

# Perspectives on Workplace Mistreatment in Singapore

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# Executive Summary

Over the past three decades, there has been a considerable increase in attention to dysfunctional workplace behaviours and attitudes that intensified with wider social media usage and the #MeToo movement.<sup>1</sup> Workplace misbehaviours and mistreatment (WM), however, remain comparatively less studied than other areas of organisational behaviour despite its prevalence and often deleterious impact on the worker, organisation and society as a whole (Einarsen et al., 2011a; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2011). Part of the challenge lies in the difficulty of quantifying complex and multi-faceted phenomena that are often contentious and shifting. Other difficulties include the need to collect sensitive and private information that are rarely divulged to external parties, or an unwillingness of victims to be identified. The perception of what constitutes WM also varies across different socio-cultural contexts.

This study examines WM in the context of antisocial organisational deviance behaviours by one or more members of an organisation against another that are counter-normative negative actions or terminates normative positive actions (Cortina & Magley, 2003). Such behaviours include any form of unsolicited, offensive and unfair behaviours that result in disrespectful and unjust treatments towards an individual, and includes acts such as abusive supervision, bullying, discrimination, ostracism, harassment, incivility (e.g., shouting, rudeness, harsh criticism), and physical violence. These constructs can be grouped broadly under workplace discrimination, workplace harassment, and workplace mistreatment injury (DHI) that contributed to, or resulted from, discrimination or harassment. See Table 1.1 for an elaboration of these constructs.

Despite its importance on the worker and organisation, there have been comparatively few empirical studies on the prevalence and impact of WM in Singapore. This report contributes to existing literature by examining WM from the perspectives of both the worker and the organisation, obtained through surveys and interviews of 100 WM victims, and 21 human resource (HR) practitioners and senior executives from agencies that provide support for WM victims. It examines the extent of WM before and since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and one's coping skills to WM. Furthermore, consensus opinion from a panel of 20 experts is obtained through a Delphi study on the strategies that can be taken to alleviate WM and improve wellbeing, over and above existing legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> #MeToo is a social movement against sexual harassment and abuse involving the sharing of information of alleged sex crimes on social platforms.

# Key Findings

The key findings are given below. Note that the findings should not be extended to the national population.

Among the group of respondents surveyed:

- The prevalence of WM was found to have increased by 36.4% since the onset of Covid-19 pandemic.
- Workplace discrimination and harassment increased by 35.5% and 17.6% respectively. WM-related injuries more than doubled.
- WM translated into higher job and family stress, and lower job satisfaction. 86.6% reported experiencing higher job stress since WM, 76.0% experienced higher family stress and 74.2% had lower job satisfaction.
- As a result, work commitment and performance were negatively impacted. 42.0% became depressed, 11.0% were unable to perform their usual activities, and 17.0% took leave from work (17%). Others resorted to more online gaming (16.0%), drinking (10.0%) and smoking (4.0%). Almost half (44.7%) resigned from the company, with three in five avoiding working in the same occupation again.
- 27.4% said they never fully recovered from the WM experienced.
- Those who chose to remain on the job despite WM did so mainly because of financial reasons, e.g. support of family (49.5%), sole breadwinner (13.7%), and wanting to get another job first (40.0%). Other reasons include work commitments (22.1%) and contractual obligations (5.3%).
- 44.0% had their pay frozen, 39.0% had no bonus, and 94.0% did not get promoted. 16.0% were transferred, 14.1% were dismissed and 11.8% did not get their contracts renewed.
- Many did not get company support for training (77.0%) and training in new skills (85.0%) after experiencing WM.
- In most situations, making a formal complaint against the perpetrator helps WM victims to overcome negative impacts on work and career.
- Nevertheless, only 45% thought of making a report / complaint, and only 25% actually made a report. Underreporting amounted to 75% of WM victims surveyed.
- The main concerns against making a report were the seniority of the perpetrator (38.7% of respondents), fear of job loss (36.0%), negative impact on career given the small community (33.3%), and a loss of promotion opportunities (10.7%). There were also concerns about the investigation lacking anonymity (38.7%) and confidentiality (37.3%), that it would be biased

(28.0%), slow (17.3%) and ineffective (22.7%). A few respondents thought it would be fruitless to make a report as no one would believe them (18.7%), and were even threatened against making a report (4.0%).

- Only 38.0% said there was a whistle blowing policy in their company.
- Of those who reported, most preferred to resolve the matter within their organisation by making a formal complaint to the company's HR department (60.0%) or senior executives (40.0%). Others lodged a complaint at a non-government voluntary organisation (12.0%), union (12.0%) and TAFEP, a government agency in support of WM concerns (12.0%).
- Most complaints resulted in no change in situation (64.0%) and one in three said no one believed them (32.0%).
- A large group of respondents indicated that the company (95.0%) and government (88.0%) should protect staff and workers from WM.
- A few companies studied indicated the return on investment (ROI) of wellbeing benefits and programmes (or cost savings from poor work performance and resignations per dollar spent on wellbeing benefits) was estimated to average \$406 per annum.

## Recommendations

A group of experts from agencies that support WM victims, senior HR executives, and academia provided their consensus opinion through a Delphi study on strategies to help alleviate WM. The consensus recommendations by the experts are given below:

- Companies to have formal procedures and channels, including whistle blowing avenues, for reporting workplace grievances that provide protection of complainant's identity and retaliation from the perpetrator, and to have investigations concluded within stipulated timeframe. Intentional misuse of the channels where validated to be penalised with warning.
- Blacklisting companies that repeatedly breach WM policies (e.g. on TAFEP or MOM website).
- Provision of helplines by companies for WM complaints with the identity of staff protected.
- Agencies that provide support for WM concerns to be provided with other support in legal matters, direct intervention and knowledge expertise.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the agencies and their support WM concerns, see pages vii, 50 and 51.

- Educational programmes in ITEs, polytechnics and universities to include information on WM, workers' rights and recourses available in the event of WM.
  - Employers need to set the right tone with zero tolerance policy against WM whereby the severity of breaches are clearly communicated to all staff as HR practice and policy.
  - Formal recognition of companies that prioritise good workplace culture and inclusiveness and have in place an adequate standard of workplace wellbeing programmes utilised by employees and policy provisions for WM.
  - A company resource guide to be accessible by workers and employers on:
    - good workplace behaviour to adopt and unacceptable behaviour to avoid,
    - case studies, and
    - links to resources (e.g., self-improvement learning, TAFEP, other agencies, etc).
  - Supervisors to participate in training on leadership, team building and effective communications. Training to include understanding, identifying and managing WM issues, including being proactive in recognising and taking action to de-escalate WM cases (indicating link to such training courses from SkillsFuture website, NTUC learning hub, etc.).
  - After investigation of WM complaints, depending on the severity of validated incidents, disciplinary actions against the perpetrator can range from formal warning to counselling and training, and to dismissal.
  - An annual national campaign for workers, employers, and union/employer associations to work together to improve kindness, respect, inclusiveness and empowerment at the workplace, with publicity for agencies that support WM concerns.
- (Note: Empowerment refers to knowledge of worker's rights and recourse).
- Where WM has been observed to adversely affect an employee's wellbeing, HR personnel/employers can direct affected staff to appropriate avenues for information and support such as counselling within the company or at an agency that supports WM concerns.
  - A national framework that serves as a guide on:
    - the severity and consequences of WM,
    - best practices for employers to improve management of WM concerns and to improve workplace wellbeing, and
    - resources and recommendations for workers who may experience WM concerns.
  - Agencies that provide support for WM concerns to be given more financial support on a case-by-case basis.