A Special Place in Hell

Intra-Gender Bullying in the Workplace

By

Myfan Jordan

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Foreword

Between 2020 and 2022, I was researching the experiences of 'older'* women workers during Australia's Covid-19 pandemic. Amongst other findings, the 'Generation Expendable?' survey suggested that as many as 52% of participants were experiencing, or had experienced, relationships and/or conditions of work that aligned with Australian definitions of workplace bullying.

For many, the bullying behaviours were perpetrated by other females.

Although only a small sample of Australian women at an exceptionally stressful time, many participants described the 'toxic workplace' as preexisting the pandemic, as the quotes below show:[1]

> *Australian work culture is so screwed up and you all don't even know. Bitching behind peoples backs, rumours and telling tales is all bullying and intimidation and yet everywhere I have worked, these people are seen as loyal and promoted. That is nothing to do with the pandemic.*
>
> *Australia is prewar Europe with organised crime, boys clubs, and desperate women...*

The findings of 'Generation Expendable?' were published as 'Women's Work in the Pandemic Economy' by Springer Nature in 2023.

When developing the 'Generation Expendable?' survey, personal experience of workplace bullying from women prompted me to include questions around work cultures and behaviours in relation to this.**

The experience also reminded me that, many years ago, when a young adult in London, I myself had been hostile and unsupportive towards a female manager. Reflecting on that, after my own experience, led me to contemplate the ways in which women can treat other women so poorly in the context of work. Speaking with friends, the same phrase was invoked time and again: 'it's the women!'

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* Aged over forty.

** This, and a second personal experience of workplace bullying are included in this book, anonymised, as with all participants' stories.

These factors prompted the A Special Place in Hell research on which this book focuses.

Female bullying remains an under-recognised and under-researched issue. With more women in paid employment, and across a variety of industries, it is urgent that we better understand and articulate the intra-gender bullying epidemic, so that the often serious impacts on individuals, employers, and perhaps even on national cultures, can be addressed.

Only from a place of visibility and accountability can transformative change emerge. With this in mind, A Special Place in Hell aims to provides a platform for less heard voices who have been bullied by other women and rarely had opportunities to share this.

The book is dedicated to the many women who shared their often traumatic experiences of abuse with me; by interview, survey and via Facebook. Many also contributed valuable insights into workplace bullying, female relationships, and Australian culture more broadly.

While I have endeavoured to reproduce most narratives in (edited) case story format, unfortunately, this hasn't always been possible. For those whose narratives have been omitted, or fragmented into quotes to align with the themes of this book, I sincerely apologise.

Disclaimer

This book is intended to serve as general information about workplace bullying and harassment laws and regulations across various countries, with an emphasis on Australia. The information provided is for guidance only, and should not be regarded as an authoritative statement of the law, which can only be made by reference to the particular circumstances which apply, and which may also change over time.

All names in this book, of women workers, workplaces/organisations/ government departments, and their geographical locations, have been anonymised to protect the identity of all involved. Accounts are taken from interview and survey data, and all views and details expressed are unverified.

In case studies, editorial changes have been made to limit the amount of text and to improve content flow.

In some instances, foreign or alternative spellings of certain English words, such as 'labor' are retained. Although web links presented were checked for accuracy prior to publication, they may subsequently change or become inoperative.

Chapter 1

A Special Place

Introduction

Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State, famously stated in a 2006 keynote speech that 'there is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women'.[2] Almost twenty years on, her judgment is still quoted in the context of female work relationships. To today's women workers however, Albright's judgement might seem almost utopian; her 'special place' chock-full of women who are not only unsupportive of their female colleagues, but who can be downright 'toxic' in their propagation of bullying behaviours at work.

In 2024, men remain the primary perpetrators of harassment, bullying, and sexual misconduct in work environments, there is however, a notable rise in females engaging in bullying activities (Hauge et al., 2009; Ortega et al., 2009; Ayaz et al., 2024).[3, 4, 5] Recent data from the US), for example, identifies 29% of workplace bullies as female. Furthermore, that these women predominantly target other women (WBI, 2024).[6]

What Exactly *Is* Workplace Bullying?

Defining workplace bullying (WPB) is important for understanding its implications. UNESCO* acknowledges both schoolyard bullying (SYB) and WPB as significant global issues, with scholars from multiple disciplines and jurisdictions agreeing. Leon-Perez et al. (2021) for example, describe WPB as a 'widespread phenomenon that necessitates attention to foster safer working environments where individuals can perform their duties with dignity' (UNESCO, 2019; Leon-Perez et al., 2021). [7, 8]

Academic exploration of WPB mostly commenced in the 1990s, driven by Scandinavian researchers who had identified patterns of aggression in

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*   The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

both school and occupational settings, and sought to understand the 'antecedents' or drivers.[9, 10, 11] Since then, more than thirty terms have developed to describe detrimental work behaviours. These include harassment, mobbing, incivility, violence, aggression, even 'petty tyranny' (Ashforth, 2009; Liefooghe and Olafsoon, 1999; Samnani, 2013; Langan-Fox and Sankey, 2007).[12, 13, 14]

Behaviours that are either distinct from, or align with WPB, remain the subject of debate. This definitional ambiguity means there is no single approach to measuring the phenomenon on a global scale. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that 'workplace bullying' is an effective term encompassing 'many behaviours, one concept' (Jenkins, 2011:364).[15]

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines WPB as follows:

> *The intentional use of power, whether threatened or actual, against another person or group in work-related circumstances, which results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation* (cited in Cooper and Swanston, 2002).[16]

Statistics from the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggest nearly one-fifth of individuals—around 583 million workers globally—have experienced WPB during their professional lives, a figure that is likely an underestimate (ibid:9).[17] For 80% of those targeted, the most recent incident occurred within the last five years (ibid).

