



Power without accountability: Political interference and the normalisation of workplace bullying in Limpopo municipalities

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying remains a major challenge in public institutions because it harms employee well-being, weakens governance, and reduces service delivery. In South African municipalities, these problems may be worsened by political interference in administrative processes. This article explored how political interference contributes to workplace bullying in municipalities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with municipal employees selected through snowball sampling. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that political interference contributes to workplace bullying by protecting certain employees from accountability, influencing appointments to strategic positions, pressuring employees in procurement processes, and reinforcing fear and silence among workers. Participants reported that politically connected individuals were often perceived as untouchable, even when they engaged in intimidation, exclusion, verbal abuse, or unfair treatment. The findings further show that political interference weakens employee morale, reduces trust in reporting systems, and affects municipal service delivery through delays, poor teamwork, and compromised procurement practices. Guided by Power-Control Theory, the article argues that political influence strengthens both formal and informal power, creating conditions that allow bullying to emerge and persist. The article concluded that addressing workplace bullying in municipalities requires stronger accountability systems, merit-based appointments, confidential reporting mechanisms, and a clearer separation between political leadership and administration.

Keywords: Accountability, bullying, political interference, power, and workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying is increasingly recognized as a serious organizational problem with harmful effects on employees, institutions, and the public they serve. Bullying often includes repeated humiliation, exclusion, intimidation, verbal abuse, unfair criticism, and the misuse of authority against a worker who is in a weaker position.¹ Workplace bullying is the repeated verbal abuse, humiliation, health-harming

¹ Morten Birkeland Nielsen, Guy Notelaers, and Ståle Valvatne Einarsen, "Methodological Issues in the Measurement of Workplace Bullying," *SV Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, CL & CL Cooper (Eds.). Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace*, 2020, 235–65.

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mistreatment, sabotage, and intimidation that creates a hostile environment within the workplace. Workplace bullying is not limited to superiors; it can also be perpetrated by peers or subordinates. It is a pattern of workplace behavior that undermines dignity, performance, well-being, and respect, requiring swift intervention to avoid damage to staff morale and legal liability.² This understanding aligns with Sekgobela, who defines bullying as behavior characterized by intentional harm, repetition, and a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim.³ Workplace bullying continues to be associated with psychological distress, lower well-being, absenteeism, and weakened organizational functioning.⁴

In public sector institutions, workplace bullying may be intensified by bureaucracy, rigid hierarchies, and weak accountability systems. In municipalities, workplace bullying is especially important because local government is responsible for essential services such as water, sanitation, roads, waste management, and community support. Where municipal employees work under fear, intimidation, or political pressure, the effects are not limited to staff wellbeing; they may also affect governance and service delivery.⁵ South African local government continues to face challenges, including poor accountability, political-administrative tensions, maladministration, and unstable leadership.⁶ These governance conditions may create environments in which workplace bullying is tolerated or normalised.

Although workplace bullying has been studied in South Africa and globally, a lot of previous studies and existing literature conceptualize bullying mainly as a managerial, interpersonal, or organizational issue. Studies have focused on individual-level predictors such as work stress, leadership style, organizational culture, and personality structure, with comparatively limited attention to political and structural conditions that shape power dynamics in public-sector workplaces. In particular, research on workplace bullying in South African municipalities frames the problem within labour relations, human resources, and occupational health perspectives. This often neglects or overlooks the role of political interference in administrative processes as the main enabling factor. The research gap points to the absence of an integrated, employee-centered, and theoretically informed analysis of how political interference operates as a structural catalyst for workplace bullying in municipalities. The study addresses these identified gaps through a qualitative exploration of how political interference contributes to the normalization, emergence, and persistence of workplace bullying in municipalities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The adopted theory centralizes the voices of municipal employees, and the study contributes to empirical and conceptual insights.

The aim of the study was to explore how political interference contributes to workplace bullying in municipalities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The main research question for the study was how political interference shapes the emergence, normalization, and persistence of workplace bullying in Municipalities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study included the following objectives:

- To explore how political interference contributes to workplace bullying.
- To develop strategies for reducing political interference and workplace bullying in Municipalities in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

The study is important not only for South African scholarship but also for an international audience. Workplace bullying affects many countries worldwide, making the study suitable for a global context. Workplace bullying is a universal phenomenon affecting the well-being of employees and organizational resilience. Across many countries, public institutions face similar concerns around politicized administration, abuse of authority, toxic work environments, and weakened public trust. The article therefore speaks to broader debates on decent work, ethical governance, and institutional

² Morten Birkeland Nielsen and Ståle Valvatne Einarsen, "What We Know, What We Do Not Know, and What We Should and Could Have Known about Workplace Bullying: An Overview of the Literature and Agenda for Future Research," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 42 (September 2018): 71–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2018.06.007>.

³ Tumelo Sekgobela, "Bullying in an Educational Setting in Limpopo Province: Insights from the Social Work Discipline," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 61, no. 3 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.15270/61-3-1366>.

⁴ Bitna Kim, "Workplace Violence and Harassment: An Umbrella Review of Synthesis Studies," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 78 (September 2024): 101981, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2024.101981>; Arathi Krishna et al., "The Escalation Process of Workplace Bullying: A Scoping Review," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 71 (July 2023): 101840, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2023.101840>.

⁵ South African Local Government Association SALGA, "Annual Performance Plan 2024–2025.," Pretoria, 2024.

