
WORKPLACE HARASSMENT PREVENTION IN SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract

Workplace harassment is a serious organisational risk in service settings because work is often delivered through frequent interpersonal contact, emotional labour, customer interaction, shift-based coordination, and unequal power relationships. Employees in hospitality, healthcare, education, retail, financial services, transport, information services, and public-facing support roles may experience verbal abuse, bullying, sexual harassment, discriminatory conduct, intimidation, exclusion, online misconduct, or harassment by third parties. The consequences can include psychological distress, reduced dignity, absenteeism, lower service quality, turnover, reputational harm, and weakened public trust. Prevention therefore requires more than a formal policy or a one-time training session. It requires leadership accountability, risk assessment, accessible reporting routes, fair investigation, protection against retaliation, support for affected employees, and continuous review of workplace culture. This study uses a qualitative, literature-based approach to examine workplace harassment prevention in service organisations. It reviews international guidance, organisational research, and practical prevention frameworks to identify the conditions that increase risk and the measures that strengthen prevention. The analysis follows a prevention cycle: leadership commitment, risk identification, policy design, workforce education, reporting and response, corrective action, recovery support, and evaluation. It considers the distinct challenges created by customer-facing work, dispersed service locations, digital communication, outsourcing, and contractual insecurity. The study finds that sustainable prevention depends on integrating legal and ethical responsibilities with everyday management practices. Clear behavioural standards, confidential complaint options, trained managers, impartial procedures, documented decisions, and reliable data review can help organisations prevent harm before incidents escalate. The paper concludes that respectful service cultures are strengthened when harassment prevention is treated as a core quality, safety, and people-management responsibility rather than only a compliance obligation.

Keywords: Workplace Harassment, Service Organisations, Bullying Prevention, Sexual Harassment, Employee Well-Being, Respectful Workplace, Complaint Mechanisms, Organisational Culture, Customer-Facing Work, HR Governance

1. INTRODUCTION

Service organisations depend heavily on the quality of human interaction. Employees communicate with customers, patients, students, clients, passengers, vendors, colleagues, supervisors, and digital-platform users while delivering services that are often time-sensitive, emotionally demanding, and highly visible. In such environments, workplace harassment can emerge through repeated hostility, humiliating comments, discriminatory treatment, unwanted sexual

conduct, threats, online abuse, exclusion from information, misuse of authority, or customer aggression. These behaviours may be carried out by managers, peers, subordinates, clients, contractors, or other third parties. The International Labour Organization recognizes that violence and harassment in the world of work may occur in the course of work, be linked with work, or arise out of work, including situations connected with travel, communications, social activities, and employer-provided accommodation [1, 2].

The prevention of harassment matters not only because it protects individual dignity and well-being, but also because it affects service quality, ethical practice, organisational continuity, and public confidence. Employees who work in a climate of fear or disrespect may avoid reporting concerns, withdraw from teamwork, reduce discretionary effort, or leave the organisation. In customer-facing settings, unmanaged harassment can also compromise the attention, empathy, and reliability required for safe and responsive service delivery. The World Health Organization has identified poor working environments, including bullying and psychological harassment, as important risks to mental health at work [3, 4].

A policy statement alone cannot prevent harassment. Effective prevention requires a system that makes respectful conduct visible in daily work, gives employees safe ways to speak up, equips managers to respond appropriately, and uses lessons from incidents to reduce future risk. This paper examines workplace harassment prevention through the context of service organisations. It reviews the nature of harassment, identifies risk factors specific to service work, and develops a practical framework that connects leadership, policy, training, reporting, investigation, support, and evaluation. The discussion is general and educational; organisations must apply the laws, collective agreements, and sector-specific requirements that govern their own jurisdictions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace harassment is commonly understood as unwelcome conduct that undermines a person's dignity, safety, participation, or equal opportunity at work. It can be episodic or repeated, overt or subtle, direct or mediated through digital systems. Research distinguishes among bullying, sexual harassment, discriminatory harassment, incivility, interpersonal aggression, and third-party violence, while also recognizing that these experiences can overlap in practice [5–9]. Bullying is often described as persistent negative treatment in which the target finds it difficult to defend themselves because of a power imbalance. Sexual harassment involves unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature or conduct based on sex that creates an intimidating, hostile, humiliating, or offensive

environment. Discriminatory harassment may relate to gender, disability, age, race, religion, caste, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other protected characteristics depending on the applicable legal framework.

