisational conditions that enable bullying to persist. This is consistent with research arguing that effective responses to workplace bullying require organisational systems, procedures and leadership that explicitly recognise power relations rather than placing the primary responsibility for coping on individual employees (Maran et al., 2024; Szusecki et al., 2023).

How Female Employees Navigate Challenges in a Female-Dominated Workplace

The participants' accounts reveal that coping with workplace bullying is not simply an individual psychological response to an unpleasant interpersonal experience. Rather, it is a socially embedded process shaped by gender expectations, competition, organisational power and the availability of institutional support. Although the participants worked in a female-dominated environment and therefore shared a common gender identity, this similarity did not automatically produce solidarity. On the contrary, some participants described jealousy, competition and interpersonal tension among women as factors that could create conditions for bullying. This finding is sociologically important because it challenges the assumption that women working together will necessarily form a supportive collective. Shared gender identity may create a basis for solidarity, but solidarity is not inevitable; it is influenced by the distribution of organisational resources, recognition, authority and opportunities.

The participants primarily understood themselves as members of a socially vulnerable group. Their narratives suggest that vulnerability was not produced solely by individual characteristics but was connected to broader gender relations. Women were expected to negotiate multiple and sometimes contradictory identities: professional, mother, wife, daughter, colleague and caregiver. These expectations create what can be understood as a form of gendered social burden, in which women are required to demonstrate professional competence while simultaneously maintaining behaviours considered socially appropriate for women. In this context, workplace conflict may become intensified when professional authority challenges conventional expectations of femininity.

This interpretation is consistent with feminist perspectives that locate women's experiences within wider systems of power rather than treating them as isolated interpersonal events. Hooks (2015), for example, conceptualises the internalisation of patriarchal relations as a process through which women can reproduce forms of domination against one another. The idea of the "enemy within" is particularly relevant to the present findings because it shifts attention away from the assumption that women are naturally supportive of one another. Instead, women may internalise social expectations that encourage them to compare themselves with other women, compete for recognition and seek approval within existing power structures.

The findings suggest that competition among female employees is particularly significant when professional recognition and organisational opportunities are perceived as limited.

Competition may involve access to promotion, managerial recognition, desirable assignments, professional visibility, influence over decision-making, or simply the perception of being valued within the organisation. When such resources are experienced as scarce, colleagues who might otherwise cooperate can become perceived as competitors. Conflict theory provides an important explanation for this process because it understands social relationships as shaped by unequal access to valued resources and opportunities. In this sense, bullying may become an extreme expression of competition when ordinary disagreement is transformed into attempts to undermine another employee's social or professional position.

However, interpreting female-to-female bullying solely as jealousy would risk individualising a phenomenon that is also structurally produced. Jealousy itself can be understood as a social response to unequal opportunities rather than simply as a personality defect. In a workplace where advancement opportunities are limited or where managerial recognition is distributed unevenly, employees may compare themselves with colleagues and interpret another woman's success as a threat to their own position. Consequently, the problem is not merely that women are “jealous of one another”; rather, organisational structures may create conditions in which employees perceive one another as competitors.

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the South African context. Loh & Dollard (2024) argue that South African society continues to be shaped by intersecting patriarchal, class and racial inequalities. Within such a context, women may encounter pressure to compete for legitimacy and recognition in spaces historically structured around male authority. The irony is that when opportunities for women increase, competition may not disappear. Instead, competition may become redirected towards women themselves, particularly when institutional resources remain limited. A female employee who obtains promotion, recognition or professional authority may therefore become perceived by colleagues not only as a successful peer but also as someone occupying a position that others desire.

The participants' accounts also indicate that bullying can become normalised. This is particularly concerning because normalisation makes harmful behaviour difficult to identify, challenge and report. When gossip, exclusion, belittling, dismissive communication or interpersonal hostility are interpreted as ordinary features of workplace relationships, employees may hesitate to describe their experiences as bullying. Goodness's earlier observation that female bullying can be “silent” is relevant here because covert forms of aggression are more difficult to distinguish from ordinary interpersonal disagreements. Consequently, the victim may question whether the behaviour is serious enough to report, while colleagues may interpret it as a personality clash.

This normalisation also affects how victims understand themselves. Rather than seeing themselves as entitled to institutional protection, employees may perceive the responsibility for managing the situation as their own. Kollerová et al. (2023) similarly notes that employees may tolerate bullying because they fear losing their jobs, feel embarrassed about reporting it or believe that complaining is unprofessional. The present study extends this argument by showing

that the pressure to cope independently may be particularly strong among social workers. As professionals whose occupational identity is strongly associated with helping, counselling and supporting others, they may find it difficult to position themselves as individuals who require assistance. Seeking psychological or organisational support can consequently be interpreted as an admission of professional or personal weakness.

The participants' coping strategies therefore reveal a significant tension between individual agency and institutional responsibility. Some participants responded through confrontation, while others relied on avoidance, emotional self-regulation, boundary-setting, music or informal support. These strategies demonstrate agency because employees actively attempted to protect themselves and maintain their capacity to work. Nevertheless, the reliance on individual coping mechanisms also indicates a potential weakness in the organisational response. If employees must independently develop strategies to survive bullying, the organisation effectively transfers responsibility for managing a structural workplace problem to those experiencing its consequences.