⁶ Cooperative Governance, "Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), 2023," *Nasional Framework for Local Economic Development 2018 2028* (2022).

accountability, which are directly linked to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 on decent work and economic growth and 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) is essential to integrate with the study to ensure that workers' health is prioritized. It posits that barriers to good health and well-being, such as violence, discrimination, and stigmatization, should be removed to improve employee well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace bullying as an organizational and public sector problem

Workplace bullying has become a significant occupational health, governance, and organizational challenge affecting both developed and developing countries. Although bullying occurs across different sectors, public institutions are particularly vulnerable because of hierarchical structures, bureaucratic systems, unequal power relations, and complex accountability mechanisms.⁷ Workplace bullying refers to repeated and persistent negative behaviours directed at an employee who finds it difficult to defend themselves because of real or perceived power imbalances.⁸ These behaviours may include verbal abuse, intimidation, humiliation, social exclusion, excessive monitoring, withholding information, unreasonable workloads, and professional sabotage.⁹

Recent evidence demonstrates that workplace bullying extends beyond interpersonal conflict and should be understood as an organizational phenomenon shaped by leadership practices, organizational culture, governance systems, and institutional power structures.¹⁰ Krishna argues that bullying rarely results from individual personality differences alone; rather, it develops within organizational environments where abusive leadership, weak accountability, poor ethical leadership, and ineffective grievance mechanisms are tolerated.¹¹ Similarly, Knutsen and Bøe found that organizational climates characterized by fear, silence, and unequal authority significantly increase employees' vulnerability to bullying.¹²

Studies consistently report that workplace bullying negatively affects employees' psychological wellbeing. Victims frequently experience anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, reduced self-esteem, burnout, sleep disturbances, and symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.¹³ Beyond individual wellbeing, bullying contributes to absenteeism, presenteeism, reduced organizational commitment, increased turnover intentions, lower productivity, and poor organizational performance.¹⁴ These consequences are particularly concerning within municipalities because employees are responsible for delivering essential public services, making workplace bullying not only an employee wellbeing issue but also a governance and service delivery concern.

Within South African municipalities, bullying may be intensified by political-administrative tensions, patronage networks, and organizational cultures where accountability mechanisms are weak. Consequently, workplace bullying increasingly reflects broader governance failures rather than isolated interpersonal misconduct.

⁷ D Salin and H Hoel, "Organizational Risk Factors of Workplace Bullying," in *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory Research and Practice*, ed. S Einarsen et al., 3rd edn. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020), 305–30; Krishna et al., "The Escalation Process of Workplace Bullying: A Scoping Review."

⁸ Ståle Valvatne Einarsen et al., *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Theory, Research and Practice* (CRC press, 2020).

⁹ Z. Luo et al., "Workplace Bullying and Suicidal Ideation and Behaviour: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Public Health* 222 (September 2023): 166–74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2023.07.007>.

¹⁰ Kim, "Workplace Violence and Harassment: An Umbrella Review of Synthesis Studies."

¹¹ Krishna et al., "The Escalation Process of Workplace Bullying: A Scoping Review."

¹² Rigmor Harang Knutsen et al., "Associations between Workplace Aggression and Subsequent Mental Distress and Sick Leave among Home Care Workers," *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health* 98, no. 9–10 (December 13, 2025): 899–911, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00420-025-02183-2>.

¹³ Luo et al., "Workplace Bullying and Suicidal Ideation and Behaviour: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis"; Kim, "Workplace Violence and Harassment: An Umbrella Review of Synthesis Studies."

¹⁴ Chia-Hao Ho et al., "Exploring the Coping Strategies of Bullying Targets in Organisations Through Abductive Reasoning: An Agent-Based Simulation Approach," *Journal of Business Ethics* 199, no. 4 (July 23, 2025): 839–61, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-024-05861-2>.

Political interference in local government administration

Political interference has become one of the most significant governance challenges confronting local government in South Africa. Political interference refers to situations where political office bearers improperly influence administrative decisions that should be made by professional municipal officials based on legislation, policy, competence, and administrative procedures.¹⁵ While councillors are responsible for political oversight and policy direction, municipal officials are responsible for administration and implementation in accordance with the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000.

The constitutional framework governing municipalities recognises the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between political governance and administrative management. The Local Government: Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 establishes political leadership structures, whereas the Municipal Systems Act regulates professional municipal administration. The National School of Government further emphasises that effective municipalities depend upon respecting these distinct roles to promote accountability, transparency, and ethical governance.¹⁶

Despite this legislative framework, recent reports indicate that political interference remains widespread across many municipalities. The Auditor-General South Africa and COGTA report that political influence frequently affects appointments, disciplinary processes, procurement decisions, performance management, and administrative decision-making. Such interference weakens institutional independence and creates opportunities for favouritism, corruption, and abuse of authority.

International literature similarly demonstrates that political patronage undermines merit-based administration, weakens organizational justice, and contributes to unhealthy workplace environments.¹⁷ When employees perceive that political affiliation is more important than competence or performance, trust in organizational leadership declines, organizational commitment decreases, and workplace conflict increases.¹⁸ These governance failures create organizational conditions that may foster workplace bullying and intimidation.

Political protection, patronage, and organizational impunity

One important consequence of political interference is the emergence of political protection and organizational impunity. Organizational impunity refers to situations where individuals who engage in misconduct are not held accountable because they are protected by influential political actors or senior management.¹⁹ In municipalities, political protection may discourage disciplinary action against perpetrators of bullying, thereby reinforcing a culture in which inappropriate behaviour becomes normalized.