WPB has been reported at elevated rates in the US, the United Kingdom (UK) and India, with other jurisdictions fast catching up (Praslova et al., 2022; Bunce et al., 2024; Escartín et al., 2011; Power et al., 2013).[18, 19, 20, 21] The US alone saw 52 million workers experiencing WPB in the past year, with 74.8 million 'affected': a number equivalent to the population of ten US states (Namie and Namie, 2024).[22]

Given the pervasiveness of WPB, and growing recognition of its impacts, there is clearly a need to establish systems and structures of work that discourage, and also respond effectively to, abusive behaviours. But in a complex and global landscape of labour, how might we do this?

In 2022, the ILO advocated for recognition of 'a safe and healthy working environment' as a universal human right, asserting that all individuals should be free to engage in work without threat of violence or aggression (ILO, 2022).[23] At the time of writing however, there is no international law which sufficiently recognises WPB and its impacts, let alone addresses the fast-changing nature of work and how this might affect worker wellbeing and relations.

Understanding the urgency of the matter, the aim of this book is to consider the complexities shaping negative work cultures and to consider how current measures to safeguard workers might be improved. Through the example of Australian women workers—a relatively privileged cohort in a country with a strong tradition of workers' rights—this book elevates the voices of targets, or 'victim-survivors', of work-related violence, with the hope of uncovering key drivers of WPB and from there, solutions.

Why Australia?

If WPB is a global problem, why a book focused on Australia?

Building on European scholarship, WPB research emerged in Australia during the 1990s and 2000s. Studies conducted at this time demonstrated the prevalence of WPB in Australian workplaces and also the financial ramifications for businesses and governments, which include workers' compensation payments, insurance premiums, absenteeism, employee 'disengagement', and diminished productivity overall (Rayner, 2000; Sheenan et al., 2001; Lewis and Sheenan, 2003).[24, 25, 26]

At that time, incidents were often trivialised as the rigours of working life, but following targeted research from Queensland's Griffith University, alongside advocacy from unions and the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), the discourse slowly shifted towards recognising WPB as a serious workplace health and safety (WHS) issue (Morgan, 1998; Toten, 2003; McCarthy, 2004; Kelly, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2003). [27., 28, 29, 30, 31]

While some of Australia's six states and two territories already mentioned WPB in their WHS legislation at this time, with remedial pathways under

civil, contract and anti-discrimination provisions, Australia lacked compre-
hensive national laws before the introduction of the Fair Work Act (2009):
and later WHS Act (2011) (Squelch and Guthrie, 2010).[32]

These key pieces of legislation aimed to harmonise federal, state, and terri-
torial laws around WHS and to also enhance recognition of WPB.

In 2012, responding to escalating concerns about WPB, Australia's federal
House of Representatives Committee for Education and Employment
commenced an 'Inquiry into Workplace Bullying'. Simultaneously, an
'Australian Work Barometer' (AWB) initiative was funded by the Common-
wealth to collate workplace injury claims' data from around the country
and over time.

The inaugural report of the AWB was published just prior to the Govern-
ment's 'Workplace Bullying: We Just Want It to Stop' in 2012. Both firmly
established WPB as a prevalent and harmful issue across multiple Austral-
ian industries (AWB, 2012; Australian Government, 2012).[33, 34]

As with earlier research, the reports emphasised the financial costs of
WPB, and how these would only escalate without effective interventions,
prompting broad calls for anti-bullying regulation. In 2014, 'Model' Work-
place Health and Safety laws, with specific provisions addressing WPB,
were enacted as 'Amendments to the Fair Work Act'.

These included a world first* 'Application for an Order to Stop Bullying at
Work, which granted (nearly all)** Australian workers the right to request
the cessation of work behaviours within the following criteria:

- An individual or group has behaved 'unreasonably' towards the
  worker or a group of workers to which the worker belongs;

- The behaviour has been repetitive in nature;

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* The Fair Work Commission Annual Report, *Our Future Direction* (https://www.
  fwc.gov.au/documents/reporting/fwc-annual-report-2012–13.pdf, 2012–2013:4)
  states 'there was no similar jurisdiction in Australia, or internationally'.

** Many state sector and local government employees are not covered under the
  national Fair Work system, but instead by the state industrial relations. Addi-
  tionally, members of the Defense Force are not covered. See https://www.fwc.
  gov.au/issues-we-help/bullying/what-do-if-youre-bullied-work/who-can-apply-
  stop-bullying.