Confrontation, for instance, may provide an immediate sense of empowerment, but it can also reproduce the conflict it seeks to resolve. When one employee directly confronts another without adequate mediation, the interaction may escalate into reciprocal hostility. Avoidance may similarly reduce immediate exposure to the perpetrator but does not necessarily eliminate the underlying problem. In some cases, avoidance can even reinforce the perpetrator's position by allowing harmful behaviour to continue without institutional scrutiny. Coping strategies should therefore be understood as adaptive responses to organisational conditions rather than automatically interpreted as effective solutions.

The participants' limited knowledge of formal organisational mechanisms represents another important dimension of the findings. The existence of Human Resources procedures and Employee Assistance Programmes does not necessarily mean that employees know how, when or whether to use them. There is therefore an important distinction between the formal availability of support and the practical accessibility of support. An organisation may have policies, reporting procedures and counselling services, yet these mechanisms remain ineffective if employees do not trust them, understand them, or believe that using them will produce meaningful protection.

This distinction is particularly important in relation to organisational power. Employees may be reluctant to report bullying when the alleged perpetrator occupies a higher organisational position or has stronger relationships with management. Reporting can therefore involve considerable risk, including social isolation, reputational damage, career consequences or being labelled as difficult. The experience described by Mbali D., who reported bullying but ultimately left the organisational unit while the alleged perpetrator remained, illustrates how formal reporting may unintentionally shift the burden onto the victim when institutional accountability is weak. Such experiences can discourage other employees from reporting future incidents.

The findings consequently point to a deeper problem: the absence of collective coping mechanisms. Individual strategies can help employees survive particular incidents, but they do not necessarily create the organisational conditions required to prevent recurrence. What appears to be missing is a shared framework through which female employees can distinguish between ordinary interpersonal conflict, constructive disagreement and workplace bullying. Without such a framework, employees may interpret bullying according to their own experiences and coping capacities, producing inconsistent responses across the organisation.

This has implications for female solidarity. The findings suggest that solidarity should not be understood simply as women supporting women because they share the same gender. Instead, solidarity needs to be cultivated through organisational practices that encourage mutual respect, psychological safety, transparent conflict resolution and collective accountability. Training should therefore move beyond general awareness of bullying and address the specific relational dynamics through which female-to-female bullying can develop, including competition, informal exclusion, gossip, undermining, power asymmetries and the normalisation of harmful behaviour.

The study also suggests that conflict management should not focus exclusively on eliminating conflict. Conflict is an inevitable dimension of organisational life and can sometimes stimulate reflection, negotiation and organisational learning. The critical issue is whether conflict remains constructive or escalates into repeated humiliation, intimidation, exclusion and abuse. Effective organisational intervention should therefore distinguish between constructive conflict and destructive relational aggression. Supervisors and Human Resources personnel need the capacity to identify this distinction and intervene before interpersonal disagreements become entrenched patterns of bullying.

Ultimately, the participants' experiences demonstrate that coping with workplace bullying involves a continuous negotiation between vulnerability, agency and institutional power. Female employees are not simply passive victims; they actively confront, avoid, report, establish boundaries and develop personal strategies to remain productive. Yet their capacity to cope is constrained when organisational mechanisms are poorly understood, inaccessible or perceived as ineffective. The central issue is therefore not whether women can cope with bullying, but whether they should be required to cope with it individually in the first place.

From a sociological perspective, the findings indicate that female-to-female workplace bullying should be understood as a relational manifestation of gendered power and organisational competition, rather than as evidence of inherent hostility among women. Patriarchal expectations, limited organisational resources and unequal recognition can shape relationships among women in ways that reproduce competition and undermine solidarity. Addressing the problem consequently requires interventions at both individual and structural levels: employees need knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to bullying, while organisations need transparent reporting systems, accountable leadership, accessible psychosocial support and mechanisms that foster cooperation rather than destructive

competition. Such an approach would not only protect individual employees but also contribute to stronger professional solidarity, improved organisational well-being and a more equitable understanding of gender relations in female-dominated workplaces.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that workplace bullying among female social workers in a female-dominated workplace is shaped not only by interpersonal tensions but also by gendered expectations, competition, power relations, and limited awareness of institutional support mechanisms. The findings show that female employees respond through varied individual strategies, including confrontation, boundary-setting, avoidance, informal coping, and formal reporting, while the absence of a consistently understood and trusted organisational response may leave employees largely responsible for managing the consequences themselves. The study therefore contributes a more nuanced understanding of female-to-female workplace bullying by demonstrating that shared gender identity does not necessarily produce solidarity when organisational recognition, authority, and opportunities are experienced competitively. Addressing this problem requires clearer awareness of bullying, accessible reporting procedures, and organisational practices that encourage supportive rather than competitive relationships among female employees.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including avoidance of harm, voluntary participation, informed consent, violation of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. However, the researcher was prepared to refer to the Department of Social Development Employee Health and Wellness Program (EHWP), any participant whose participation in this study could have caused any emotional distress. EHWP offers psychological and emotional support to the employees on both telephonic and face-to-face counselling services at no cost and is available 24/7. Nonetheless, the current study utilised the voluntary participation ethical principle to ensure that participants were not forced to take part, enabling them to openly share their experiences. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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