Research suggests that employees are less likely to report bullying when perpetrators occupy influential positions or enjoy political support.²⁰ Fear of retaliation, victimization, career stagnation, and unfair disciplinary action often discourage employees from reporting abusive conduct. As a result, organizations develop cultures of silence where bullying persists because victims believe that reporting will not produce meaningful action.²¹

Organizational justice theory explains that employees are more likely to trust organizational systems when disciplinary procedures are fair, transparent, and consistently applied. Conversely, when influential individuals receive preferential treatment, perceptions of injustice increase, contributing to employee disengagement, emotional distress, and reduced confidence in management.²² Within

¹⁵ Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) Department of Planning, *Stability at the Political-Administrative Interface* (Pretoria: Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2019).

¹⁶ National School of Government (NSG), *A National Framework towards the Professionalisation of the Public Sector* (Pretoria: National School of Government, 2024).

¹⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Government at a Glance 2023* (OECD Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1787/3d5c5d31-en>.

¹⁸ Ho et al., "Exploring the Coping Strategies of Bullying Targets in Organisations Through Abductive Reasoning: An Agent-Based Simulation Approach."

¹⁹ Transparency International, "Annual Report 2023. Berlin: Transparency International," 2023.

²⁰ Ho et al., "Exploring the Coping Strategies of Bullying Targets in Organisations Through Abductive Reasoning: An Agent-Based Simulation Approach."

²¹ Krishna et al., "The Escalation Process of Workplace Bullying: A Scoping Review."

²² Kim, "Workplace Violence and Harassment: An Umbrella Review of Synthesis Studies."

municipalities, political protection therefore represents not only a governance problem but also an important structural contributor to workplace bullying.

Political appointments, competence, and organizational performance

Political patronage frequently influences recruitment and appointments within municipalities. Rather than appointing individuals based on qualifications, competence, and experience, appointments may sometimes be influenced by political loyalty or personal relationships. Such practices undermine meritocracy and weaken institutional capacity.

Research has consistently demonstrated that merit-based recruitment contributes to organizational effectiveness, accountability, and employee confidence.²³ Conversely, politically motivated appointments may reduce organizational competence, weaken managerial legitimacy, and increase workplace conflict because employees perceive appointment processes to be unfair.

Recent South African local government reports indicate that municipalities continue to experience governance challenges associated with inappropriate appointments, vacant senior management positions, and limited administrative capacity. These governance weaknesses contribute to ineffective supervision, inconsistent decision-making, and increased opportunities for bullying, intimidation, and abuse of managerial authority.

Employees working under managers perceived to lack competence may experience frustration, increased workloads, unclear instructions, inconsistent supervision, and greater organizational conflict. Such environments may facilitate workplace bullying because employees become reluctant to challenge inappropriate managerial decisions, particularly where political influence is involved.

Procurement pressure, workplace bullying, and ethical governance

Municipal procurement represents one of the administrative functions most vulnerable to political interference because of its direct association with public financial resources. Section 217 of the Constitution and the Municipal Finance Management Act 56 of 2003 require procurement systems to operate according to principles of fairness, equity, transparency, competitiveness, and cost-effectiveness.²⁴

Despite these legal requirements, several studies report that procurement processes remain vulnerable to political influence, favouritism, and corruption.²⁵ Political actors may attempt to influence tender awards, pressure officials to favour preferred service providers, or discourage employees from reporting procurement irregularities.

Such pressure may itself constitute workplace bullying when employees are intimidated, threatened, isolated, or victimized for refusing to participate in unethical procurement activities.²⁶ Employees working in supply chain management therefore face unique ethical dilemmas in balancing professional responsibilities with political expectations. Research suggests that procurement-related bullying contributes to emotional stress, reduced job satisfaction, ethical conflict, and organizational disengagement. Beyond employee wellbeing, politically influenced procurement delays infrastructure development, wastes public resources, weakens accountability, and compromises municipal service delivery.²⁷

Organizational support systems, reporting behaviour, and employee wellbeing

Effective organizational support systems play a critical role in preventing workplace bullying and supporting affected employees. Such systems include clear anti-bullying policies, confidential reporting

²³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Government at a Glance 2023*.

²⁴ National Treasury, "Assessment of South Africa's National Procurement System (MAPS). This Is Strong for the Claim That the Procurement System Shows Systemic Signs of Corruption and Political Interference," 2024.

²⁵ T Reddy and S Naidu, "Governance Failures, Organisational Climate and Service Delivery Challenges in Local Government," *Journal of Public Administration* 59, no. 2 (2024): 145–62.

²⁶ Ho et al., "Exploring the Coping Strategies of Bullying Targets in Organisations Through Abductive Reasoning: An Agent-Based Simulation Approach."

²⁷ Cooperative Governance, "Traditional Affairs (COGTA), 2009, State of Local Government in South Africa," *Overview Report. National State of Local Government Assessments. Working Documents, Republic of South Africa*, 2022.

mechanisms, Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), counselling services, leadership commitment, and effective human resource management.²⁸

Research consistently shows that employees are more willing to report bullying when they trust organizational procedures and believe complaints will be handled fairly and confidentially.²⁹ However, where organizations are characterised by political interference, poor leadership, or fear of retaliation, reporting rates remain low despite widespread bullying.³⁰

Within municipalities, fear of victimization may discourage employees from accessing formal support services, particularly where perpetrators occupy influential political or managerial positions. Weak reporting mechanisms therefore reinforce organizational silence, allowing bullying behaviours to continue unchecked.