- The behaviour poses a risk to health and safety (Fair Work Commission, 2024).[35] *

The anti-bullying measures were a milestone for Australia, reinforcing the idea that WPB was a violation of workers' rights. The amended legislation underscored the obligation of 'persons conducting business or undertaking' (PCBUs) to provide a safe working environment for all staff; not only in relation to physical and material hazards, but also 'psychological safety'.

The amended Fair Work Act reflected what the House of Representatives Standing Committee had found: that WPB has the power to 'significantly disturb that sense of dignity and identity' that Australians associate with work, which the report describes as 'central to [our] individual and collective sense of identity' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2012:1).[36]

Why then, with such robust governance enacted, have rates of WPB across Australia only increased in the decade following?

In 2021–2022, mental health conditions accounted for 9% of all 'serious' workers' compensation claims in Australia, a 37% rise on 2017–2018 figures (Australian Institute Health & Safety, 2024).[37] By 2024, the median duration of work time lost due to psychological injuries—often, but not always WPB—was four times that of physical injuries/illnesses. The median financial compensation three times higher (Safe Work Australia, 2024).[38]

In 2024 alone, WPB is estimated to have cost Australia up to AU$36 billion (AWB, 2024).[39] Safe Work Australia (SWA), the federal statutory agency responsible for WHS policy, acknowledges rates of WPB are growing. Research also reveals that, in some sectors such as the legal profession, rates are 'substantially higher than international averages and have been for years' (SWA, 2021; Croft, 2024). [40, 41]

Bullying is everywhere in Australia yeah? [Charli]

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* From 11 November 2021, the FWC was given new powers to make 'stop sexual harassment orders' against employers and co-workers.

I wish I'd known then what I know now. We were bought up to believe that bullying was more of a playground issue than a workplace problem. [Survey Respondent]

That Australia routinely tops the league in prevalence of WPB can be seen in Figure A below from the AWB, which compares Australian rates with countries of the European Union (EU):

https://www.stresscafe.com.au/awbproject.html
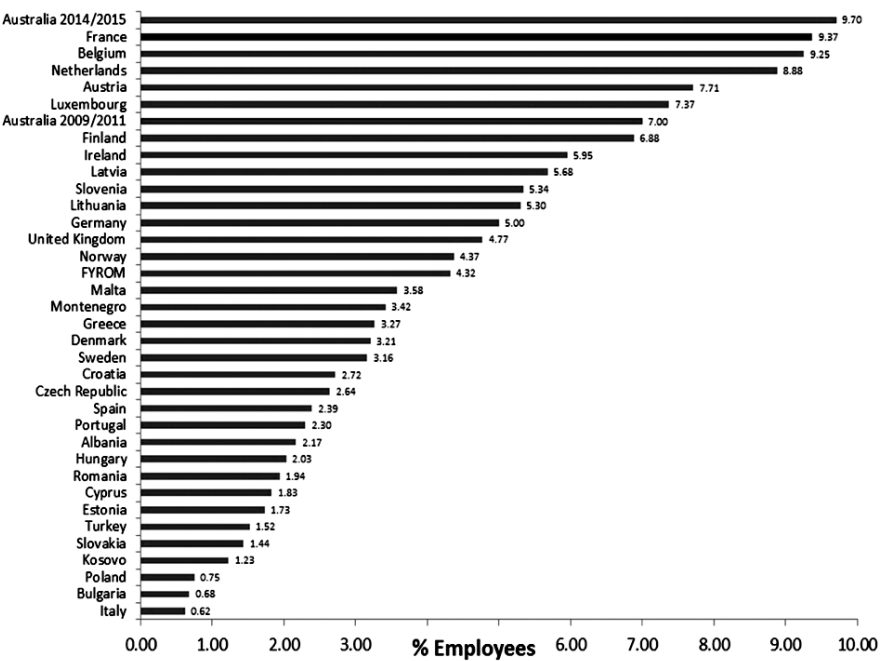
Figure A *Comparison of Australian National Rates of Workplace Bullying with European Statistics (2010 and 2014/2015).*[42,*]

While definitional issues make exact comparisons elusive, Figure A, and the more detailed Figure B below, which includes data according to Australian state/territory, clearly shows Australia leading a 'race to the bottom'.**

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*   Slide reproduced with permission from Stress Café, University of South Australia.