The literature consistently shows that harassment is shaped by organisational conditions as well as by individual behaviour. Risk increases where power is concentrated, targets are isolated, work roles are ambiguous, supervision is inconsistent, performance pressure is extreme, and reporting channels are not trusted. Organisational tolerance, silence, retaliation, and weak accountability can normalise misconduct even where formal policies exist. Conversely, leadership that models respect, addresses concerns promptly, and makes outcomes visible can discourage harmful conduct and support psychological safety [5, 10–13]. Service organisations have features that make prevention particularly important. Employees may interact with customers who are distressed, demanding, intoxicated, impatient, or dissatisfied; they may work alone, at night, across multiple sites, or under tight throughput targets. Call centres, hospitals, retail outlets, hotels, educational institutions, transport services, banks, care services, and public help desks often rely on frontline employees who must maintain courtesy even during abusive encounters. Digital customer channels also create risks through messaging, video meetings, social media, and platform-based rating systems. Prevention programmes therefore need to address both internal misconduct and third-party harassment [1, 14–16].

2.1 CONCEPT AND SCOPE OF WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

- Workplace harassment includes verbal, non-verbal, physical, sexual, discriminatory, psychological, and digital conduct that creates a hostile, humiliating, intimidating, or offensive work environment.
- Harassment may be committed by supervisors, peers, subordinates, customers, patients, clients, vendors, contractors, visitors, or online participants connected with the service relationship.
- The impact of conduct should be assessed in context, including frequency, severity, power relationships, work setting, intent,

effect on the person targeted, and whether the conduct interferes with work or safety.

- A respectful-workplace approach should distinguish ordinary performance management or legitimate disagreement from abusive, degrading, discriminatory, retaliatory, or threatening behaviour.

2.2 HARASSMENT RISKS IN SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

- Customer-facing employees can face third-party abuse, sexualised comments, threats, stalking, discriminatory demands, and aggressive complaints during service delivery.
- Shift work, mobile work, lone work, and geographically dispersed branches can reduce informal support and make reporting or follow-up more difficult.
- Hierarchical teams, target-driven sales systems, and precarious contracts can discourage employees from challenging senior staff or reporting incidents.
- Digital communication tools can extend misconduct beyond the physical workplace through messages, video calls, shared platforms, social media, and digital monitoring systems.
- Outsourcing and multi-employer sites may create uncertainty about who receives complaints, who investigates, and how corrective action is coordinated.

2.3 PREVENTION FRAMEWORKS AND ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

International and national guidance increasingly emphasizes prevention through a whole-of-organisation approach. The ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) and Recommendation No. 206 encourage inclusive policies, risk assessment, reporting mechanisms, protection from retaliation, and measures for third-party violence and harassment [1, 2]. The WHO guidelines on mental health at work emphasize organisational interventions, manager training,

worker training, and systems that promote safe, supportive work conditions [3]. The EEOC's prevention guidance similarly highlights leadership, clear policy, accessible complaint systems, responsive action, and meaningful training [17, 18]. These frameworks support the view that prevention is a continuous management process, not only a legal document or a disciplinary response after harm occurs.

3. OBJECT OF STUDY

The present study examines workplace harassment prevention in service organisations. The object of study is the organisational system through which service employers prevent, identify, respond to, and learn from harassment. Rather than focusing on a single company or sector, the analysis considers the prevention requirements that arise across service settings in which employees routinely interact with customers, colleagues, managers, contractors, and digital users. The study treats harassment prevention as an integrated responsibility involving governance, human resources, operational management, safety, employee assistance, and service-quality systems. The theoretical basis is grounded in the principle that employees should be able to perform work with dignity, safety, fairness, and meaningful access to support. A written policy without reporting trust may be ineffective; a complaint channel without impartial review may deepen harm; and a training programme without manager accountability may produce little change. The analysis therefore considers prevention as a connected set of practices that shape norms, decisions, evidence, and outcomes throughout the employment relationship.

3.1 SERVICE SETTINGS AND PREVENTION REQUIREMENTS

The study considers representative service settings that illustrate different harassment risks and prevention requirements.

TABLE 1. REPRESENTATIVE SERVICE SETTINGS AND HARASSMENT PREVENTION REQUIREMENTS

S.No.	Service Setting	Main Harassment Risk	Prevention Requirement	Expected Protective Value
1	Healthcare and care services	Patient or visitor aggression, seniority-based bullying, sexual	Incident escalation protocol, safe staffing, trained supervisors,	Safer care environment and reduced

		harassment during shifts	confidential reporting	normalisation of abuse
2	Hospitality and tourism	Customer misconduct, alcohol-related abuse, isolated shifts, informal work relations	Third-party conduct rules, security support, lone-worker safeguards, prompt manager response	Improved employee dignity and service continuity
3	Retail and banking	Threats, discriminatory comments, sales pressure, customer intimidation	De-escalation training, visible conduct notices, branch-level reporting, review of target systems	Lower exposure to abuse and stronger customer boundaries
4	Education and training services	Harassment by supervisors, peers, students, parents, or online participants	Code of conduct, neutral complaint options, anti-retaliation safeguards, digital etiquette standards	Fairer learning and work climate
5	Call centres and digital support	Abusive calls, monitoring pressure, hostile messages, platform-mediated harassment	Call termination protocol, wellbeing breaks, digital evidence preservation, supervisor coaching	Psychological protection and sustainable performance

3.2 STUDY OBJECTIVES

- To examine the forms and consequences of workplace harassment in service organisations.
- To identify organisational and work-design factors that increase harassment risk in customer-facing and digitally connected service settings.
- To evaluate the importance of policy, leadership, reporting, investigation, support, and training in prevention systems.
- To compare prevention needs across healthcare, hospitality, retail, education, and digital support services.
- To develop a practical framework for sustainable, respectful, and accountable workplace practices.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology. It synthesizes international labour guidance, workplace-health resources, legal and policy frameworks, and scholarly literature on workplace bullying, sexual harassment, organisational climate, and service work. This approach is appropriate because the study aims to interpret how prevention systems operate across different organisational contexts rather than to estimate a single numerical rate of harassment. The

analysis uses a comparative framework to identify common risks, prevention mechanisms, and implementation barriers across service sectors.

The methodological framework follows a prevention cycle: leadership commitment, risk identification, policy and role clarification, employee education, accessible reporting, timely response, corrective action, support and recovery, and continuous review. This cycle is used to evaluate whether an organisation has the conditions needed to prevent harm, respond fairly when concerns arise, and learn from patterns in complaints or incidents. The study does not use primary survey data; its findings are interpretive conclusions drawn from the reviewed literature and practical guidance.

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN (QUALITATIVE ANALYTICAL APPROACH)

- The study follows a qualitative and comparative design based on established workplace-harassment literature, prevention guidance, and organisational practice frameworks.
- The analysis compares service settings according to public interaction, power relations, work schedules, digital exposure, staffing patterns, and reporting accessibility.

- The study uses a prevention perspective that connects workforce well-being with organisational safety, service quality, and ethical governance.
- Findings are interpreted through policy and management principles rather than a survey, experimental, or case-specific dataset.