Studies further indicate that organizations with effective psychological support services, ethical leadership, and transparent grievance procedures experience lower levels of bullying and improved employee wellbeing.³¹ Strengthening organizational support systems is therefore essential not only for protecting employees but also for improving organizational governance, accountability, and service delivery.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Power–Control Theory

This article was guided by Power–Control Theory.³² Although the theory originated in another field, it is useful here because it explains how unequal power and control shape relationships and behavior. In municipal workplaces, formal power may come from job rank, while informal power may come from political connections or influential networks.³³ When power is not balanced by accountability, those with greater authority may dominate or silence others. Power-Control Theory helps explain why politically connected individuals may be perceived as untouchable, why victims may remain silent, and why bullying can become normalized in politicized organizational settings. The theory also helps explain how loss of control affects employees' emotional well-being, work behavior, and coping responses.³⁴ Later extensions and applications of Power-Control Theory demonstrate that the theory is flexible and applicable beyond family contexts to broader institutional environments where power and control shape behaviour.³⁵ These developments supported its use in this study to explain workplace bullying within municipal organizations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design to explore employees' perceptions and experiences of workplace bullying in municipalities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to obtain rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences and understand the meanings they attached to workplace bullying within their organisational context. The study was conducted across municipalities in Limpopo Province, where participants were selected from different municipal departments based on their direct experience of the workplace environment. The study population comprised permanently employed municipal employees aged between 35 and 60 years who had worked in the municipality for at least five years. These inclusion criteria ensured that participants had sufficient experience and

²⁸ Ho et al., "Exploring the Coping Strategies of Bullying Targets in Organisations Through Abductive Reasoning: An Agent-Based Simulation Approach."

²⁹ Kim, "Workplace Violence and Harassment: An Umbrella Review of Synthesis Studies."

³⁰ Krishna et al., "The Escalation Process of Workplace Bullying: A Scoping Review."

³¹ Knutsen et al., "Associations between Workplace Aggression and Subsequent Mental Distress and Sick Leave among Home Care Workers."

³² John Hagan, A Ronald Gillis, and John Simpson, "The Class Structure of Gender and Delinquency: Toward a Power-Control Theory of Common Delinquent Behavior," *American Journal of Sociology* 90, no. 6 (1985): 1151–78.

³³ Noyila Mxolisi Amos, Modeni Mudzamba Sibanda, and mpi Rungano Kuhlengisa, "Political Appointments, Governance and Accountability in a South African Local Municipality," *International Review of Social Sciences Research* 5, no. 4 (December 31, 2025): 90–109, <https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353278>.

³⁴ Reddy and Naidu, "Governance Failures, Organisational Climate and Service Delivery Challenges in Local Government."

³⁵ Hagan, Gillis, and Simpson, "The Class Structure of Gender and Delinquency: Toward a Power-Control Theory of Common Delinquent Behavior."

prolonged exposure to municipal organisational processes to provide informed accounts of workplace bullying. Employees who were temporarily employed, had less than five years of service, or fell outside the specified age group were excluded from the study.

Non-probability snowball sampling was used to recruit participants because workplace bullying is a sensitive phenomenon and potential participants may have been reluctant to volunteer due to fear of victimisation or retaliation. Initial participants who met the inclusion criteria assisted in identifying other employees with similar experiences who were willing to participate in the study. This process continued until data saturation was reached, at which point no new information or themes emerged from the interviews. A total of 15 participants were recruited. Below is a table of participants.

Table 1: Participants' biographical information

Participant	Age	Gender	Years of employment	Work position	Language
Part 1	45	F	11	Clerk	Tshivenda
Part 2	54	M	23	Supply chain official	Xitsonga
Part 3	55	F	15	Revenue cashier	Sepedi
Part 4	38	F	09	Driver	Sepedi
Part 5	52	M	25	Secretary	Sepedi
Part 6	49	M	17	Water services senior Admin	Tshivenda
Part 7	41	F	15	Exec PA	Sepedi
Part 8	50	F	13	Junior Manager	Xitsonga
Part 9	47	F	08	Traffic Admin	Tshivenda
Part 10	51	F	10	Junior Manager	Tshivenda
Part 11	46	M	07	Revenue services	Xitsonga
Part 12	48	F	14	Manager	Xitsonga
Part 13	53	M	19	Junior manager	Tshivenda
Part 14	39	F	10	Environmental officer	Tshivenda
Part 15	44	F	11	Technical services	Tshivenda

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which allowed participants to describe their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to probe issues related to workplace bullying, political interference, organisational support, employee wellbeing, and municipal service delivery. Interviews were conducted in private venues that were convenient and comfortable for participants, lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual observations and non-verbal expressions that supported interpretation of the data.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-step approach proposed by Braun and Clarke.³⁶ Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to ensure familiarity with the data. Meaningful statements were coded, similar codes were grouped into categories, and related categories were organised into broader themes aligned with the study objectives. The themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, defined, and supported with verbatim quotations from participants to ensure that the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences.

The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced through the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through careful interviewing, prolonged engagement with the data, and the presentation of direct participant quotations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of the research process, while confirmability was promoted through reflexive note-taking and grounding interpretations in participants' accounts. Transferability was supported by providing sufficient detail about the study context, participants, and research procedures to enable readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

³⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide," 2021.