** European data is taken from the European Working Conditions Survey 2010.

Australian and European Bullying Rates

Northern Territory 2011 — 15.00
Northern Territory 2014/2015 — 14
Slovakia — 12.15
Kosovo — 11.95
Poland — 11.74
Bulgaria — 11.53
Queensland 2014/2015 — 10.9
Victoria 2014/2015 — 10.7
New South Wales 2014/2015 — 10.1
ACT 2014/2015 — 9.90
Australia 2014/2015 — 9.70
France — 9.37
Belgium — 9.25
Western Australia 2010 — 9.20
Tasmania 2014/2015 — 9
Netherlands — 8.88
Tasmania 2011 — 8.00
Austria — 7.71
Luxembourg — 7.37
Australia 2009-2011 — 7.00
New South Wales 2009 — 7.00
Western Australia 2009 — 7.00
Finland — 6.88
South Australia 2011 — 6.60
New South Wales 2010 — 6.00
South Australia 2010 — 6.00
Western Australia 2010 — 6.00
New South Wales 2010 — 6.00
Western Australia 2010 — 6.00
Ireland — 5.95
Latvia — 5.68
Slovenia — 5.34
Lithuania — 5.30
Germany — 5.00
United Kingdom — 4.77
South Australia 2014/2015 — 4.40
Norway — 4.37
FYROM — 4.32
Total — 4.17
ACT 2011 — 4.00
Malta — 3.58
Montenegro — 3.42
Greece — 3.27
Denmark — 3.21
Sweden — 3.16
Croatia — 2.72
Czech Republic — 2.64
Spain — 2.39
Portugal — 2.30
Albania — 2.17
Hungary — 2.03
Romania — 1.94
Cyprus — 1.83
Estonia — 1.73
Turkey — 1.52
Slovakia — 1.44
Kosovo — 1.23
Italy — 0.97
Poland — 0.75
Bulgaria — 0.68

Europe (European Working Conditions Survey 2010)
q71b. Over the past 12 months, during the course of your work have you been subjected to bullying /harassment?
No = 1, Yes = 2
N = 41, 034, Employed only

Australia (AWB 2009-2014/2015)
Bullying is a problem at some work-places and for some workers. To label something, as bullying, the offensive behaviour has to occur repeatedly over a period of time, and the person confronted has to experience difficulties defending him or herself. The behaviour is not bullying if two parties of approximate equal "strength" are in conflict or the incident is an isolated event.

Have you been subjected to bullying at the workplace during the last six months?
No = 1, Yes = 2
AUS N = 5919, Employed only 2009-2011
AUS N = 4242, Employed only 2014/2015

0.00   5.00   10.00   15.00   % Employees

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Figure B *Comparison of Australian (State/Territory) Rates of Workplace Bullying with European Rates (2010 and 2014/2015)*

Under current Australian law, incidents of WPB must be repeated, unreasonable, and create a risk to health and safety. They can be intentional or unintentional, and include, but are not limited to:

- Abusive, insulting or offensive language or comments;
- Aggressive and intimidating conduct;
- Belittling or humiliating comments;
- Victimisation;
- Practical jokes or initiation;
- Unjustified criticism or complaints;
- Deliberately excluding someone from work-related activities;

- Withholding information that is vital for effective work performance;

- Setting unreasonable timelines or constantly changing deadlines;

- Setting tasks that are unreasonably below, or beyond a person's skill level;

- Denying access to information, supervision, consultation or resources;

- Spreading misinformation or malicious rumours; and

- Changing work arrangements such as rosters to deliberately inconvenience (Safe Work Australia, 2016:6).[43]

2023 research from the Australian Workers Unions (AWU) suggests around 50% of Australians experience WPB, harassment, conflict, or otherwise inappropriate behaviour during their working lives. In the year preceding the survey, 30% of AWU members had sustained a mental health injury at work (AWU, 2023).[44] Further, when targets seek redress, their claims are typically dismissed (ABC, 2019).[45]

According to the Australian Productivity Commission, WPB is a leading cause of work-related mental stress (Productivity Commission, 2019).[46] Health data from the state of Victoria suggests 17% of suicides are 'work-related' (Routley and Ozanne-Smith, 2012).[47] Similarly, a 2015 report by Australia's peak mental health body found only 52% of Australian workers believe their workplace 'mentally healthy' and only 56% that workplace leaders value their mental health (Beyond Blue, 2015).[48]

It seems Australia has a long road ahead before going to work becomes psychologically safe.

> *She was horrible. No one had taught her it's okay if you're caring and supportive. It's okay to be honest; okay to be wrong: I think women find it difficult to say they're wrong. But they like* you *to say* you're *wrong, then can use it as a lever to punish you in some way.* [Camille]

Trends In Women Bullying Women

Traditionally, male-dominated industries such as manufacturing reported higher incidence of WPB, but in the third decade of the 21st century, the female-dominated sectors have caught up. In 2024, a SWA report on 'Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace' confirms—if confirmation was needed—that Australians not only face a rising trend of violence and aggression at work, but that these hostile interactions thrive in the 'feminised' professions.

   It's like high school: safety in numbers. [Charli]

