Coping with Workplace Bullying among Front Line Employees: A cross-sectional study

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ABSTRACT--Bullying at work has recently been a growing concern by researchers and practitioners from various disciplines including psychology and management. This study examines the different types of coping strategies used by targets of workplace bullying. A sample of (N = 270) front-line employees from various organisations in the Klang Valley area participated in this cross-sectional study. The survey measures a number of different types of bullying behavioursvia the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ-R) and the different types of coping using existing scales that measures how victims deal with bullying. Results show that almost three quarters of the respondents of the study have experience of being mistreated via person-related (73.7%) and work-related bullying behaviours (75.6%) while an average of 15% were victims of workplace bullying experiencing negative acts at least on a weekly basis if not daily. Results also show that self-doubt was significantly correlated to all three types of workplace bullying behaviours and that problem solving was negatively correlated with personal-related bullying (r = -.30**). Although, it was found that majority of the respondents tend to ignore the problem and problem solving was the least choice of their coping strategy. T-test results showed significant differences between gender where female utilised more passive coping [t(268) = -2.07, p = .040] and ignoring [t(268) = -2.93, p = .004] while male utilised more problem solving [t(268) = 2.33, p = .021]. Findings are further discussed in the article.

Keywords-- workplace bullying, coping strategies, frontline employees

I. INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying can occur in various forms. As a whole, it can be grouped into two general categories: person-related and work-related (Beswick, Gore and Palferman, 2006). In terms of its definition,workplace bullying can be defined as a situation where a person has the perception of being negatively acted upon by one or more colleagues or supervisors and that the individual is in some sort of predicament to defend themselves against those unfavorable actions (Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen,1994). Five essential criteria when defining workplace bullying: (1) experiencing negative behaviour; (2) experiencing it persistently; (3) victims feeling that they are physically or psychologically threatened; (4) victims finding it hard to defend themselves normally due to the

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perception of having less power than the perpetrator; and (5) self-labelling themselves as victims (Rayner & Keashly, 2005).Nevertheless, taking a more structured view, the elements that seems to be persistently used and widely included by various bullying researchers are adverse treatment, time (persistence) and power imbalance(Einarsen, 2000; Hoel, Faragher& Cooper, 2004; Salin, 2003). However, researchers have tended to categorize these forms based on its context and it might vary across different populations depending on its cultural backgroundTehrani, 2012; Tsuno, Kawakami, Inoue & Abe, 2010).Taking this into account, this research sets to look at how individuals exposed to workplace bullying cope with this phenomenon.

Coping can be defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific internal and/or external demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person"which involves two processes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These are cognitive appraisal (cognitive) and the coping itself (behavioral). Cognitive appraisal includes primary appraisal, a process in which the person assesses whether a specific experience or encounter with a situation is relevant to his or her well-being (stakes) and, if so, in what way (secondary appraisal).A type of coping strategy might be effective for one individual, but it might be ineffective for another person for the same type of stressor. Coping has to be seen as a dynamic process which varies within and between individuals and it also depends on the type of problematic situation the individual is in. Given that bullying is a longitudinal process, victims might have to adopt different coping strategies at different stages (Smith & Lazarus, 1990). The integration of cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage stress can be conveyed into two types of coping strategies: problem-oriented strategies (active coping) and emotion-focused (passive coping). Active coping involves analysing the situation, taking steps to reduce a stressor and then actively carrying out a relevant solution (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty & Freels, 2001).

Meanwhile, passive strategies are aimed at re-adjusting and re-appraising the stressor. Passive or emotion-focused strategies are aimed to modify individuals' emotional responses to the stressor, rather than addressing the stressor (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). This, in turn, will motivate the individual to use a different approach by using positive reassessments or making positive comparisons which are basically emotional reinterpretations (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Some of the examples of passive coping include ignoring the problem (selective coping), managing one's affective state (resigned coping) or even distancing oneself from the stressor (avoidance). Nevertheless, how one uses a strategy would also influence the valence of the strategy. Seeking for social support could be either of the two strategies depending on how it is being carried out (Dehue, Bolman & Völlink, 2012). For instance, asking someone for help to solve a problem is seen as active coping while seeking social support in the form of emotional support is seen as passive (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001). Social support was seen to have a neutralising effect on stressors and contributed to faster recovery (Stroebe, Zech, Stroebe & Abakoumkin, 2005). This is on the basis that active coping strategies attempt to discard or control the stressor.

There exists mixed evidence on the use of different types of coping in a workplace bullying context. Coping strategies varied across individuals which are usually associated with the level of control over the situation. Control is an important factor when it comes to coping as mentioned a lot in coping studies (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004;

Hauge, Skotsgad & Einarsen, 2009).However, in relation to one of the definitional characteristics of workplace bullying which is 'feeling defenceless', it basically implies that victims perceive that they have no control over the situation. Victims of workplace bullying may also experience a range of feelings such as shame, self-blame, self-doubt, shock, fear, denial and disbelief (Lutgen-sandvik, Tracy & Alberts, 2007). This in turn would motivate the victims to opt for a more passive style of coping, for example, maintaining distance from the perpetrator or leaving the organisation.

This is why it has been commonly found that bullying victims often use passive coping strategies such as avoidance and ignoring the behaviour (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004). Victims tend to 'put up' with the problem rather than doing anything about it for fear of making a fuss about the whole thing as victims might feel uncomfortable sharing information that could be threatening to their perpetrators (especially if the perpetrators are superiors in their organisational hierarchy) (Salin, 2003). Victims may also experience fear of being labelled negatively which could also damage valued relationships within the organisation (Miliken, Morrison & Hewlin, 2003). Whereas some victims who feel loyal tend to remain silent in order to avoid causing any disruption or further conflict if complaints were made. Besides that, victims might also think that no one would want to believe them and fear that it will cause retribution or any other negative personal and professional outcomes (e.g. getting blamed, reputation).

Furthermore, studies that looked at coping with workplace bullying found that personal dispositions tended to moderate the relationship between bullying and health rather than just focusing on a specific coping style. Personal dispositions like self-efficacy and sense of coherence are examples of significant moderators between workplace bullying and healthMikkelsen, Gemzøe, & Einarsen, 2002; Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2008).Sense of coherence (SOC) refers to how people view life in stressful situations and are able to use general resistance resources to maintain healthy well-being (Eriksson & Lindstrom, 2007). This concept includes three main components; comprehensibility (the ability to understand what happens), manageability (to what extent the person was able to manage the situation) and meaningfulness (the ability to find meaning in the situation). In a Norwegian study, it was found that the sense of coherence was beneficial in terms of it being a protective moderator but only when the rate of bullying was mild (Nielsen, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2008). The study also found that as bullying grew more severe, its protective benefits became weaker.

It is also common to find ineffective results of active coping when dealing with workplace bullying which previous evidence showed resulted in heightened feelings of stress (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty & Freels, 2001; Fitzgerald et al., 1997). and aggressive reactions from the target which can have adverse effects on wellbeing (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; Zapf & Gross, 2001) and even health-declining related behavioursRichman, Rospenda, Flaherty & Freels, 2001. This assumption was also supported by a longitudinal study that tested workplace bullying and subsequent levels of anxietyReknes, Einarsen, Pallesen & Bjorvatn,, 2016). Another interesting study also found that the negative relationship between bullying and mental health was weaker among employees that attained low scores on active coping compared to those who attained high scores in active coping (Dehue, Bolman, Vollink,