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. Written informed consent, including permission to audio-record the interviews, was obtained before data collection commenced. All interview recordings, transcripts, and consent forms were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher and the supervisor. Because workplace bullying is a sensitive topic that may evoke emotional distress, interviews were conducted respectfully, participants were debriefed after each interview, and those requiring additional support were referred to social workers or psychologists for counselling or psychosocial support.³⁷ Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the institutional research committee, with ethics number FHSSE/25/SW/16/2702, before data collection began.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and meanings within participants' responses. The coding process identified six main themes aligned with the study's research objectives. These themes were essential for summarizing the study's findings and for demonstrating understanding of the participants' perspectives on the political interference contributing to bullying in municipalities in Limpopo Province. Table 1 illustrates and describes these themes in detail in the section thereafter.

Table 2: Themes

Theme 1	Political protection and a culture of impunity
Theme 2	Political appointments and the occupation of strategic positions by unqualified people
Theme 3	Political protection, patronage, and organizational impunity
Theme 4	Effects of political interference on employees
Theme 5	Effects on municipal service delivery
Theme 6	Weak support systems and fear of reporting

Theme 1: Political protection and a culture of impunity

The study revealed that municipalities have political immunity for politically connected municipal workers. It established that the politically connected employees receive protection from their political principals. The study found that municipal employees perceived politically connected individuals as protected from accountability, even when they engaged in bullying, intimidation, and other forms of workplace mistreatment. These findings suggest that political interference in municipal administration may create conditions in which formal disciplinary systems are weakened and informal power becomes more influential than official authority. Participants explained that when certain employees were linked to influential political figures or structures, they were rarely challenged, disciplined, or corrected, creating a working environment marked by fear, silence, and mistrust.

"We have powerful employees who are immune to disciplinary processes in our institutions, you see... these employees perpetuate bullying without consequences because they are mostly acting for their political head in the institution. Municipalities are rife with bullying incidents because they are political institutions. Politically connected employees feel entitled to do what they want." P2

"Politically connected individuals are protected from accountability even when they are involved in bullying incidents. Bullying victims end up becoming victims of political influence. Municipal workers posit that politically connected workers are perpetrators of workplace bullying because they feel untouchable." P7

³⁷ Pranee Liangputtong, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

“Some municipal workers get involved in bullying in the workplace, but do not experience consequences because of their political protection and because they are untouchable. Workers experience anxiety, fear, mistrust, and silence.” P9

The study's findings are consistent with the literature on the politically connected and indicate that workplace bullying in municipalities cannot always be understood solely as interpersonal conflict or poor supervision.³⁸ In some cases, bullying appears to be sustained by broader political and organisational dynamics that protect perpetrators and silence those affected.³⁹ Where employees believe that politically connected individuals are “untouchable”, the normal channels of complaint and disciplinary action may lose credibility. This weakens trust in management and discourages reporting, because workers may assume that no meaningful action will be taken.⁴⁰ From the perspective of Power–Control Theory (PCT), these findings are important because they show that power in the workplace is not exercised only through formal rank or job title.⁴¹ Politically connected individuals may exercise domination beyond their official roles because others believe that they enjoy external protection from political office-holders or influential political networks. In this way, political backing increases both the perceived and actual power of the perpetrator, while reducing the victim’s confidence to resist, report, or seek support.⁴²

Theme 2: Political appointments and the occupation of strategic positions by unqualified people

The study found that political interference leads to the appointment of unqualified individuals to positions of responsibility. It found that political appointments influence political interference and workplace bullying to instill fear and anxiety among workers. Unqualified people and managers use power, authority, and aggression to force people to make bad decisions. Participants also reported that political connections may influence appointments to strategic or managerial positions within municipalities. Some participants believed that certain individuals were appointed to senior posts because of political ties rather than merit, qualifications, or competence. This proved problematic due to the pressure associated with these appointments. Workplace bullying is rife within municipal institutions because of the nature of the environment. The findings suggest that when politically connected but underqualified individuals occupy strategic positions, leadership quality may decline, organisational conflict may increase, and employees may lose trust in the institution's fairness and legitimacy.

“Sometimes people are placed in senior positions because of political connections, not because they are qualified. This causes irreparable damage to the municipality as an institution and the service delivery to the communities.” P2

Leaders and managers who lack confidence in their competence resort to bullying, intimidation, exclusion, or excessive control to maintain authority. We become victims of political interference, appointments, and incompetence.” P8

Political appointments cause low morale among municipal workers due to poor working environments and conditions. They decrease the quality of services, leadership, and teamwork, with a trust deficit in the management because of a threatening environment.” P12

³⁸ Margaret Hodgins et al., “Workplace Bullying and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions: A Scoping Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 21, no. 9 (September 3, 2024): 1173, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21091173>.

³⁹ Abdul Kadir et al., “Workplace Bullying in High-Risk Sectors: A Mixed-Methods Study on Prevalence and Impact Among Construction and Manufacturing Employees,” *Social Sciences* 14, no. 11 (October 31, 2025): 641, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14110641>.

⁴⁰ South African Local Government Association SALGA, “Annual Performance Plan 2024–2025.”

⁴¹ Hodgins et al., “Workplace Bullying and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions: A Scoping Review.”

⁴² Kadir et al., “Workplace Bullying in High-Risk Sectors: A Mixed-Methods Study on Prevalence and Impact Among Construction and Manufacturing Employees.”

This finding is significant in light of section 54A of the Municipal Systems Act, which requires senior municipal appointments to be based on appropriate skills, expertise, competencies, qualifications, and experience. Recent local government sources continue to emphasise that capable municipal administration depends on merit-based appointments and reduced political interference in senior management selection.⁴³ Although Sekgobela focused on an educational context, the study remains relevant because it demonstrates that bullying is sustained by unequal power relations and by institutional environments that fail to protect those in weaker positions.⁴⁴ This is consistent with recent research showing that political appointments in municipalities may weaken governance, undermine accountability, and erode professional confidence in local administration. Recent workplace studies similarly show that toxic and abusive leadership are closely linked to bullying behaviour, employee silence, and deteriorating organisational climate.⁴⁵

Theme 3: Political pressure in procurement processes

The study found that employees in procurement or supply chain management are pressured, harassed, and bullied to favor or recommend companies linked to politically influential individuals during tender processes. The study found that bullying is used as a strategy to enforce compliance with politically influenced procurement decisions. Furthermore, the study found that employees who resist or refuse instructions may face exclusion, intimidation, and victimization. The study revealed that this not only harms the staff's well-being but also undermines accountability, transparency, and ethical governance in municipalities. The study indicates that a municipality is a political institution and exerts significant pressure on employees involved in procurement or supply changes to recommend companies linked to it.

"In a political institution like the municipality, we experience a lot of political pressure, and most of the time, you have to compromise your integrity to protect your livelihood. Politicians do things outside of the law and expect you to implement." P8

"We incriminate ourselves because of political pressure. Our principals exert pressure on us and bypass the law through tender systems to suit their needs. Generally, in municipalities or public service, there is a lot of political pressure." P10

"Look, we get bullied, threatened with our jobs and lives, and become victims of non-compliance. Political power is abused to suit the interests of the few, with the violation of procurement laws, and we have no power. Unfortunately, we are easy targets of the politicians, and we easily get bullied." P14

The findings of this study concur with the literature on the influence, violence, and threats posed by political leaders. Employees from procurement offices are often targeted, threatened with dismissal from work, and threatened with their lives. Municipalities are often the centre of political influence within the procurement sector.⁴⁶ Recent evidence on South Africa's public procurement system notes systemic signs of corruption and political interference, while local government analysis shows councillors and political networks may become involved, directly or indirectly, in procurement processes, weakening professional administration and increasing the risk of irregular decision-making.⁴⁷ In this context, bullying and intimidation can serve as informal mechanisms to silence resistance and secure compliance with unlawful or unethical procurement preferences. Workers are threatened by their

⁴³ Governance, "Traditional Affairs (COGTA), 2009, State of Local Government in South Africa."

⁴⁴ Sekgobela, "Bullying in an Educational Setting in Limpopo Province: Insights from the Social Work Discipline."

⁴⁵ South African Local Government Association SALGA, "Annual Performance Plan 2024–2025."

⁴⁶ B. Zindi and M. M. Sibanda, "Political Interference and Service Delivery Challenges in South African Municipalities," *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 10, no. 1 (2022): a640.

⁴⁷ National Treasury, "Assessment of South Africa's National Procurement System (MAPS). This Is Strong for the Claim That the Procurement System Shows Systemic Signs of Corruption and Political Interference."

political principals to give them any projects they want, even when they do not meet the requirements. The quality and integrity of the services provided would be compromised.⁴⁸

Theme 4: Effects of political interference on employees

The study established that political interference with employees has significant effects, including emotional vulnerability. It found that municipal workers experience depression and trauma because of the political influence. Participants described serious emotional and behavioural effects associated with political interference and bullying in the workplace, including stress, anxiety, fear, low confidence, emotional exhaustion, withdrawal, and reduced concentration. The participants revealed that political interference and bullying not only affect the organizational procedures but also harm employees' psychological well-being and sense of safety at work. Some participants also referred to unhealthy coping responses such as substance use, gambling, and absenteeism.

"Politics in the municipality makes people afraid because some individuals are protected. You end up working in fear and keeping quiet even when things are wrong. We are vulnerable at work and always live in fear." P5

"When you know that a person is politically connected, you lose confidence in speaking. It causes stress, anxiety, reduced concentration, withdrawal, and you feel powerless. It affects us in various aspects of our human life, socially, mentally, emotionally, and psychologically." P9

"Some people end up drinking or staying away from work because the pressure becomes too much. It also affects our performance at work, our daily attendance, as we are always scared that we may be victimized" P13

These findings are consistent with recent evidence linking workplace bullying to mental distress, maladaptive coping, and reduced work functioning.⁴⁹ From the perspective of Power-Control Theory, these outcomes may arise when employees are repeatedly exposed to domination and feel unable to challenge abuse safely. Under such conditions, power is experienced as coercive rather than supportive, which may produce helplessness, emotional strain, avoidance, and harmful coping behaviours.⁵⁰ The findings also connect with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8, which promotes full and productive employment and decent work for all, and SDG 16, which calls for effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. When employees work under fear, intimidation, and political pressure, both decent work and institutional accountability are undermined, with consequences for employee wellbeing and organisational integrity.