Figure C below, detailing WPB and harassment rates by occupation/industry, shows female-dominated sectors now leading, with workers in 'healthcare and social assistance', and 'education and training', where women constitute 77.9% and 76% of the workforce respectively, reporting higher victimisation rates than other professions (SWA, 2024; ABS, 2020; Accumulate Australia, 2024).[49, 50, 51]
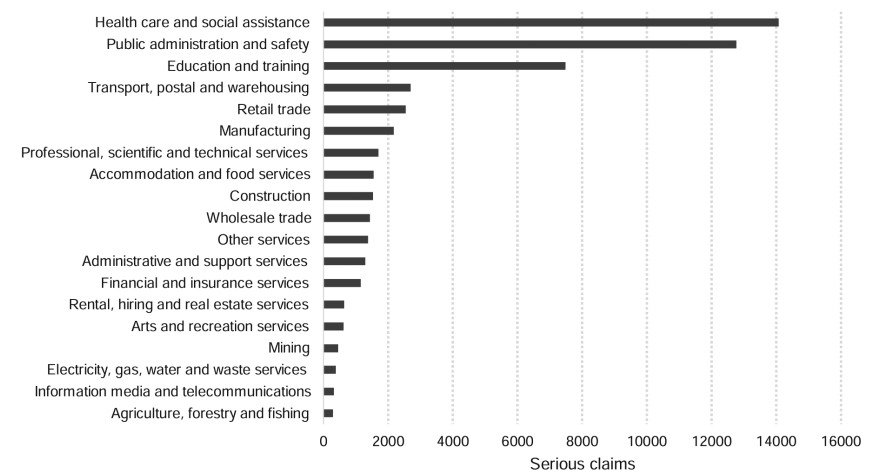
Source: Safe Work Australia National Dataset for Compensation-based Statistics.

Figure C *Number of serious claims for mental health conditions by industry National Data Set 2017–2018 – 2021–2022*[52]

While this might suggest that women bullying women is an emerging trend, as scholars note, it is a phenomenon that remains 'under-researched and under-theorized', suggesting it may have long been an issue (Agarwal,

2016:57).[53] Even early on in Australia's WPB scholarship, a 1998 study had found *over half* of working women experiencing WPB (Working Women's Centre of South Australia, 1998).[54]

A potential reason that women bullying women hasn't been picked up in WPB data and research may be because, as the case studies in this book will show, female WPB comprises distinct characteristics. It manifests in forms that are challenging to identify and often, more difficult to substantiate.

We see this time and again in Australian women's experiences presented in this book.

> *Women are very careful about how they do it. The first thing they do is size you up, look you up and down. Then they gauge your intellect and 'capacity'. If they're in a position of power, they immediately—whether unconsciously or consciously—try to work out your weaknesses. Men who bully will exploit weaknesses* overtly. *If the bully is a woman, they do it very subtly.* [Belén]

> *Men will just turn around and say to you outright. Women don't know how to say it so they marginalise you psychologically. Women are extraordinarily subtle and very, very clever at it. Men, if they bully, are a lot more explicit.* [Berén]

> *She would go out of her way to humiliate me, but she could be really nice as well. It was a double edged sword and half the time I didn't understand what was going on.* [Tori]

> *Mine wasn't overt bullying—with women it never is. Underhand and really hard to pinpoint.* [Hermione]

> *I don't know exactly how to word it, but women just don't like other women.* [Roberta]

Perpetration of WPB has been theorised as individuals—or groups—either seeking, or holding more power than the target of their abuse (Baillien et al., 2017; Glambek, Skogstad & Einarsen, 2016).[55, 56] It is said that this 'resource imbalance' distinguishes WPB from SYB and other negative behaviours in the context of employment (Hershcovis & Reich, 2013).[57]

With women still lagging behind men in securing 'elite' and leadership roles, resource imbalance may only partly explain intra-gender WPB.

Over the past four decades, Australia has seen significant advancements in women's participation in paid labour, paralleling trends in other jurisdictions. But while women's progress is something to be celebrated, our persistent underrepresentation at the strategic, 'C Suite' tier of leadership remains a matter of concern; both in Australia and globally.

As of 2023, international statistics suggest that CEO gender parity will take another 81 years. Furthermore, 2023 saw a record number of female executives *departing* leadership positions (Reynolds, 2024).[58] Women may be rising to management roles, but these are mostly 'middle management', where we typically carry the operational load without the decision-making authority of senior leadership.

> *I work in a female-dominated industry but with mostly males in senior positions: classic 'glass escalator'. All you have to do is be male and you'll get a senior position! So there's that thing of it's 'just girls'. That misuse of 'girls'—it's like nails on the blackboard to me!* [Lou]

An Emerging Phenomenon

The first AWB report had revealed that Australian women report WPB more often than men, and across longer periods (SWA, 2012:8).[59] But the report had included 'unwanted sexual advances and unfair treatment based on gender': acts typically perpetrated by male colleagues.

It is abuse that continues to affect Australian women.

> *He came from behind and just started massaging my shoulders! Straight away I said: 'Don't touch me!'* [Christy]

> *I was sexually targeted by a covert narcissist half my age the moment l completed training. It got to the stage of him going and masturbating in the toilets, turned on by my utter fear, dismay and disgust.* [Jessee]

> *Reporting just made it worse. HR gave him a platform to attack me. He wrote a 40 page submission about how terrible I am; accused me of all kinds of stuff like being racist. None of it was true or correct.* [Stevie]

> [He] *started gaslighting and bullying me. He knew my computer password and I found him downloading pornography onto my computer. He would deny things and complain to management about* me. [Christy]

Without dismissing the serious effects that WPB has on men and boys, nor the gravity of abuse perpetrated by men against women, statistics indicate a troubling trend of women engaging in 'toxic' workplace behaviours, and not only in Australia.

