Workplace Bullying and Mistreatment in the #MeToo Era: Policy, Training, and Mental Health

Workplace bullying and mistreatment are serious and costly problems for individuals, organizations, and society. Yet the scope and impact in Canada are unclear as studies in this area tend to be cross-sectional with small datasets. Increasingly, legislative and regulatory reforms are spurring organizations to provide psychologically and physically safe workplaces. At the same time, global changes in social justice and governance responsibilities are shifting how harmful behaviour at work is understood and accepted while the ‘business case’ argument often fails to motivate employers’ health and safety due diligence and meet standards of care.

Against this backdrop, I describe an innovative, partnered approach to generate evidence about workplace bullying and mistreatment in Manitoba for policy, practice, and decision support toward intervention and prevention. I lead the Workplace Bullying and Mistreatment Partnership for Prevention (funded by SSHRC) – a team of interdisciplinary researchers in Canada, the UK, and Europe as well as decision-makers and policy analysts from partner organizations – to produce large datasets using longitudinal, multimethod research. I discuss results related to: the prevalence and impact of workplace bullying and mistreatment from multiple perspectives – target, observer, and perpetrator; different risks of exposure to workplace bullying and mistreatment for certain groups of employees and differential impact on mental health; the role of policy and training in prevention; and how employees responded to bullying. In this context, I touch on some of my pioneering work on employee silence, in which employees withhold or silence their complaints about mistreatment from organizational authorities able to provide remedy or redress. To close, I look broadly at what we know about policy and training as key levers for prevention and intervention to improve work experiences and employee well-being along with next steps in theory and research.