2012). In other words, those who utilised active coping contributed even more to the negative bullying-well-being relationship. However, findings were different for those who utilised active coping under low levels of conflict (usually at the beginning stage of workplace bullying). It has been found that active coping has been successful in stimulating health and negatively related to depressive symptoms, whereas passive coping was seen to elevate health complaints and depressive symptoms (Dehue, Bolman, Vollink, 2012; Folkman &Lazarus, 1988; Lechner, Bolman, & van Dalen, 2007; Stanton, Revenson & Tennen, 2007). As an example, avoidance would impact health negatively as it does not help the individual to change or solve the problematic situation. In short, active strategies are often used when a person believes that the stressor or problem can be reduced or solved (which is usually at the initial phase of bullying) while passive strategies are often used when the person thinks that they do not have control over the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Therefore, the types of coping strategies are dependent on the bullying intensity as part of the cognitive appraisal process. Research on coping with workplace bullying often find that the targets or victims would initially employ problem focused coping (active coping) strategies such as confrontation or negotiation (Zapf & Gross, 2001). However, when their attempts are deemed unsuccessful or if the bullying escalates and worsen, victims would then shift to strategies that are destructive such as leaving their jobs or avoiding and/or ignoring the bullying behaviour (especially if leaving is not an option). For an example, a study(Zapf & Gross, 2001)used two types of coping models which were known as the ELVN Model(Rusbult et al. 1988) and the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (Rahim, Western & Magner, 1995).

The ELVN model is short for 'Exit', 'Loyalty', 'Voice' and 'Neglect' which refers to the final reactions when employees are unhappy at work. This model is an integrative model of responses to job dissatisfaction which is and extension of the ELV model which discusses employees' responses to organizational decline. Taking it into the bullying context, victims of workplace bullying may leave their organisation (exit), improve their situation through problem solving (voice), maintain in the organisation with hopes that the organisation will support them (loyalty) or not focusing at work but focusing on non-work interest (neglect). Meanwhile, the other model consisted of five styles of conflict handling with regard to interactions with supervisors which were termed: dominating, avoiding, obliging, compromising and integrating (Rahim, Western & Magner, 1995). The results of that study found that victims were prone to use more passive strategies such as avoidance more than non-victims and that leaving their organisation (exit) was the ultimate reaction of the victim to workplace bullying (Zapf & Gross, 2005).

II.   METHOD

Respondents

The study samplewere among front-line employees including those working in sales, call centres, retail and the service sector. These criteriawere selected over a few reasons which are workplace bullying has been commonly reported among those working in service sectors as compared to other sectors(Omari, 2007)and it was found that employees dealing with customers experienced frequent encounters of aggression and bullying (Talib & Hassan,

2014).Respondents were recruited via purposive sampling through organisations and existing networks within the Klang Valley region. This study adopts homogenous sampling which focuses on potential respondents that share similar characteristics, in this case, organisational size (with more than 50 employees), tenure (at least 6 months of experience in the same company) and job role (deals with customers, clients or patients). Since the respondents were recruited via their organisations, it was difficult to identify the accurate number of respondents who received the link the survey. However, the actual number of respondents who logged into the survey were able to be identified (N = 431). Once all the data were collected, the responses were scanned for missing data. After excluding those with missing data, the final number of respondents who answered completely was N = 270. (62.6% completion rate).

Among the 270 respondents, majority were young adults between the age of 18- 28 (74.1%), female (69.3%) and more than half holds at least a bachelor's degree (53.7%). More than half of the respondents works in retail (58.1%), and the rest works in other sectors including consulting firm, education, health, and hospitality (49.1%). The majority of them works full time (88.5%) and have at least one year of experience working in the company (64.8%).

Measures

The items used in the questionnaire were adapted from existing scales developed by other researchers in the field. These items were translated from English to the Malay Language which is the native language of Malaysia. Back-to-back translation was carried out to avoid deviation in its meaning. The items were then uploaded on qualtrics, which is an online platform used to collect data. Demographic items were included to assess socio-demographic factors and differences (gender, age, education level, job status, tenure and sector) besides items on workplace bullying and coping behaviours.

Workplace bullying was measured using the revised version of the Negative Act Questionnaire (NAQ-R)Einarsen, Hoel & Notelaers, 2009).This scale measured different type of bullying behaviours that were grouped into three dimensions. The dimensions are *person-related* (eg. Having insulted or offensive remarks to you as a person), *work-related* (eg. being given with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines) and *physical intimidation* (eg. being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger or rage). Respondents were required to answer in a retrospective manner which required them to recall behaviours from six months ago. A five-point Likert scale was used ranging from 1= 'Never', two = 'Now and then', three = 'Monthly', four = 'Weekly or 5 = 'Daily'. The responses were categorised into three groups; *no exposure* (answered 1), *exposed to bullying behaviours* (answered 2 or 3) and *bullying victims* (those who answered 4 or 5). The internal consistency of the scale was measured using Cronbach's Alpha(r = .91). In addition to that, respondents were asked to indicate the most frequently reported perpetrator or sources which were either their 'Superior', 'Colleague' and 'Client/ Customer'.