Epidemiological studies from abroad show that particular sectors and occupations act as predictors of WPB the world over. For example, 'administrative and retail' roles consistently display elevated rates of WPB, as do healthcare and education, as noted above (Sansone and Sansone, 2015).[60]

Across the world we see a 'mass exodus' of teachers and nurses, indicating that issues with sectoral culture are entrenched, and only exacerbated by the profound—and ongoing—pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic (Oluk, 2023; Burston, 2017; Health Workforce Australia, 2012).[61, 62, 63]

> *There are hundreds of us on the scrapheap, who've never been asked, 'Why did you walk away?'* [Belén]

> *How can a great teacher have to leave? It's affected my mental health; it's affected the way I eat.* [Isabella]

Research on gender in the context of WPB is limited, and typically focuses on victim and perpetrator rates, and on impacts according to gender (Salin et al., 2013; Mavin et al., 2014).[64, 65] However, my own study of Australian women workers during the pandemic found just over half were experiencing conditions aligned with WPB, with many suggesting feminised WPB existed well prior to the pandemic.

The A Special Place in Hell (ASPIH) research that underpins this book hypothesises that female WPB is not simply 'pandemic', but *endemic* to Australia and many other countries.

> *There's nothing worse than female-to-female bullying in the workplace. It was only when talking with my partner did I realise that one of the issues may be actually understanding that I'm being bullied by another woman. We're surrounded by* [narratives of] *'the sisterhood'; 'we're all here for each other'; 'let's work together'; 'let's collaborate'—you know what? All that stuff is really not what it claims to be.* [Camille]

It's very triggering to me. There's a huge problem going on for women in the workplace lately. I remember seeing something that said that the female of the species was the deadliest. In my experience, I've had more physical, emotional, and financial abuse from females [than males]. *It brings a sort of self-hatred thing which makes it pretty hard. It's very conflicting. I think it comes from a place of* [psychological] *sickness.* [Lee]

It's hard to pick just one experience, there have been several where I have been teased, excluded, bullied. [Survey Respondent]

Gendered Impacts

In addition to a prevalence of female WPB, there are gendered dimensions in the *impacts* of workplace abuse (Salin, 2021; Salin and Hoel, 2013; MacIntosh et al., 2010).[66, 67, 68] In Australia, workers' injury claims show women reporting harms from WPB at almost three times the frequency of men (SWA, 2021). We are also more than 1.5 times likely to be exposed to occupational violence—rates which exclude the traumatic events 'first responders' often face (SWA, 2024).[69]

That we endure greater 'mental stress' at work is illustrated in Figure D below:
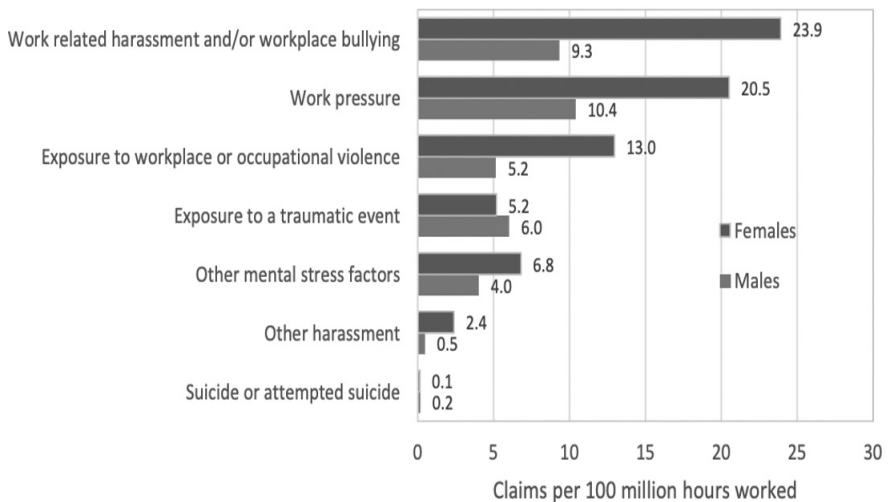

Figure D *Mental Stress Categories by Sex, 2016–2017 & 2018–2019, Safe Work Australia (2021).*70

Whatever way we approach it, the outlook for Australian women workers seems ominous.

That females routinely bully other females may come as no surprise to some, however.

We only need to look at language, and at popular culture, to see representations of 'mean girls', 'queen bees' and 'bitches': gender stereotypes which characterise females as inherently more competitive and 'gossipy' than males; and with more pronounced 'in-group'/'out-group' dynamics (Benenson et al., 2013; Mulvey et al., 2010).[71, 72]

Because of the more tacit ways in which women bully, different—potentially more damaging—consequences arise. For example, 'social exclusion', a tactic frequently deployed in cases of WPB shared by Australian women, is said to hurt women more than men (Jordan, 2023; Benenson et al., 2013).[73, 74]

> I've never had problems with males, only females. I don't know whether it's because of the quite rigid social norms of how females interact? If you don't fall into those norms, you're automatically excluded. If you have an issue with a bloke, you can just say, 'Hey, you're being a wanker; why?' With women you can't do that. [Tori]

> She would set you up by telling stories about you to other people. It sounds paranoid, but it was eventually revealed she was doing that. You can have these feelings, 'paranoias', but when there's no evidence there's nothing you can say or do. [Kaily]

Perhaps, as Simmons asserts, there is:

> A hidden culture of girls' aggression in which bullying is epidemic, distinctive and destructive... Within the hidden culture of aggression, girls fight with body language and relationships instead of fists and knives...a terrain travelled in secret, marked with anguish and nourished by silence (Simmons, 2011:3).[75]

Antecedents Of Workplace Bullying

The antecedents of WPB are better understood in 2024 than they were 40 years ago. Contemporary research identifies a range of variables that contribute to both the perpetration, and the victimisation associated with WPB.