Theme 5: Effects on municipal service delivery

The study found that politically enabled bullying negatively affects municipal service delivery. Participants described slower work processes, delays in document handling, procurement delays, poor communication, and reduced teamwork. The study found that, due to fear of workplace bullying, workers are unable to be efficient and take longer to provide basic services to communities. The effects of workplace bullying in municipalities include disruptions to communication and teamwork, administrative processes, and to organizational efficiency. Participants reported that municipalities hire unqualified individuals into senior positions, leading to incompetence, threats, violence, and poor service delivery. The study found that poor service delivery and community protests are among the effects of workplace bullying on municipal service delivery.

"When people are bullied or scared, work slows down because staff are no longer free to do their jobs properly. Documents stay on desks for a long time because people are stressed or afraid to make decisions." P6

⁴⁸ Luo et al., "Workplace Bullying and Suicidal Ideation and Behaviour: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis."

⁴⁹ Luo et al., "Workplace Bullying and Suicidal Ideation and Behaviour: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis."

⁵⁰ Knutsen et al., "Associations between Workplace Aggression and Subsequent Mental Distress and Sick Leave among Home Care Workers."

As “In procurement, if there is political pressure, things are delayed because some people are forced to support certain service providers. This makes it difficult because we are forced to appoint companies that do not meet the requirements. We compromise service delivery, but we are coerced because we are scared to lose our jobs.” P12

“People stop sharing information and working together because there is fear, tension, and mistrust. Our work environment is hostile, making effective organizational performance difficult and weakening employees' performance. This affects service delivery and results in poor services to communities.” P15

These accounts show that politically enabled bullying disrupts daily administrative processes and weakens organisational efficiency. This is consistent with recent evidence showing that hostile work environments and workplace mobbing are associated with reduced organisational performance and weakened employee functioning.⁵¹ Recent research similarly shows that stress, poor teamwork, and weak wellbeing systems contribute to burnout and lower organisational effectiveness.⁵² From the perspective of PCT, these findings suggest that when authority is misused to dominate, intimidate, or silence employees, workers become less confident, less collaborative, and less able to perform their duties effectively. Instead of enabling support and accountability, power is used to enforce compliance through fear, which weakens institutional functioning.⁵³ In local government, these effects are especially serious because they directly affect the quality and speed of services delivered to communities. Recent South African governance sources also note that political interference and weak accountability in municipalities undermine professional administration and service delivery.⁵⁴

Theme 6: Weak support systems and fear of reporting

The study highlights that municipalities have weak support systems to enhance resilience and coping for municipal workers. It further revealed that practitioners who are expected to provide support systems are also bullied and are unable to be efficient in their duties. Workers are reportedly fearful of reporting incidents of workplace bullying perpetrated by politicians. Reporting of workplace bullying is uncommon due to fears of victimization from political principals. The findings of this study showed that organisational support systems were often weak, under-resourced, and not trusted by employees. Although Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or employee wellness services exist in some municipalities, participants reported that these structures were not always effective or accessible in practice. Many employees feared victimisation if they were seen seeking help, especially in workplaces where bullying was linked to power, favouritism, and political protection.

“Even if the wellness office is there, people are scared to go because others will ask why you are there, and then the information may come back to management. I feel the support systems have been put in place just for compliance, not necessarily to comfort us.” P4

“You can't trust the system fully because the person helping you may know the same managers who are part of the problem. It is a very difficult situation with a lack of effective support systems. The toxic environment in municipalities weakens the support systems designed to help them.” P9

⁵¹ Larissa Ronha and Rosa Isabel Rodrigues, “Relationship between Mobbing and Organizational Performance: Workplace Well-Being and Individual Performance as Serial Mediation Mechanisms,” *Merits* 5, no. 1 (2025): 6.

⁵² Jenna Saud and John Rice, “Stress, Teamwork, and Wellbeing Policies: A Synergistic Approach to Reducing Burnout in Public Sector Organizations,” *Administrative Sciences* 14, no. 12 (November 29, 2024): 319, <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14120319>.

⁵³ Knutsen et al., “Associations between Workplace Aggression and Subsequent Mental Distress and Sick Leave among Home Care Workers.”

⁵⁴ National Treasury, “Assessment of South Africa’s National Procurement System (MAPS). This Is Strong for the Claim That the Procurement System Shows Systemic Signs of Corruption and Political Interference”; South African Local Government Association SALGA, “Annual Performance Plan 2024–2025.”; Governance, “Traditional Affairs (COGTA), 2009, State of Local Government in South Africa.”

“One person is expected to help the whole municipality, including different centres. It is not realistic, and people end up not getting the help they need. We do not receive sufficient support due to a lack of capacity, strength, and resilience. We are discriminated against, labelled with lots of stereotypes and stigmatization.” P13

These responses suggest that fear of exposure, retaliation, and breached confidentiality discouraged employees from using formal reporting and support channels. This finding is consistent with recent research showing that workers often do not report workplace mistreatment because they fear retaliation, further exclusion, and limited organisational protection.⁵⁵ Participants also reported that employee wellness services are severely understaffed. In some municipalities, one official was expected to serve a wide geographical area and support employees across several municipal centres. This reduced the service's visibility, availability, and responsiveness.

Under such conditions, employees may view formal support systems as symbolic rather than practical, existing on paper but not providing meaningful protection in reality. Similar concerns have been raised by Long, who found that EAPs are often underutilised because employees doubt their usefulness, accessibility, and independence.⁵⁶ Masejane et al., likewise argue that the effectiveness of EAPs depends not only on their availability but also on employee trust in their confidentiality, responsiveness, and organisational support.⁵⁷

DISCUSSION

The study's findings extend the broader understanding and literature on workplace bullying by positioning it not only as interpersonal or managerial dysfunction but also as a sign of governance and deeper systemic and structural failures within municipalities or local governance.⁵⁸ The study and analysis posit that political interference influences organizational cultures by normalizing compliance, silence, and fear through redefined acceptable workplace behaviors. This shifts attention from individual, group perpetrators of bullying to organizational and institutional conditions that tacitly reward domination and discourage ethical practice and resistance.⁵⁹ By grounding the study in employees' lived experiences, the study shows how power and governance arrangements influence organizational trust, psychosocial identity, and professional safety within municipalities.⁶⁰

One of the study's significant contributions lies in its illustration of how politicised institutions erode organisational legitimacy and weaken professional standards. When accountability is contingent on political affiliations, and employees perceive that policies and rules are applied selectively, formal institutional structures and systems lose normative authority.⁶¹ This creates an environment where professional discretion is constrained, silence is rationalized, and ethical decision-making is risky due to fear of retaliation. This climate damage affects individual well-being and undermines organizational innovation, integrity, learning, and ethical leadership.⁶² The study therefore repositions workplace bullying as a risk that compromises the municipal ability and capacity, rather than a solely labour relations matter requiring human resources interventions.⁶³

⁵⁵ Anita Fafa Dartey et al., “Effects of Workplace Bullying on Employees’ Mental Health and Well-Being Among Hospital Staff in Ho, Volta Region of Ghana,” *Sage Open Nursing* 12 (January 21, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1177/23779608251415240>.

⁵⁶ Tianyi Long, “Why Are Employee Assistance Programmes Under-utilised and Marginalised and How to Address It? A Critical Review and a Labour Process Analysis,” *Human Resource Management Journal* 34, no. 4 (November 7, 2024): 1134–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12547>.

⁵⁷ T P Masejane, W I Ukpere, and E Monyei, “Employee Assistance Program’s Effectiveness in Addressing Occupational Stress,” *Annals of Spiru Haret University. Economic Series*, no. 4 (2024): 625–56.

⁵⁸ Long, “Why Are Employee Assistance Programmes Under-utilised and Marginalised and How to Address It? A Critical Review and a Labour Process Analysis.”

⁵⁹ Amos, Sibanda, and Kuhlengisa, “Political Appointments, Governance and Accountability in a South African Local Municipality.”

⁶⁰ Hodgins et al., “Workplace Bullying and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions: A Scoping Review.”

⁶¹ Ho et al., “Exploring the Coping Strategies of Bullying Targets in Organisations Through Abductive Reasoning: An Agent-Based Simulation Approach.”

⁶² Salin and Hoel, “Organizational Risk Factors of Workplace Bullying.”

⁶³ Kim, “Workplace Violence and Harassment: An Umbrella Review of Synthesis Studies.”

Grounded in power-control theory, the study shows that bullying in institutionalized workplaces, such as municipalities, emerges when power is concentrated without communication strategies for control and accountability.⁶⁴ Political interferences exert formal and informal power, allowing ethical constraints and dominance to be practiced beyond institutional rules while reducing workers' ability and capacity to refuse, resist, and seek redress. Within the theoretical framing, bullying is understood as an outcome of power relations embedded in organizational systems and structures. These institutional dynamics have critical implications for the Sustainable Development Goals. The unsafe and coercive work environment undermines SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by violating universal principles of respect, dignity, fairness, and healthy working conditions. The weakening of accountability and the politicization of administration within municipal institutions erode progress towards SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).⁶⁵ The study underscores that ethical, accountable, and employee-centred governance systems are essential to achieve Sustainable Development Goals. The study reveals how everyday workplace practices are influenced by political power, authority, and lack of accountability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Municipalities should strengthen the separation between political leadership and administration in line with the Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 and Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000. Strategic positions should be filled through transparent, merit-based appointments. Independent and confidential reporting mechanisms should be established for bullying and political intimidation. Procurement officials should be protected from political pressure and victimisation. Employee wellness services should be better resourced and made accessible across municipal centres. Municipal leaders should also receive training on ethical leadership, accountability, anti-bullying practices, and professional boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This article explored how political interference contributes to workplace bullying in municipalities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The findings show that political interference strengthens workplace bullying by protecting perpetrators from accountability, influencing senior appointments, pressuring procurement staff, and reinforcing fear and silence among employees. These processes damage employee well-being, weaken morale, reduce trust in reporting systems, and negatively affect service delivery. Guided by Power-Control Theory, the article concludes that political influence strengthens both formal and informal power in municipal workplaces, creating conditions in which bullying can emerge and persist. Addressing workplace bullying in municipalities, therefore, requires structural reform, not only interpersonal conflict management.

Study limitations

The use of a qualitative research approach was a limitation, as it did not include statistical methods to quantify the findings. Bias was a possibility because participants could provide incorrect or inaccurate information. The researcher implemented reflexivity to mitigate bias.

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Data availability.

The data for this study are available upon request. Researchers have data available upon request. The corresponding author will make the data supporting the study's findings available upon request.

⁶⁴ Krishna et al., "The Escalation Process of Workplace Bullying: A Scoping Review."

⁶⁵ Ho et al., "Exploring the Coping Strategies of Bullying Targets in Organisations Through Abductive Reasoning: An Agent-Based Simulation Approach."

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