Coping was measured using the coping with bullying scale which consisted of 18 items (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006).The 18 items were based on existing scales that measured how victims dealt with bullying (Keashly et al,

1994; Salmivalli et al. 1996).Four different types of coping strategies were measured: self-doubt (e.g. 'Felt bad about me'), ignored bully (e.g. 'Acted as if you didn't care'), indirect or passive ('avoided the bully') and problem-solving ('asked the person to stop'). Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they used each behaviour with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1 = never to 5 = always). In determining which coping strategy was mostly utilised by respondents, the coping score with the highest mean suggested that the participant frequently used this strategy to cope with bullying. The internal consistency was measuredusing Cronbach's Alpha at Time 1 (r = .78).

Procedures

The surveys were developed in QUALTRICS which was both desktop and mobile friendly, and it took them about 40 minutes to complete the survey. Instructions on how to respond were also provided at the beginning of every section. Links to the online questionnaire were emailed to the Human Resources in several companies and also to employees (individually) which carried a job role involving dealing with customers or clients. Organisations were identified based on the number of employees (n > 50). Large- sized organisations were chosen on the basis of it having reported more bullying occurrences due to reasons like having low transparency causing the potential for anonymity (perpetrator) (Einarsen & Skotsgad, 1996). Besides recruiting samples via organisation, individuals via existing network were approached as long as they fit these criteria: (1) belonging to an organisation with more than 50 employees, (2) have worked for at least six months in the same organisation and (3) are front liners to their organisation. Given the sensitive nature of studying workplace bullying, ethical measures were a priority in this study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and rrespondents were made aware of any possible psychological and physical harm that could emerged from the study. An information sheet was attached to the emails to explain the design of the study and what they could expect if they agreed to participate. Respondents were guaranteed their privacy and anonymity in which any information that could lead to their identity would not be disclosed. Every respondent was presented an information page at the start of the online survey every time they had to and respond to the survey. They were also made aware that they will not be coerced into participation and may withdraw at any time during the study.

III.   RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 presents the frequency levels of bullying exposure and the coping style used among the 270 respondents that participated in the study. Respondents who experienced at least one negative act on a weekly or daily basis were categorised as *victims* of bullying. For those who experienced any negative acts on rare occasions, or a monthly basis were categorised as *mistreated* whereas those who did not experience any of the negative acts at all were categorised as *non-exposed*. Results show that majority of the respondents were exposed to person-related and work-related bullying. Three quarters of the respondents were either mistreated via person-related bullying

behaviours (73.7%) or work-related bullying behaviours (75.6%). Almost a quarter were exposed at least weekly with person-related bullying behaviours (17.0%) and work-related bullying behaviours (19.3%). Meanwhile, more than half (51.5%) were exposed to rare occasions of physical intimidation while a small percentage (2.65) were exposed to frequent behaviours of physical intimidation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Exposure to Bullying and Coping Styles (N= 270)

Variables	Mean (S.D)	Frequency (%)		
Workplace Bullying		*Non-exposed*	*Mistreated*	*Victims*
Person Related	18.49 (5.7)	25 (9.3)	199 (73.7)	46 (17.0)
Work Related	12.12 (3.9)	14 (5.2)	204 (75.6)	52 (19.3)
Physical Intimidation	3.94 (1.3)	124 (45.9)	139 (51.5)	7 (2.6)

Meanwhile, Table 2 presents the frequency of coping styles used by the respondents in the study. Based on the mean value shown in the results below, ignoring the behaviour and self-doubt seems to be the favourite choice when coping with bullying while passive coping and problem solving were the least choice among the respondents. Regarding its frequency, majority of the respondents reported using *ignoring the behaviour* as the most prevalent coping strategy at least on a medium scale (83.3%). This result parallels with a study which found that individuals tend to not deal directly with the perpetrator or the problem (Keashly et al. 1994).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Coping Styles (N= 270)

Variables	Mean (S.D)	Frequency (%)		
Coping Style		*Low*	*Medium*	*High*
Self-Doubt	10.29 (4.1)	177 (65.6)	80 (29.6)	13 (4.8)
Ignoring	14.74 (3.6)	45 (16.7)	186 (68.9)	39 (14.4)
Passive Coping	6.73 (2.1)	125 (46.3)	132 (48.9)	13 (4.8)
Problem Solving	9.47 (2.8)	150 (55.6)	103 (38.1)	17 (6.3)

Inferential Analyses

Correlation Analyses

The result of correlations between different types of workplace bullying and coping styles are shown in Table 3. Person-related bullying was significantly associated with self-doubt (r = .34, p<.05) and T1 problem solving (r = .30, p<.05) but not with T1 ignoring (r = -.17, p>.05) and T1 passive coping (r = .10, p>.05). Similarly, self-doubt was significantly correlated to work-related bullying (r = .20, p<.05) and physical intimidation (r = .16, p<.05). In terms of the demographic variables, self-doubt was not correlated with any of the demographic variables (p>.50). However, ignoring was positively correlated with all demographic variables age (r = .19, p<.05), gender (r = .18, p<.05), tenure (r = .20, p<.05) and education (r = .20, p<.05). Meanwhile passive coping was correlated with gender (r = .13, p<.05) and tenure (r = .14, p<.05). As for problem solving, it was found to be correlated with age (r = .14, p<.05), gender (r = .14, p<.05) and education (r = -.14, p<.05).

Table 3: Correlations of study variables (N=270)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Person-Related	-										
2 Work-Related	.68**	-									
3 Physical Int	.62**	.56**	-								
4 Self-Doubt	.34**	.20**	.16**	-							
5 Ignoring	.17	.09	.04	.18**	-						
6 Passive	.10	.06	.13	.43**	.29**	-					
7 Prob. Solving	-.30*	.07	.08	.35**	-.04	.37**	-				
8 Age	-.02	.01	.37	.11	.19**	.10	.14*	-			
9 Gender	.02	.01	.03	.10	.18*	.13*	.14*	-.93**	-		
10 Tenure	.04	.03	.01	.12	.20**	.14*	-.07	.92**	.93**	-	
11 Education	-.02	.02	.04	.11	.20**	.10	-.14*	.90**	.92**	.91**	-

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Genderdifferences for coping with workplace bullying

Table 4 presents the mean differences of the coping style used by different genders, male and female. It was found that ignoring, passive coping and problem -solving were significantly different between gender. Female respondents had higher scores in ignoring (*M* = 15.17, *SD* = 3.6) compared to male respondents (*M* = 13.80, *SD* = 3.3), *t*(268) = -2.93, *p* = .004. Similarly, female respondents had higher scores in passive coping (*M* = 6.90, *SD* = 2.1) compared to male respondents (*M* = 6.34, SD= 2.1), *t*(268) = -2.07, *p* = .040. However, male respondents were

found to use more of problem solving when it comes to coping with workplace bullying (M = 10.06, SD = 3.2) compared to female respondents (M = 9.20, SD = 2.6), $t(268)$ = 2.33, p = .021. This may suggest that female victimsare prone to use passive coping or ignoring the problem more than men, while men prefer to use problem solving as mechanism of coping with workplace bullying.

Table 4: Gender differences of study variables (N=270)

	Male, N = 83 Mean (S.D)	Female, N = 187 Mean (S.D)	t	df	p
Self-doubt	9.66 (3.5)	10.56 (4.3)	-1.67	268	.097
Ignoring	13.80 (3.3)	15.17 (3.6)	-2.93	268	.004
Passive	6.34 (2.1)	6.90 (2.1)	-2.07	268	.040
Problem Solving	10.06 (3.2)	9.20 (2.60)	2.33	268	.021

IV. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings here support earlier evidence which predicted avoidance behaviours (e.g. such as taking sick leave or quitting their job) and doing nothing (e.g. ignoring the problem or wait and hope that the bullying stops) (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001; Olafsson & Johannsdottir, 2004).Even though conflict research has shown that individuals often start with active/ constructive strategies (voice),[25] given that the definition of workplace bullying includes power imbalance and the feeling of being unable to defend themselves, this implies little or no control of the situation. This was also mentioned by a previous study(Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001) where victims often resorted to passive strategies due to being caught in an unescapable situation. Hence, it is not odd if one would use passive coping (e.g. obligation, avoidance) or ignoring the behaviour as their preferred strategy. Problem solving strategies were the least preferred strategy by the participants. This supports studies which provided earlier evidence showing little success in conflict management, especially if the conflict was not work-related anymore(Zapf & Gross, 2001) Given that the Malaysian is a high power distance culture, confrontation might not necessarily be accepted as an appropriate way of handling the problem especially if there is an age gap between the victim and the alleged perpetrator with the victim being younger.

One of the limitations of using self-report surveys is that questions are close-ended, and the scope of information are within the boundaries of the questions. For example, participants in this study might be using coping strategies other than what is listed in the survey (e.g. self-doubt, ignoring, passive and problem-solving). Although it was possible to identify what were the common choices of coping and what were the least preferred choices, but the study was not able to explore more on why or what made the participants choose those coping strategies.Given the nature of self-report measurement is that employees with worse psychological health however may perceive their work environment in a negative way, hence reporting more bullyingRodríguez-Muñoz et al.

2015).In relation to that, the measures only focus on the frequencies but not on the intensity or severity of the acts which might have different impact than others.

Bullying experience at different levels may lead to different levels of cognitive and behavioural reaction and thus may or may not lead to certain negative outcome. This type of survey measure (multi-list items) cannot capture all possible negative behaviours and some behaviours though experienced, might be acceptable to individuals given that the sample is from a different culture. With that being the case, individual factors are necessary to consider when examining workplace bullying especially when research is focused on the individual level (e.g. predicting cognitive reaction, coping behaviour). Perhaps a future study could incorporate a qualitative or narrative input might give more insight.

Furthermore, while the results from the current research show disparities in the social process surrounding workplace bullying and coping choices, future research should aim to understand if conceptualization of workplace bullying are distinctly unique for those who may be experiencing gender-based harassment in addition to bullying. Besides that, items related to cyber bullying within a workplace context should also be added to the existing instruments when researching bullying given the fast pace in technology development. Besides that, most studies on workplace bullying carried out in Malaysia are cross-sectional in design (Khalib & Ngan, 2006; Hairul Akmal et al. 2017, Nur Izzati Hidzir et al. 2017; Ruth Packiavathy et al, 2009)where longitudinal studies measuring the escalation of workplace bullying is quite limited (DM Mokhtar et al. 2018).Given that workplace bullying itself is defined by its repetitive nature, a longitudinal study would help better understand the phenomenon.

The findings from this research have provided several research implications to the bullying literature. If stopping the bullying behaviour remains impossible, we could at least train employees to exercise coping behaviours that reduces engagement in sustained cognitive activation. For an example, providing organizational and social support to employees may help victims feel secured and supported in the way of justice. Research in workplace bullying has focused a lot on employees from sectors that reported high number of cases of bullying including the education, health and hospitality sectors (O'Driscoll et al., 2011). However, this thesis has contributed the use of front-line employees that include samples from call centers, retail, sales sectors. This study also does not only focus on top down and lateral bullying from superiors and colleagues respectively, but also collects information on the samples' bullying experience from their customers and clients. The suggest a strong need for bullying policies and complaint procedures that incorporates effective and fair process which mitigates prolonged activation of stress. Policies have to be distinct on bullying, sexual harassment, racial and ethnic harassment and discrimination, workplace conflict, violence making it accessible to all employees.

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