These include personality traits and interpersonal dynamics, demographic vulnerabilities such as ethnicity and sexuality, 'labour processes' or work conditions, and the influence of local cultures (Coyne et al., 2000; Fox and Stallworth, 2005; Persson et al., 2009; Lewis and Gunn, 2007; Hoel et al., 2010; Bulutlar and Unler Öz, 2009; Samnani and Singh, 2012).[76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81 82, 83]

WPB can have serious and long-term impacts on those targeted. In a recent paper, the Applied Neuroscience Association (ANA) describes WPB as a 'profoundly consequential phenomenon' that typically inflicts severe harm (ANA, 2023:35).[84]

They cite emerging evidence that both SYB and WPB don't only inflict psychological damage in the short-term, but can alter the structure and function of the brain in ways akin to an acquired brain injury (ibid).

Conclusion

Intra-gender female WPB is not novel, as this book will show. Despite significant advancements in gender equity, the evidence presented here, taken from one hundred ASPIH survey responses and fifty interviews, shows that women are still not consistently extending support to each other in professional settings, with an absence of the convivial and 'circular' behaviours sometimes characterised as 'female-coded' (Jordan, 2023; Chapman, 1975; Eagly and Carli, 2003).[85, 86 , 87]

With a relative scarcity of research around intra-gender WPB, this book elevates the experiences and perspectives of those affected. In doing so, it seeks to provide insights that are valuable to lawmakers, employers, trade unions, and women themselves. By exploring employment dynamics, alongside cultural frameworks of gender—and violence against women—this text shows how and why female WPB is a significant issue in Australian life.

The issue of female WPB extends beyond employment stakeholders, to also pose a challenge for *feminists*. Exploring the prevalence and drivers of female aggression may be a contentious subject for the women's movement, accounting for its neglect to date, but it is an increasingly critical one.

Perhaps because, as Albright reminds us in a later quote:

> *A person who thinks the world would be entirely different if it were run by women has likely forgotten what high school was like.*[88]

Chapter 2

Agents of the Patriarchy and Snakes in Suits

Introduction

When research into workplace bullying (WPB) emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, many academics applied psychological theories in seeking to understand toxic workplace behaviours.

Within this tradition, studies initially focused on the 'personality types' of 'victim' and 'perpetrator', and on interpersonal and group dynamics. Psychological theories subsequently integrated 'organisational' perspectives, overcoming the constraints of individual subjectivity to take account of environmental factors and their impact on workplace cultures.

While the evidence around WPB remains nuanced, psychological theories continue to play a role in research. They also resonate in mainstream discourse, helping to articulate the perceived motivations of perpetrators as well as the consequences for victims, bystanders and witnesses.

Despite limited scholarship specific to female intra-gender WPB, psychological research provides insights into why some women engage in bullying and, as the narratives of Australian women workers attest, how 'popular' psychology can support targets in making sense of their experience.

Why Do Women Bully?

As noted earlier, female WPB is typically less physical and less overt than male-perpetrated abuse. This can make it harder to prove, and also to understand. It typically takes the form of 'incivility', social exclusion, the spreading of rumours, and other 'female-coded' activities which can undermine an individual's professional standing (Einarsen et al., 2011).[89]

It is this more implicit, even *devious* tone of feminised WPB, that can make it difficult to accept and understand. Not only for those targeted, but by those responsible for organisational governance.

> *One senior male colleague made a passing comment, 'Oh, you girls get like this'. That's probably an honest expression of the attitude in the workplace. Because she and I had been friends it was dismissed as 'girls having a tiff'. A male colleague even said, 'It's not the first time I've heard about conflicts between female clinicians'.* [Lou]

> *Because everything was verbal and nothing written down, it would be, 'Where's the evidence?'* [Sage]

> *When she was quiet you better look out, she's planning something.* [Charli]

> *The women are more subversive. They get aggressive, really nasty, but it's more underhand. The women are more gaslighting and it intensifies as the manipulation gets worse—and they really play the victim role.* [Christy]

Agents Of the Patriarchy?

In exploring toxic personality types, we might start with a female archetype not uncommon to Australian workplaces according to women workers. She is someone who has secured her place in the social and organisational hierarchy and isn't going to lose it—or have it challenged—by another woman. We might call these women 'agents of the patriarchy'.*

Agents of the patriarchy is a term to describe the women who uphold traditional male power; securing and maintaining their own (privileged) status through that power. They might adopt a highly feminised and deferential demeanour in order to gain male approval or, as considered later, secure status in the workplace by adopting a 'one of the boys' persona.