4.2 WORKPLACE HARASSMENT PREVENTION FRAMEWORK

- Leadership and accountability: senior leaders communicate that harassment is unacceptable, allocate resources, and review prevention outcomes.
- Risk assessment: teams identify high-risk tasks, locations, customer interactions, power imbalances, digital channels, and contractor interfaces.
- Policy and reporting: written standards define prohibited conduct, explain multiple reporting routes, describe confidentiality limits, and prohibit retaliation.
- Response and support: trained decision-makers assess concerns impartially, preserve evidence, take proportionate interim measures, and offer support to affected employees.
- Learning and review: aggregate information is reviewed to identify recurring patterns, assess controls, strengthen training, and improve service design.

4.3 ORGANISATIONAL AND SYSTEM CONTEXT

- The study includes frontline service teams, supervisors, managers, human-resource personnel, employee representatives, contractors, and third-party service users.
- Harassment is assessed across face-to-face, telephone, mobile, hybrid, and online work arrangements.
- The analysis considers the effects of staffing levels, performance targets, informal norms, job security, language barriers, and access to support.
- Service organisations are viewed as systems in which operational design and people management jointly influence prevention outcomes.

4.4 PARAMETERS OF ANALYSIS

The following prevention parameters are evaluated:

- Clarity and accessibility of anti-harassment policies, codes of conduct, and third-party behaviour standards
- Visible leadership commitment, manager competence, and accountability for respectful conduct
- Availability, confidentiality, and credibility of reporting channels
- Quality, timeliness, impartiality, and documentation of complaint handling and investigations
- Protection from retaliation and availability of psychosocial, medical, legal, or employee-assistance support
- Use of aggregate data, culture indicators, and workforce feedback for preventive improvement

4.5 PROCEDURE OF STUDY

- Review workplace harassment research, international standards, and institutional guidance relevant to prevention.
- Identify recurring risk factors in customer-facing, hierarchical, shift-based, dispersed, and digitally enabled service work.
- Compare prevention requirements across representative service settings.
- Map organisational risks to leadership, policy, reporting, response, support, and review mechanisms.
- Interpret the combined findings to formulate an integrated prevention framework for service employers.
- Develop practical recommendations that can be scaled according to organisational size, sector, and resource capacity.

4.6 ANALYTICAL APPROACH

- Qualitative comparison of harassment risks and prevention needs across service environments.
- Interpretation of how leadership, work design, customer management, and reporting trust interact in prevention.
- Assessment of the relationship between policy commitments and daily operational practices.
- Identification of measures that are feasible for large institutions, smaller service providers, and multi-site organisations.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative analysis indicates that workplace harassment prevention cannot be reduced to issuing a policy or requiring

employees to complete a compliance module. Prevention becomes credible when employees can see that leaders model respectful conduct, managers take concerns seriously, and reporting is followed by fair and timely action. A clear policy is necessary because it defines boundaries, roles, and reporting options, but it is not sufficient when employees expect retaliation, doubt confidentiality, or believe that influential individuals will be protected. The central prevention question is therefore not only whether a policy exists, but whether the organisation's everyday decisions demonstrate that dignity and safety are valued. Service organisations require particular attention to third-party risk. Frontline workers may be expected to remain courteous during abuse because customer satisfaction, reputation, or revenue targets are treated as more important than employee protection. This expectation can normalize harmful behaviour and leave workers unsupported. Effective organisations establish clear boundaries for customers and clients, train employees in de-escalation, provide authority to end unsafe interactions, and ensure that managers respond after incidents. In high-risk settings, staffing, security, shift design, and physical layout can be as important as individual training [1, 14, 16].

The analysis also shows that reporting systems must offer choice. Some employees may prefer a direct supervisor, while others need an independent HR contact, ethics channel, employee representative, or external support route. A single mandatory route can fail when the alleged harasser is part of the management chain or when informal power is strong. Reports should be received respectfully, documented appropriately, assessed promptly, and managed with clear communication about the process. Confidentiality should be protected to the greatest extent possible, while organisations should be transparent that a fair response may require limited information-sharing and evidence gathering.

Training is most effective when it is practical, role-specific, and reinforced through management behaviour. Employees need to understand prohibited conduct, bystander options, reporting routes, and available support. Managers need additional skill in receiving disclosures, avoiding victim-

blaming, conducting immediate risk assessment, maintaining records, preventing retaliation, and obtaining specialist advice. Training that focuses only on legal definitions may not prepare supervisors for the ambiguity and emotional intensity of real service encounters. Scenario-based learning, refreshers, team discussion, and coaching strengthen transfer to practice [3, 17, 18].

Finally, prevention must include organisational learning. Aggregate, de-identified information about reports, locations, work units, customer interactions, response times, turnover, absence patterns, and staff feedback can identify risk clusters. Such information should be interpreted carefully and ethically; low reporting does not automatically mean low risk. It may reflect lack of trust, fear, poor access, or uncertainty about what counts as harassment. Regular review should therefore combine administrative data with workforce consultation and independent scrutiny where appropriate.

6. DISCUSSION

The analysis confirms that harassment prevention in service organisations is both a people-management and an operational-design responsibility. Where work is public-facing, emotionally demanding, fast-paced, or dispersed, employers need systems that support employees before, during, and after difficult interactions. Respectful workplaces are not produced by formal language alone; they are created through staffing decisions, supervisory practice, customer rules, scheduling, performance expectations, and consistent consequences for misconduct. This supports the broader literature that links organisational climate and power relations to harassment risk [5, 10–13].

An important implication is that service quality and employee protection should not be treated as competing objectives. Employees are more likely to provide reliable, empathetic, and safe services when they are protected from abuse and can seek help without fear. Customer-oriented cultures become harmful when they communicate that staff must tolerate any behaviour in order to preserve a sale, rating, or complaint score. Organisations should define respectful service as a reciprocal standard: customers deserve professional

service, and employees deserve safety and dignity while delivering it.

Prevention also requires procedural fairness. People who raise concerns need to know how their information will be handled, who will make decisions, and what support is available. Those accused of misconduct should receive a fair, impartial, and proportionate process. Investigators and decision-makers should have appropriate independence, competence, and access to evidence. Retaliation monitoring is particularly important because adverse treatment after a report can deter future reporting and damage trust across the workforce. Clear documentation, proportionate interim measures, and timely communication can reduce uncertainty and strengthen credibility.

The strongest prevention strategy is layered. It combines leadership commitment, risk assessment, clear standards, customer-facing safeguards, multiple reporting options, competent investigations, support services, data-informed review, and meaningful accountability. International frameworks provide valuable direction, but implementation must be adapted to local law, workforce composition, cultural context, and service realities. Small organisations may need shared external resources, while larger organisations may need robust multi-site governance and oversight. In every context, prevention should be treated as a continuing ethical and managerial commitment rather than a one-time compliance exercise.

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7. CONCLUSION

This study examined workplace harassment prevention in service organisations through a qualitative review of research, policy guidance, and practical prevention frameworks. It showed that service employees may face harassment from colleagues, managers, customers, clients, contractors, and digital users, and that the resulting harm can affect well-being, retention, service quality, and organisational trust. Effective prevention therefore requires more than a written policy. It requires a connected system of leadership accountability, risk assessment, clear behavioural standards, safe reporting channels, fair response procedures, anti-retaliation protection, worker support, and continuous improvement.

The analysis found that healthcare, hospitality, retail, education, and digital support settings have different exposure patterns, but all depend on a shared foundation of dignity, transparency, and reliable management action. Prevention measures should address third-party misconduct, power imbalances, customer-facing pressures, isolated work, and online communication alongside internal workplace conduct. Organisations that protect employees from harassment strengthen both their ethical responsibilities and their capacity to deliver respectful, dependable services. Workplace harassment prevention should therefore be understood as an ongoing organisational commitment to safe work, fair treatment, and sustainable service excellence.

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