> *She would thoroughly enjoy him coming to chat to her while he leered at my breasts. It greatly distressed me.* [Jessee]

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* Echoing a description of the Kardashians in the documentary House of Kardashian. The Kardashians sisters have been accused of bullying other women, and well as themselves experiencing extensive bullying online.

I think my inability to be flirty in the way that other women were with the male managers was definitely divisive. [Survey Respondent]

She spread the rumour that I only responded to the attractive [male] *workers. That I would 'flounce over' and 'give them whatever they needed'. Ridiculous.* [Joline]

She manipulated the workplace. She would be intimate with the most popular players which got her higher in the pecking order, because 'they're all mates'. She was able to get away with it because it was a male-dominated workplace. She would say really uncomfortable things to me; awful things about my weight. She made fun of me running: I would hear her saying things to the players and male staff. [Nova]

She bullied all young female graduates apparently because her husband ran off with one. [Survey Respondent]

I confronted her as she made another 'dumb blonde' joke in front of colleagues. My boss witnessed it and said that I needed 'to calm down'... Said I shouldn't cry at work. [Survey Respondent]

It was definitely interesting how she treated me compared to the others; particularly 'the boys'. [Amory]

These women might present as 'mean girls': female stereotypes who secure (and wield) power through the exclusion and subordination of other women. They are the workers—or schoolgirls—threatened by other females they perceive to be prettier/smarter/better dressed/more feminine, or conversely, who present in a manner that challenges her own sense of self within the gendered hierarchy.

Your appearance counts—I don't care what anyone says. I think it comes down to insecurity. They feel insecure and that festers. I've noticed that ladies who are attractive, well-groomed, who have good figures, they're targets. [Belén]

She very much would comment on people's clothing and obviously I'm not dressed like the feminine females. [Jill]

She would insult me in front of other people, insult my dress [sense]. *She would say things like, 'The 1960s called and they want their coat back'* [Tori]

It was easier to try and shut me up and push me out than deal with the predators. It just became acceptable to cover up [inappropriate behaviours at work]. *So even though I reported terrible things, there were no consequences.* [Chloe]

These are the women who laugh when a male boss 'jokingly' harasses their female colleague. They comment on your clothing/weight/make-up: its lack, or its excess. Their judgement of other women seems almost instinctive, but is not so much *biologically* prescribed as socially designated: shaped by women's status within Australia's still patriarchal and heteronormative culture.

Some may claim to be 'women's women'—a red flag right there—but they effectively operate to reproduce norms of female subjugation because *it works for them.*

She had a very big bias towards men... When we'd get new guys starting she'd be lovely to them. If a female started, she'd hardly even train them. She would just kind of look at them—it was weird. A colleague left for that reason; it was so toxic. [Roberta]

I don't know if it was jealousy, but colleagues thought it was. [Joline]

There was a rumour spread that I was sleeping with the manager. He was actually grooming me. [Karoline]

When I confronted her, she said, 'This is just how I am. This is how I am to get along with the boys. If you if you don't like it then maybe this industry isn't a place for you. [Roberta]

She pretended to befriend me and even came to dinner with me—the hatred she looked at me with was something l won't forget. [Jessee]

The ways in which women perpetrate WPB are multifaceted and also culturally located, as discussed in later chapters. That female WPB is perpetrated to uphold a woman's position in the (gendered) social order is only one explanation of motivation, but it was a common pattern identified by women workers in the A Special Place in Hell (ASPIH) research.

Other 'personality type' characterisations also featured.

The 'Workplace Psychopath'

Who—or what exactly—is a workplace psychopath?

The traits which mark out psychopathology were originally developed by Robert Hare and published as Hare's 'Psychopathology Checklist' (PCL)* (Hare, 1991).[90] The psychopathic personality criteria, which Hare applied to a particular criminal type, caught the public imagination far beyond its original (clinical) context. It has been reproduced in countless books and films, including in the context of the workplace.

Recently reclassified as a 'Cluster B' 'antisocial' personality disorder in the DSM-5**, psychopathic personality disorder (PPD) sits alongside narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), borderline personality disorder (BPD) and histrionic personality disorder as an example of 'deeply ingrained, distressful ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that stray from standard cultural expectations of how people typically think, feel, and act' (PsychCentral, 2024).[91]

> She's obviously unstable. She's taking sleeping pills and can't cope...
> [Karoline]

Individuals diagnosed with PPD encounter distinct challenges in interpersonal relationships. Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that a correlation between PPD and WPB has been floated. Mostly this has been in the context of 'corporate psychopaths', an archetypal leader who lacks empathy but is able to 'mask' their toxic personality and present as charismatic and plausible to secure work power and rewards through manipulation and abusive behaviour.

The trope of the workplace psychopath arose from the work of Hare, who, with psychologist Paul Babiak, applied his clinical insights in a 2006 book 'Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work' (Hare and Babiak, 2006).[92]

Hare and Babiak write:

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* Hare's *Psychopathy Checklist* later became the PCL-R (*Hare Psychopathy Checklist Revised).*

** Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition.