

**A case study into the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment as part of the dignity at work policy.**

X17113563 – Fionnuala Dennehy

MA in Human Resource Management

National College of Ireland

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**Name:** Fionnuala Dennehy

**Student Number:** x17113563

**Degree for which thesis is submitted:** Master of Arts in Human Resource Management

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# **Abstract**

## ***Title***

A case study into the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment as part of the dignity at work policy.

## ***Author***

Fionnuala Dennehy

## ***Purpose***

The aim of this thesis is to examine the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment as set out in the dignity at work policy, to identify areas for improvement and examine the effectiveness of the dignity at work policy, specifically withing St. Vincent's University Hospital.

## ***Methodology***

The study used a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of line-managers knowledge, perception of their responsibilities, past experiences of intervention, opinion on accountability, equality and fairness and their experience of the resolutions of complaints. This involved carrying out 6 semi-structured interviews with line managers across the organisation.

## ***Findings***

The study found that there was a lack of knowledge among line managers, that under-reporting of incidents is an issue and that line managers are of the impression that the majority of complaints are successfully managed.

## ***Value***

This study adds valuable insights to the role of line managers in the management of bullying harassment and sexual harassment.

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## List of Abbreviations

*Abbreviation*

SVUH

HR

*Explanation*

St. Vincent's University Hospital

Human Resources Department

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## ***1.1 Introduction***

This opening chapter will outline the introduction to the topic being researched, it will outline the background and context of the case study, outline the rationale, objectives and the significance of the research. This chapter will conclude with an outline of the structure to be expected in the following chapters.

## ***1.2 Background and Context***

St. Vincent's University Hospital (SVUH) is a voluntary hospital within the HSE with over 3,000 employees, it is one of the world's leading academic teaching hospitals providing front line, acute, chronic and emergency care in Ireland's only multi-hospital campus; St. Vincent's University Hospital is part of the St. Vincent's healthcare group which includes St. Vincent's Private Hospital and St. Michael's Hospital (St. Vincent's University Hospital, 2021).

## ***1.2 Rationale for the research***

This research is being proposed because in recent years there has been a significant rise in the complaints of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment reported to the human resources department (HR) (SVUH, 2020) and there are numerous studies that have identified bullying, harassment and sexual harassment as an issue in workplaces, especially within healthcare settings and their impact on employee's health and wellbeing and in turn cost to the organisation.

Bullying is on average experienced by approximately 15% of a workforce and has been vastly researched in recent years, however there is little evidence that mistreatment has reduced in any way or become less potent in workplaces and in recent literature harassment and sexual harassment have been identified as emerging areas for review, due to the psychological risk factor they pose and that bullying, non-sexual harassment and sexual harassment are all as common in workplaces as bullying is in schools among children, but that the consequences vary significantly for bullying, harassment or sexual harassment (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Brun & Milizarek, 2007) (Einarsen, 1999).

There is a clearly demonstrated link between bullying in the workplace and depression, anxiety, stress and post-traumatic stress disorder, which can present in the victim but also to almost the same extent in the bystanders or witnesses (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018)

(Balducci, et al., 2011) (Niedhammer, et al., 2006). The cost of bullying to the organisation is also well researched, with higher rates of occupational stress, intentions to leave, sick leave, absenteeism, job dissatisfaction and decreased productivity (De Wet, 2014) (Pearson & Porath, 2005). Employees silence and under-reporting is another well researched element of the issue of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in workplaces, which exacerbates and perpetuates the problem (Hutchinson, et al., 2010) (MacMahon, et al., 2018). This under-reporting is coupled with recent research in the context of Irish workplaces that while dignity at work policies provide standards for behaviour of employees and interventions of line managers, evidence of their effectiveness is mixed and it was found that line managers frequently engage in organisational sequestering tactics such as re-framing bullying as a personal issue, trivializing matters, labelling things as a 'performance management issue' or rebuffing targets by refusing to deal with the problem (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Thirlwall, 2015).

Based on these previous studies a specific case study of line manager's role in the management of these phenomenon in SVUH was undertaken.

### ***1.3 Research Objectives***

The objective of this research is to investigate the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in St. Vincent's University Hospital to assess their understanding and knowledge, experiences and assess this information in contrast to current literature to give rise to recommendations for improvements that could be made in SVUH and areas for further research.

### ***1.4 Structure of the research***

As outlined above the overview and rationale behind the choice of this topic for research have been explained. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation will be structured accordingly. Chapter two presents a review of the existing literature, referring to theoretical and empirical studies based on the topic. Following this, the third chapter outlines the methodology approach adopted for this study and the rationale for this choice. It also provides the research objectives and a breakdown on how the aims of these objectives will be achieved effectively. Chapter four discusses the findings of the research, similar themes and comparisons and. Chapter five analysis the findings from the research with existing literature to present a clearer understanding on the information collected from the interviews. Chapter six will conclude the study, discuss the limitations of the research, propose future research

and suggest practical recommendations for organisations. Finally, following chapter six is a postscript self-reflection analysis on the research project.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Introduction***

The purpose of this chapter is to present a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to the role of line management in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment as part of the dignity at work policy in St. Vincent's University Hospital. The chapter will commence by discussing the dignity at work policy and its purpose in the workplace, followed by a review of the antecedents and behaviours that constitute bullying, harassment and sexual harassment. The chapter will then explore literature discussing the management of complaints, access to support, the organisation's response. The chapter will then conclude with a review of literature discussing the perceptions and outcomes for employees and line managers; the review of this literature will give rise to research questions as outlined at the end of the chapter.

### ***2.2 Dignity at work policy***

The subject of this case study follows the dignity at work policy set out by the Irish Health Service Executive, the main aim of this policy is to promote and maintain each employee's right to be treated with dignity and respect and to work in an environment that is safe and free from bullying, sexual harassment and harassment (Health Service Executive, 2009). The policy is strongly focused on prevention and each employee's duty to create and maintain a safe and respectful working environment and the role of line-managers in promoting the policy and ensuring this environment for employees.

In the event of any incidence of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment employees are advised on an action how to firstly confront the perpetrator or report the complaint to management, the key objective for management being to ensure all reasonable effort is made at a local level for mediation prior to formal investigation (HSE, 2009). In the policy the key role of the supervisor or manager is outlined as to treat any complaint seriously with sensitivity, remain confidential, take action in a prompt manner, intervene and explain possible consequences if behaviour persists, avoid using language that would label any party involved, continually monitor the situation and ensure the claimant is not victimised and escalate the matter further, using mediation tactics at each stage of the process (HSE, 2009).

The focus on prevention and mediation coupled with clear explanations of what behaviour constitutes bullying, harassment or sexual harassment, the supports that are available to employees and the clear commitment maintained throughout to dignity and respect in the workplace for all employees matches with recommendations from research from (Boyd & Carden, 2010) and (Salin, 2008). However, even though a policy is 'good on paper' does not therefore lead to a workplace free from bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and research shows that these behaviours still occur in the workplace and organisations are failing to protect their employees' health, safety and wellbeing and organisations should be investing more to try and improve the situation to allow for all employees to have dignity at work (Ballard & Easteal, 2018). Issues that have been identified for further review with regards to the policy, are that the policy should be applied consistently and enforced across all levels and teams in the organisation, the policy should be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure effectiveness, training programmes for employees, and to ensure understanding and communication and finally the importance of all stakeholders showing commitment and responsibility to the policy (Ritzman, 2016), (Khan & Khan, 2012), (LeVan & Martin, 2007).

### ***2.3 Bullying, harassment and sexual harassment: The behaviour, antecedents and effects***

As defined in the dignity at work policy bullying is repeated inappropriate behaviour, direct or indirect, whether verbal or physical conducted by one or more persons towards others which could reasonably be regarded to undermine that individual's right to dignity at work (Health Service Executive, 2009), the most important distinction is that an isolated incident that could be classified as inappropriate behaviour, while that would be an affront to others dignity at work a one-off incident is not considered to be bullying or harassment.

“Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work. In order for the label bullying to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (for example weekly) and over period of time (for example six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal strength are in conflict” (Zapf, et al., 2003).

Harassment can be defined as the ill-treatment, unwanted conduct or negative behavior towards an individual related to any relevant protected characteristics with the effect

of violating that employees right to dignity at work and/or the creation of a hostile, intimidating, degrading, humiliating or offensive working environment. These protected characteristics are age, disability, gender, race, religion or beliefs and sexual orientation. If the conduct or behavior is related to the aforementioned protected characteristics and causes one of two effects, also aforementioned, regardless of the perpetrator's intention, it is harassment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020); similarly sexual harassment, regardless of the perpetrator's intention is unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, again resulting in the creation of a hostile, intimidating, degrading, humiliating or offensive working environment. (Fitzgerald, et al., 1997) defines three types of sexual harassment, the first being verbal or non-verbal behaviors that encourage or propagate insulting, hostile or degrading attitudes about women, which is defined as 'gender harassment, the second form of sexual harassment is 'unwanted sexual attention which can be defined as unwanted, offensive and unreciprocated sexual advances which can include requests for dates, touching and in some cases severe forms of sexual assault. The final category as described by (Fitzgerald, et al., 1997) is sexual coercion which is the demanding of sexual favors in return for job rewards and/or prospects. Another important defining factor is that both harassment and sexual harassment can be perpetrated in an isolated incident in contrast to bullying which is repeated negative behavior over a period of time, therefore both harassment and sexual harassment are clearer to define and easier to identify and characterise again in contrast with bullying and having a clearly defined definition of what does and does not constitute bullying included in the organisation's dignity at work and anti-bullying policies is important according to (Jenkins, 2011) (Lewis, et al., 2008) employees can perceive many types of negative behavior in the workplace as bullying and in the absence of a clear definition of bullying available to employees there term 'bullying' is often used to express discontent regarding a number of conflicts and perceived injustice with a number of organisational practices, this can then further cause the label of bullying to be used in incorrect situations and more seriously if a complaint is raised for an employee to be told that the behavior they perceive as bullying, does not constitute bullying, this situation is likely to be met with resentment and a feeling of injustice.

According to a study by (Willness, et al., 2007) the organisation's culture and tolerance of sexual harassment and the proportion of women within a workgroup or within the organisation are the two greatest factors in facilitating or predicting sexual harassment in an organisation. Similarly the aspects of an organisation's culture that have been found to

allow bullying to occur or lead to instances of bullying in the workplace can include: the structure of the organisation's hierarchy, lack of clearly defined job roles, reporting relationships, transparency practiced in the decision making process, interpersonal conduct, reciprocation of loyalty, support provided to employee's concerns and trust and performance expectations (Namie & Namie, 2009).

While research suggests that the organisation's culture has a large role to play in the prevalence of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace power dynamics in working relationships also have a large role to play in the escalation of negative behavior into bullying in the workplace. As per its definition firstly for bullying to take place it is accepted that the target must, because of the behavior perpetrated, end up in an inferior position and bullying cannot take place if the target and perpetrator hold equal power (Zapf, et al., 2003). Therefore statistically while employees in management positions are more likely to be the perpetrators of bullying, there can also be informal power structures in workplaces where an employee may have more influence or power because of increased knowledge, experience, length of service or job security compared to other employees; other informal power structures in the workplace could also develop due to racial, ethnic, sexuality, age or ability factors (Jenkins, 2011). Due to these 'unseen' relationships, some power dynamics may be more difficult to identify than the traditional hierarchical structures which can create conflict (Jenkins, 2011).

#### ***2.4 Current situation within Public Sector Healthcare in Ireland***

With regard to bullying and harassment, Ireland has slightly lower rates of prevalence than other EU countries reported at between 10% to 15% and Ireland at 7.9% (O'Connell, et al., 2007). In the Irish Workplace Behaviour study, which categorizes ill-treatment under three main headings which are unreasonable management, examples of which include having opinions viewed and ignored, someone withholding information that affects performance or someone continually checking on your work which is not necessary; secondly incivility or disrespect, examples of which include being humiliated and ridiculed in connection to work or being shouted at or someone losing their temper; and finally violence or injury, which can include aggression, actual physical violence or injury in any way. This study found that the Public Sector had the highest instances of unreasonable management with 40.36% of respondents having reported experiencing that type of negative behaviour in contrast to 34.51% in the private sector; in the private sector 1.18% of respondents experienced actions under the violence of injury category which is in stark contrast to 6.15% of respondents in the

public sector (Hodgins, et al., 2018); when respondent data is split by sector the prevalence is highest in the health & social services sector across all three characteristics in addition each category has significantly higher percentages of prevalence where there is a presence of a trade union or staff association.

During the study when the rates of employees who witnessed negative behaviour under unreasonable management, incivility or disrespect and violence or injury the prevalence rates are approx. 5% higher in all measures, this highlights the issue self-identifying that you are being bullied.

A recent report showed that almost one in ten employees in Ireland have recently experienced being bullied and a total of 1.7 million working days are lost in Ireland each year because of bullying at a cost to the economy of 250 million euros per annum (Cullinan & Hodgins, 2021).

## ***2.5 Intervention***

The relevant policy set out in this case details that the key role of the supervisor or manager is to treat any complaint made under the dignity at work policy seriously with sensitivity, remain confidential, take action in a prompt manner, intervene and explain possible consequences if behaviour persists, avoid using language that would label any party involved, continually monitor the situation and ensure the claimant is not victimised and escalate the matter further, using mediation tactics at each stage of the process (HSE, 2009). Mediation is the preferred method for resolving complaints of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment.

“The objective of mediation is to resolve the matter speedily and confidentially without recourse to a formal investigation and with the minimum of conflict and stress for the individuals involved”

Mediation is the most common intervention used in the resolution of claims of bullying in the workplace, for example in Ireland, the (Health & Safety Authority and Workplace Relations Commission, 2021) recommend that in any suspected or reported case of bullying in the workplace that every effort is made by line management to mediate the situation prior to being escalated to formal investigation. Other researchers such as (Saam, 2010) (Salin, 2007) (Jenkins, 2011) also discuss that the main approach taken by organisations to resolve bullying is usually conciliatory and to encourage understanding and co-operation, this approach is echoed by (Glassl, 1994) and in later literature by (Zapf & Gross, 2001).

Mediation is accepted to be an appropriate intervention, but the point of that intervention in the escalation of the conflict should heavily inform the process, for the mediation to truly guide and aid a lasting resolution; at the early stages of a conflict both parties tend to be more open to mediation, this is seen as an optimal time for mediation to be an effective means of resolution, as both parties will engage and at this early stage there is thought to be no damage to the parties psychologically and other factors in the process such as fair management of the complaint can take quick effect (Jenkins, 2011) (Ferris, 2009). If the conflict between the parties involved has escalated to be predatory in nature, or in other words to a destructive phase where one or both parties have become aggressive, mediation can still be effective as a problem-solving tool in providing reconciliation but the mediator should be extremely aware and explore the antecedents that allowed the situation to escalate and also the power dynamics at play in the relationship; if the antecedents are not addressed in the mediation at this phase of the conflict, even if a resolution is reached the process may have little impact on preventing the conflict from occurring again with the added frustration of the previous conflict (Jenkins, 2011). While the point or stage of a conflict at which mediation is entered into has a large part to play in the effectiveness of mediation to resolve the complaint, some researchers have discussed issues with mediation as an intervention in these cases because the impartial party in an organisation that would step in to mediate the situation (usually a member of the human resources department) may firstly not be well educated or experienced in the nuances of bullying but also may be unskilled in the techniques needed to engage in meaningful and efficient mediation; another potential issue with the process of mediation is that the power dynamic that may have been an antecedent to the situation has been found typically to play out in the mediation process and as a result of this the target of bullying may be at an immediate disadvantage at the initiation of the mediation process (Ferris, 2009). Further to the skills and nuances of the mediation process, if mediation is initiated at a later stage of conflict where one or both parties are aggressive or the conflict is in a destructive phase whereby one party's intention is to harm the other party in the conflict emotionally or physically then mediation is not a suitable intervention, if there is violence involved the mediator should recognise the potential health and safety risks and cease mediation and initiate arbitration and any other specific strategies aimed at enforcing an organisation's policy towards a zero tolerance of bullying (Keashley & Nowell, 2011) (Jenkins, 2011).

Also a key point to note is that mediation is concerned with finding a resolution for a specific conflict between two parties and the priority for the resolution is the interpersonal



relationship between the complainant and respondent, however while this approach completely addresses the characteristics of the target and the perpetrator and the relationship between them, it does not take into account and address the organisational or environmental factors that may have caused the conflict and therefore does not prevent bullying in an organisation and furthermore is then a futile exercise in the prevention of bullying in the workplace (Jenkins, 2011).

In addition, an area for further review in any organisation with the goal of the prevention of bullying in the workplace is managing levels of stress among employees; according to (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007) the perpetrators of bullying reported elevated levels of stress and competing demands and expectations in their roles. Bullying as a phenomenon is an escalation of conflict and an organisation with role conflict, role ambiguity, perceptions of contradictory expectations, demands, goals and ambiguous command structures have higher levels of stress among employees; studies show that high levels of stress causes conflict in organisations and therefore can lead to higher incidences of bullying in the workplace (Jenkins, 2011).

During the mediation process it may also be difficult to separate the perpetrator from the target or victim which is important for mediators to be aware of and take into account in any case; many victims blame themselves for being the target of bullying and discuss their poor performance, social skills, complaining or 'being difficult' as a factor in the inappropriate or aggressive behaviour directed towards them (Zapf, 1999). During the escalation of conflict it is normal for the target to engage in inappropriate or negative behaviour as a response to the inappropriate behaviour that they are on the receiving end of, in addition to the target having also been the perpetrator of negative behaviour, the target is also initially identified as being the first party to make a formal complaint, which is an assumption which could negatively impact the impartial mediation process (Jenkins, 2011). According to (Tehrani, 2003) both complainants and respondents, or targets and perpetrators, report feeling like victims of bullying making the task of ascertaining who is the target and who is the bully more difficult for mediators.

Another support or intervention that is offered to employees who are victim to bullying harassment or sexual harassment as set out in the relevant dignity at work policy is access to a contact support person. This contact support person is a designated employee given the authority by the organisation to act as an initial facilitator in a complaint of bullying harassment or sexual harassment, the aim of the contact support person is to act as a support for the employee, address the matter with the alleged perpetrator to ascertain if the matter can

be deescalated or how a formal complaint can be made (HSE, 2009). However, (Hodgins, et al., 2020) Argues that it is naive to assume that any member of staff can realistically be independent and unbiased; studies have shown that sometimes these designated contact persons are friends of the alleged perpetrator, the alleged perpetrator themselves, or someone whom upon disclosure would increase vulnerability for the victim.

## ***2.6 Roles, Accountability and Fairness***

“Bullying is everyone’s problem”, a recent qualitative study that took place in Ireland found that the ownership of responsibility for the resolution of a complaint can be seen as a ‘hot potato’ and tension between the complainant, respondent, the line manager and HR as to who has ownership of the problem (Hodgins, et al., 2020). Firstly, line managers are identified in the dignity at work policy as the first line of defence for employees experiencing inappropriate or negative behaviour, however many managers are not adequately trained to deal with such complex issues and micropolitics can present another element to the ownership and tension (Hodgins, et al., 2020). Culture in an organisation influences who makes decisions in an organisation and how they make them, what behaviours are rewarded and who is promoted therefore influencing all aspects of behaviour and how people are treated (Janicijevic, 2011). In addition to cultural complexities and lack of adequate training, management themselves have been found to be common perpetrators of bullying or facilitate in the normalisation of bullying, through toleration or reward in some cases, or lack of meaningful action (Daherndorf, 1959) (Aasland, et al., 2010). In some instances, when the formal route was taken with a complaint, employees were faced with significant difficulties which they identified as a misuse of power (Hutchinson, et al., 2010). ‘Power favours power’, studies have also found that during the formal resolution of a complaint HR personnel have been sceptical of employee’s accounts and aligned themselves with the position taken by the manager, which is in stark contrast to the impartial and unbiased approach that is recommended (Catley, et al., 2016) (Harrington, et al., 2012).

However, prior to formal investigation or intervention studies have shown confusion between HR and line managers on who is responsible for the resolution, HR stating that the manager is responsible and the manager seeing it as a HR issue, furthermore, HR personnel have a role conflict between being employee champions and their function as a business partner (Catley, et al., 2016) (Bernie & Hunter, 2013). Again, according to (Harrington, et al., 2012) HR personnel have been found to align themselves with the views of managers, while employees expect HR to unequivocally defend and support them.

In addition, another element of responsibility that should be taken into account in the process of resolving a complaint is that many victims blame themselves for being the target of bullying and discuss their poor performance, social skills, complaining or 'being difficult' as a factor in the inappropriate or aggressive behaviour directed towards them (Zapf, 1999). This point of view could be further exasperated if the manager involved agrees in any way with that perspective as there is a significant risk they could be sanctioned, given the power of management, for being deviant, upsetting the status quo or 'being difficult' (Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

## ***2.7 Resolutions and outcomes***

Despite extensive literature on the prevalence of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in workplaces and clear evidence of its impact on employees health and in turn cost to the organisation there is evidence that organisations do not address the issue sufficiently (Namie & Namie, 2009) (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Mannix McNamara, et al., 2017). Employees who experience bullying, harassment or sexual harassment in the workplace are frustrated by the poor response on the part of the organisation and the inability or unwillingness of organisations to devise or implement appropriate practices to prevent it (Pearson & Porath, 2005) (Hodgins, et al., 2020). While there may be exceptions, it is apparent that organisations fail to either prevent or manage workplace bullying and minimize harm to workers, they fail to implement policy or facilitate target's attempts at redress which serves to add further to the distress of employees, the link between employees experience of bullying and turnover intention is well established and an overwhelming amount of studies document employees intention to resign, however, unfortunately there are less studies that document actual resignation rates (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Jenkins, 2011) (O'Connell, et al., 2007) (Silvia, et al., 2010).

In the event of an action being considered or taken this rarely leads to any vindication or satisfaction for the victims, in fact victims or targets of negative behavior often feel further victimized and intimidated by management responses and the use of anti-bullying policies can construct employee silence (Hodgins, et al., 2018) (Ferris, 2009) (Mannix McNamara, et al., 2017). Many victims report bullying being represented to them as a communication or interpersonal problem or as personal weakness, this view is similar to that set out in the dignity at work policy set out by the HSE and the popular notion that bullying and negative behavior are problems of interpersonal behavior (Thirlwall, 2015) (Jenkins, 2011) (Mannix McNamara, et al., 2017). Many of the interventions detailed in literature and anti-bullying

policies are aimed at addressing an individual's behavior and correcting this behavior through initially informal interventions, such as, recognition of negative behavior and making the alleged perpetrator aware of the consequences, training and education and increasing awareness (Hutchinson, et al., 2010) (Hodgins, et al., 2020). According to (Harrington, et al., 2012) HR personnel have been found to align themselves with the views of managers, who have been found statistically to be the largest cohort of perpetrators and in one of the few studies conducted on the views of alleged perpetrators, they did not see their behaviour as bullying, they saw their behaviour as managing and the alleged victim resisting this management (Jenkins, 2011). (Lewis , 2006) describes that the perpetrator can impose their view or definition of the situation onto the target and in some cases onto HR also, either directly or indirectly. This is in addition to the fact that research has found that HR personnel and managers both have a tendency to frame or reframe the situations or complaints presented to them by victims as 'just' interpersonal conflict, personality differences or as the victims own defensive reactions to a manager questioning or trying to 'manage' their performance (Hutchinson, et al., 2010) (Harrington, et al., 2012) (Crimp, 2017). This shows a complete failure on the part of organisation to consider employee's difficulties, it is well established the effect that bullying, harassment and sexual harassment has on victims and bystanders mental health in the workplace and it is also well documented that mental health difficulties can interfere with communication and perceptual processes which can affect someone's perception of their colleagues behaviors (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018) (Einarsen, et al., 2011).

In the event of a formal investigation of a complaint of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment where an external third party has been appointed to investigate the case, ultimately the organisation is the final adjudicator, the recommendations of the third party are not automatically enforceable and their use is at the discretion of the organisation therefore significant power still remains with the organisation not with any other party involved, especially the victim (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Sullivan, 2010).

## ***2.8 Research Questions***

1. RQ1: What are line manager's understandings of the definitions of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and their role in the management of these behaviours as set out in the dignity at work policy?
2. RQ2: Is bullying, harassment and sexual harassment common and are incidences reported?

3. RQ3: Line Manager intervention: role, past experiences and skills?
4. RQ4: Who is accountable for the resolution?
5. RQ5: Is the policy applied fairly and equally?
6. RQ6: The resolutions: what are the resolutions, and do/did they have a lasting effect?

## ***2.9 Conclusion***

This chapter discussed the recent literature with regards to the definitions of bullying harassment and sexual harassment, the dignity at work policy, management and HR interventions, roles, accountability and fairness and finally the resolutions and outcomes in the event of a complaint. The literature was reviewed and gave rise to the research questions outlined above, to investigate the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in SVUH as set out in the dignity at work policy.

# **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

## ***3.1 Introduction***

This chapter will present a detailed overview of the methodological approach undertaken for this research study, which is influenced by the nature of this study (Bell, et al., 2018). The chapter will begin with the key research objectives being presented and outlined, followed by, the philosophical basis of the research will be examined, and justifications will be provided in relation to the suitability of the research paradigm employed. The research strategy and data collection methods used will then be outlined and discussed, followed by the study sample. The chapter will then conclude with a discussion of the ethical issues which were considered during the course of the research.

## ***3.2 Research Objectives***

The principle aim of this research is to explore the role of line-managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, as set out in the dignity at work policy. The following research questions will be addressed in this research:

1. What are line manager's understandings of the purpose, definitions of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and their role in the management of these behaviours as set out in the dignity at work policy?
2. Is bullying, harassment and sexual harassment common and are incidences reported?
3. Line Manager intervention: role, past experiences and skills?

4. Who is accountable for the resolution?
5. Is the policy applied fairly and equally?
6. The resolutions: what are the resolutions, and do/did they have a lasting effect?

The objective of this research is to gain an insight into the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in St. Vincent's University Hospital to assess their understanding and knowledge, experiences, it is therefore important for respondents to give detailed and honest information, as it is a complex issue in a complex environment (Campbell, et al., 2000) and the literature reviewed suggest semi-structured interviews as most appropriate to allow flexibility and yield the most honest responses (Forester & Sullivan, 2018).

The proposed research will be collected by the data collection method of qualitative interviews to get an in-depth understanding of a complex topic, which in its own context is very open to interpretation, for example what one individual may perceive as bullying another may not, the topic of the research is open to interpretation so the research conducted will need to allow for a full range and depth of information, understanding of one's impressions and experiences (Saunders, et al., 2015).

### ***3.3 Research Theory and Perspective***

Research can be defined as a process undertaken in a systemic way, based on logical relationships and not beliefs, in order to find out something which increases knowledge (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). There are modes of research which are set out by (Gibbons, et al., 1994), which are categories of knowledge creation, the research proposed on the role of line managers in the management of workplace conflict, will fall between Mode two and Mode three as it will aim to produce practical and relevant knowledge with practical implications which may have a broader societal impact (Saunders, et al., 2015).

The research proposed will take an interpretivism approach and according to (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008) the principal focus with this approach will be to discover irrationalities within the organisation, the concern will be to become involved in organisation's everyday activities in order to understand and explain what is going on rather than change things. In an interpretivism approach the researcher's interpretation is key to the contribution of the research, interpretivist research theory is typically inductive in nature, using small samples and qualitative methods during in depth investigation but a range of data can be interpreted (Saunders, et al., 2015).

The research proposed will be inductive in nature, which means that the theoretical structure is postulated based on analysis taken, that is that the method is chosen to give rise to data, defined and discussed in findings, ultimately giving rise to a theory; the interpretivist and an inductive approach are being taken towards the proposed research for a number of reasons, firstly according to (Saunders, et al., 2015) “some would argue that the interpretivist perspective is very well suited to business and management research, as business situations are complex, unique and reflect a particular set of circumstances and interactions involving individuals” and as the research questions for this case study have been developed on the basis of the literature researched on the subject, it can be said that the theory development acquire and inductive approach rather than testing a deductive approach (Bell, et al., 2018) (Saunders, et al., 2016). Due to the nature of the proposed research, qualitative research methods traditionally are highly agreeable with an interpretive philosophy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

### ***3.4 Research Design***

Research design is the suggestion of a planning procedure to drive the research study, to allow for the result to be the most valid possible findings (Collins & Hussey, 2013), for the purpose of this research a qualitative approach to data was taken as the research being conducted is to ascertain a feeling, opinion and previous experience in the workplace and not to analyse numbers (Saunders, et al., 2015).

The nature of the research is to explore the role of line manager in managing conflict in the workplace within the context of the efficiency of the current dignity at work policy, the research will be an exploratory study asking open questions to gain insights about the topic of interest (Saunders, et al., 2015). The research will be collected by the data collection method of qualitative interviews to get an in-depth understanding of a complex topic, which in its own context is very open to interpretation, for example what one individual may perceive as bullying another may not, the topic of the research is open to interpretation so the research conducted will need to allow for a full range and depth of information, understanding of one's impressions and experiences (Saunders, et al., 2015).

The study will be based on a grounded theory and the study will follow the order of qualitative research steps beginning with a set of objective questions to guide the research, during the course of the data collection adjustments to the questions can be made based on self-interpretations of the data and the interpretations of the respondents (Ladge, et al., 2012).

The process of analysis will begin by identifying similar concepts or themes that emerge inductively from the interviews.

### ***3.5 Qualitative Data: Semi-structured Interviews***

Following the rationale set out in the beginning of this chapter the research conducted was collected through the means of semi-structured interviews with line managers in SVUH, to allow sufficient engagement with line managers feelings, opinions, past experience and knowledge on a complex subject (Patton, 2005) (Bodgan & Taylor, 1998). The interviews will be semi-structured to allow the interviewee to be probed on their individual answers to allow for more in-depth data (Quinlan, 2011).

The research participants were informed, following the selection stage, of the research objectives, made aware of the confidentiality of their results, the ethical approval that the research had received from SVUH management and the National College of Ireland and that the ethical standards and procedures set out by the National College of Ireland would be rigorously adhered to. All interviews were recorded and the information obtained transcribed, structured and coded in order to conduct a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### ***3.6 Research Sample***

The sampling technique used in this research was be non-probability sampling, as the sample will be selected to represent the employee population by convenience, the sample is not representative statistically of the oragnisation (Quinlan, 2011). The research participants are line managers and heads of department from within SVUH. To recruit volunteers the author sent an email with the research topic and explanation of the objectives of the study, along with the details of the confidentiality and ethical approval and asked for their participation, a significant proportion of the management population was asked to volunteer – approximately thirty-five line managers and initially twenty eight agreed to participate. However, the research study in this case, was scheduled with participants to begin interviews at the same time the HSE was the victim of a cyber-attack (The Irish Times, 2021), which coupled with the ongoing effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, the volunteers were not in a position to give enough time to participate in this research study.

The six participants that finally took part in the study were provided with a letter of consent and a number of sample questions prior to the interview, which were conducted face to face in the office of the participant, in line with social distancing guidelines.



### 3.6.1 Table of Participants

Participant	Role	Directorate
P1	Head of department	Support Services
P2	Head of department	Support Services
P3	Head of department	Diagnostics
P4	Head of department	Support Services
P5	Line Manger	Heath & Social Care
P6	Head of department	Diagnostics

### 3.7 Interview Process

Prior to the interview participants were provided with detail of the research topic, explanation of the objectives of the study, letter of consent and sample questions along with the details of the confidentiality and ethical approval by email in advance of the research interview.

The interviews were conducted face to face in the office of the participant, in line with social distancing guidelines, the face-to-face interview in the participants' environment allowed the author to gain a better understanding

### 3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are a crucial part of the research process from the initial inception if an idea, to data collection and analysis and publication of findings (Collins & Hussey, 2014). The main tenants of ethical research are to do no harm, integrity, not to partake in plagiarism, validity, consideration of power and transparency (Quinlan, 2011). Anonymity and confidentiality are two of the most important basic precepts of research ethics, this is a guarantee that the researcher gives the participants or an oragnisation that their data will be kept confidential and not be identified at any point during the research (Quinlan, 2011).

Further considerations was given at the planning stages with relation to access to information and bias in this research because the research was conducted by an internal researcher; the issues identified were that there may be continual issues with access to information, especially in the form of obtaining formal approval to conduct research within the organisation and publish the data (Saunders, et al., 2015). Thankfully, this issue did not

arise for the author, ethical approval to conduct the research within SVUH was given by the Director of Human Resources, however as this research was approved outside of the Ethics Committee, approval could not be granted to have any nursing or medical staff participate; approval had to be granted outside of the standard procedure due to the time-frame allowed for the research to be conducted as the Ethics Committee was not scheduled to sit until late 2021.

With the data collection method of semi-structured one-to-one interviews there is a potential for the interviewer to influence or lead responses from the interviewee, which is an issue that required further review and redress (Quinlan, 2011), especially because in this case the researcher was a member of the Human Resources function in SVUH. To address this, participants were aware of the researchers position in the organisation from the outset and ensured that their confidentiality extended to the internal publishing of data also.

Prior to collecting the research for this case study, an ethics form was submitted to the National College of Ireland for review, which stated the aim of the research, proposed methods, ethical implications of the research and the steps taken to protect the confidentiality of participants, in addition to this, two formal steps were taken in order to alleviate the impact of the research process on the participants of the study:

1. A letter of consent was provided to the participant when they were asked to volunteer participation, the letter contained information about the study and provided information and reassurance about anonymity and confidentiality and ensuring the participant was aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. This was to give the participants the chance to make an informed decision on whether they decided to be involved or not (Bell, et al., 2018).
2. Upon completion of the data collection and analysis, the data that had been collected was deleted and participants were offered an opportunity to review the findings.

### ***3.9 Methodological Limitations***

The subjective nature of qualitative research gives rise to the potential issue of researcher bias, it is possible that the researcher could lead the respondent during the semi-structures interview by the use of probing questions and the data could be presented surrounding the views of what the researcher believes to be significant, as the aim of the research is to understand the perspective of the participants and present what they highlight to be important (Bell, et al., 2018) (Banister, et al., 2011). In order to avoid this limitation, the

data collected during the interviews was coded, evaluated and substituted into themes coherent with the literature (Bluhm, et al., 2011).

### ***3.10 Conclusion***

This chapter outlined the research process that this study adopted, the process was informed by the research approach and conducted alongside the research objectives. This planning informed the method of data collection that was outlined. Finally, the methodological and ethical limitations and considerations were outlined and justified.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis of Data and Findings**

### ***4.1 Introduction***

This chapter will outline the findings from seven semi-structured interviews, the aim of which was to explore the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment under the dignity at work policy in SVUH. The findings gathered will be presented by aligning the research objectives and literature review, as follows:

1. What are line manager's understandings of the purpose, definitions of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and their role in the management of these behaviours as set out in the dignity at work policy?
2. Is bullying, harassment and sexual harassment common and are incidences reported?
3. Line Manager intervention: role, past experiences and skills?
4. Who is accountable for the resolution?
5. Is the policy applied fairly and equally?
6. The resolutions: what are the resolutions, and do/did they have a lasting effect?

### ***4.2 Presentation of Findings***

It was anticipated that the research would investigate the role of line managers in SVUH in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, identify gaps in current practise and areas to recommend for improvement. The chapter will commence by discussing the findings from semi-structured interviews with line managers, the data from the interviews is used where appropriate to provide additional insights into the knowledge, perceptions and experiences of line managers in SVUH. The findings of the research are then

presented as outlined by the research objectives of this study and compared against existing literature.

**4.3 RQ1: What are line manager's understandings of the definitions of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and their role in the management of these behaviours as set out in the dignity at work policy?**

*4.3.1 Line Manager's understanding of the behaviour that constitutes bullying, harassment and sexual harassment*

Overall, all respondents had a clear understanding of the behaviours that constituted sexual harassment; however, respondents were not as clear on the behaviours or definitions of harassment and bullying. In relation to harassment four out of six respondents did not have an accurate understanding of harassment and of those four, two gave answers that harassment was linked to job performance.

*"I do find it hard to differentiate at times between bullying and harassment.*

*Harassment can be someone constantly harassing, not particularly bullying" (P1)*

*"if someone's being harassed in their job, they may not have the skill set for their job and someone might be harassing them to do their job" (P2)*

*"harassment can be very underhand, so you have to be aware that people can perceive harassment if they're getting phone calls every day or tracked but ... you have to give them structure to their day. So, for example you might say to staff member that wasn't performing very well...every time you bring a negative to them you have to balance it with positivity and have it structured because you know it's not harassment but it can be like a hidden harassment ... where the person could be feeling harassed" (P6)*

In relation to bullying, only two of the respondents relayed their understanding that for behavior to constitute bullying it must be repeated over a period of time. Five of the six respondents mentioned 'slagging' or making jokes as a behavior that constitutes bullying, but only if it 'crosses the line'.

*"there's a perception that what can be seen as bullying by one person is ... just harmless cracking and a bit of workplace fun (to another)" (P6)*

*"Could be remarks made or slagging but going overboard" (P2)*

Similarly, as found with harassment, two of the six respondents linked their opinion of what constitutes bullying to work related performance feedback.

*“very fine line I think between negative feedback or constructive feedback and it is getting a staff member to understand the difference between constructive feedback and negative feedback ...I think that's one of the hardest things to do as a manager ...ensuring that only feedback is done in a constructive but very positive way even though you're might be making corrections to their behavior” (P4)*

*“undermining or belittling or in some way making people feel less than or uncomfortable without it being in a constructive mechanism” (P5)*

One of the six respondents briefly mentioned, when questioned in relation to sexual harassment, that the perpetrators intentions did not impact the situation, no other respondent discussed the element of the policy that intentions are inconsequential, all respondents stated that in almost all cases of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, they had managed that when explained to the alleged perpetrator that their behavior was inappropriate, the behavior stopped.

*“sometimes it is unintended” (P3)*

*“99.9% of the time the person doesn't realise what they are doing is inappropriate or understand and they apologise” (P2)*

*“In our department, they don't realise they confuse it with banter but it's not, it is inappropriate behavior.” (P2)*

#### *4.3.2 Line Management's understanding of their role as set out in the dignity at work policy*

Overall, all respondents had a clear understanding of their role as a line manager in the management of these behaviours and the respondents answers clearly aligned with the language set out in the policy.

*“My responsibility is to ensure that all staff in the department have a safe working environment” (P1).*

*“you have to be vigilant and if you see anything inappropriate to act on it” (P2).*

*“to make sure that people are adhering to the policy that they understand it, that they know why it's there, what it's there for and to make sure that people are treating their colleagues, their superiors and their subordinates with that same level of respect and nondiscrimination”*

*(P6)*

## **4.4 RQ2: Is bullying, harassment and sexual harassment common and are incidences reported?**

### *4.4.1 Is bullying, harassment and sexual harassment common and are incidences reported?*

In response to the questions regarding prevalence and reporting of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment specifically in SVUH, all six respondents had similarities and also major differences in their answers. Two of the six respondents stated that they thought neither bullying, harassment or sexual harassment was common, but they were confident it is under-reported; two further respondents stated that they believed bullying, harassment and sexual harassment were common, however they stated that they still believed that these behaviours are under-reported or reported to line managers at a late stage of the conflict when interventions can be less meaningful. One respondent was of the opinion that while affronts to dignity at work, or isolated incidents were common, bullying was rare and similarly harassment and sexual harassment were also rare and that when they did occur that employees report all incidences.

*“if bullying takes a grip in an area, a lot of people won’t come forward. For example, once in the last 10 years someone came in themselves and reported bullying to me, a lot of the time its other employees or supervisors saying I am concerned” (P2)*

*“I think it’s a 50/50” (P4)*

*“I suspect it is, I suspect that by the time it gets to somebody like a line manager, probably loads of things have gone unchallenged, not discussed, not brought to attention” (P5)*

*“I cannot say a lot of it is coming to my attention, but I suspect a lot of these things are kind of under the radar” (P5)*

*“it’s the person who is the victim who tends to be the one who’s hesitant about bringing these issues, that would be my experience that there’s a reticence about actually reporting it” (P6)*

#### 4.4.2 Why incidences are not reported?

As detailed in the previous paragraph, five of the six respondents believed that bullying harassment and sexual harassment is under-reported in SVUH. Two respondents believed in some cases this is because the ‘victim’ or the person receiving the negative behavior does not realise they are being bullied, harassed or sexually harassed.

*“it’s common enough and I’d say there’s people that are the subject of it without realising that it’s happened.” (P2)*

*“I think unfortunately some staff don’t realise there being bullied” (P4)*

Two respondents believed that there was a stigma attached to reporting incidences of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and that this is why incidences are under-reported.

*“there's maybe a little bit of peer pressure about bringing it to management and that something will be done about it and I think it takes quite a lot of guts to actually say look this is happening I'm not comfortable with it and it's usually always followed with but ‘I don't want to make a fuss’” (P6)*

*“I think there is a stigma attached to it for people that are reporting it, it could be their manager, it could be anyone and they are dealing with these people every day of the week and they will say ‘I'll let it go’ or ‘I'll wait and see how it goes’ instead of reporting it” (P2)*

Another two reasons given by the respondents was a fear of the consequences of reporting bullying, harassment or sexual harassment and lack of confidentiality in the resolution process.

*“I think a lot of people put up with it for fear of the consequences” (P2)*

*“I would be concerned that students or junior staff are in a vulnerable position because they are depending on references going forward. People want to be given glowing references so despite unreasonable things being asked of them, they may say yes because they think ‘I have to get that reference for my next job’” (P5)*

*“there's sometimes a lack of confidentiality ... I think you know ... that this is not going to be self-contained and it's not a HR thing, I think it's managers, I think it's your colleagues you know I think it doesn't stay within the department ... I think that will be in the background to some people. Thinking well I hear about Joe blogs down in that Department so if I then feel I have it, someone else can find out that I'm going down that route” (P4)*

#### **4.5 RQ3: Line Manager intervention: role, past experiences and skills?**

*4.5.1 Line Manager's role and past experience of interventions, did it have a positive or negative impact on the situation?*

All six respondents stated their role and the steps they would follow in the event of a complaint being brought to their attention, in line with what is set out in the policy, making the alleged perpetrator aware of their actions and all parties discuss their conciliatory approach. However, each respondent had varying experiences from past interventions, which informs their current and future actions.

Each respondent discussed that in the past when they had made informal, local interventions that the intervention had a positive outcome in the majority of cases. However,

half of the respondents discussed that in some cases where their intervention was positive was where employees were transferred, to remove risk or limit interactions.

*“so what we do is very quickly we just intervene by actually moving the person to another area... adjust systems of work or whatever to make sure that we reduce the possibility of any further interaction” (P4)*

Two of the six respondents also discussed ‘listening to both sides of the story, suggesting everything is not black and white and not everything perceived as negative behavior really is inappropriate.

*“you need to listen to what the individual in front of you is telling you, not to be dismissive but also not to make too big of an issue out of it until you hear both sides of it because ...there are always two sides” (P6)*

*“felt that she was then victimized because she had made a complaint ... we had step in and give her confidence because she got a little bit like ‘oh I'm sorry I raised it now because they are being funny with me... we had to say well now your perceiving everything to be bullying or harassment, when it's not. So, we have to kind of teach the girl to perceive that just because people don't speak to you now doesn't mean they've heard that you complained about their colleagues. ... you have to try to find that balance saying well you know what, not everything is about harassment or your dignity it's just the way someone gets into the lift, there not having a go at you” (P4)*

This negative outcome was echoed by all six respondents, discussing other aspects of the process of managing complaints under the dignity at work policy.

*“people wouldn't be happy with the outcome necessarily especially when you go down mediation routes sometimes feel unfair” (P3)*

*“the policy is effective if you go through the stages, it is but its only when individuals are willing to take part. Over the years here, there has been situations of bullying which are hard to prove, you can't get someone to officially complain... majority of people that get bullied and it falls under the dignity at work policy don't come forward unfortunately.” (P2)*

*“The person accused...they were very negative very resistant to the fact that they're behavior had been perceived to be bullying” (P4)*

*“had a very negative effect and the line manager who was trying to help said that they would never do that again” (P1)*

*“With early intervention, it worked to a point as in, they kind of agreed to certain steps and to what we would do in the short term to try and bring about resolution to it, so that worked.*



*long term did it work? well going to paragraph one of the policy, one of them left and I suspect that was part of their motivation for leaving” (P5)*

While two respondents discussed previous experience of interventions, both occurred between a senior member of staff and a subordinate, similarly to previous themes presenting from the respondents answers constructive feedback and poor performance seems to be a cause for conflict and accusations of bullying and/or harassment.

*“I met with the individual and got her to document what she felt because there were a number of issues...she did not use the term bullying but there certainly were a lot of examples of areas where she was unhappy with how her colleague was treating her... I then sat down with the alleged perpetrator to talk it through, she was incensed... the alleged perpetrator then complained about me bullying her” (P5)*

*“I have seen it ...where it started off as somebody with a poor performance and there was legitimacy to that... but it was the person who was being accused of being a poor performer said that the other individual was actually bullying them so negative impact, very much so and that one went all the way” (P6)*

#### *4.5.2 Line Manager’s skills*

Finally, each respondent felt confident in their skills to manage behaviour and complaints that fall under the dignity at work policy.

#### **4.6 RQ4: Who is accountable for the resolution?**

All respondents stated wither that it was themselves as the line manager or head of department that was responsible or a partnership or shared responsibility between all parties involved.

#### **4.7 RQ5: Is the policy applied fairly and equally?**

Four of the six respondents believed that the policy was always fairly and equally applied, the remaining two were of differing opinions, firstly that the higher up the hierarchy you go the less people are held accountable for inappropriate behaviour and secondly that line management shouldn’t know if the policy is equally applied because every complaint should be dealt with in the strictest confidence; but that there is inequity in SVUH where some cohorts of staff do not have access to PCs as part of their daily tasks and therefore do not have access to policies.

*“no more than anything in bullying there is a hierarch, and it is power based and the higher up the chain of command you go, I suspect or believe that people are not held accountable to*

*the same level. I do think it's easier to deal with people further down the organisation, whereas if you are in quite senior position, there would need to be some determination that it will be applied equally...so I think it depends on who the alleged perpetrator is" (P5)*

#### **4.8 RQ6: The resolutions: what are the resolutions, and do/did they have a lasting effect?**

As discussed in earlier paragraphs, three of the six respondents discussed that a positive resolution they experienced in the event of a complaint was transferring of staff or in some cases resignation of employees, therefore removing the possibility of interaction and removing risk. Of course, in these cases, there was no further conflict, no need for further intervention, but is it a positive outcome?

*"resolve the situation by removing the risk but because we have removed the risk, I cannot say that that person fully learned their lesson" (P4)*

Other respondents identified a positive outcome by the indicator that they did not receive any further complaint. However, this response was given from the same respondents that also stated that they were of the impression that bullying, harassment and sexual harassment was under-reported in SVUH.

*"I haven't heard anything, so it was positive", "I felt it was positive and the reason it was positive because there was no more feedback, because I gave all the information ... I was able to prove that there were no other avenues to approach here unless it happened again, unless we could identify the culprit ... I felt the intervention was positive" (P1)*

*"always check in after and 100% it has never re-occurred" (P2)*

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

The above chapter has outlined the main findings of the research conducted investigating the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in SVUH. While all respondents had a clear understanding of their role, their responsibilities under the dignity at work policy as a line manager and a clear understanding of the behavior that constitutes sexual harassment; the majority of respondents had a colloquial understanding of harassment and also did not seem to understand the repetitive nature of bullying and similarly the singular nature of harassment; in addition respondents seemed to rely on their own judgement to largely inform part of the process, taking into account the intent of the alleged perpetrator and their own perception of what constitutes bullying and harassment. Every respondent was clear on the behavior that constitutes sexual harassment, and that intent or perception was irrelevant.

The majority of respondents stated that they did not believe bullying, harassment and sexual harassment were common in SVUH, however the majority of respondents also believed that incidences were under-reported, for reasons including lack of confidentiality, that making a complaint has a stigma attached to it or that some employees do not realise that they are being bullied. The interventions used by line managers in the event of a complaint were largely similar, however half of the respondents discussed this included where transferred, to remove risk or limit interactions or resigned or that the issue was not brought to their attention again. In response to equity one respondent identified inequity in application of interventions and the remainder believed that the policy was applied equitable. All of the issues identified in the findings chapter will be discussed and analysed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis and Discussion of Findings**

### ***5.1 Introduction***

In this chapter the findings will be identified, discussed and interpreted in contrast with existing literature.

### ***5.2 Line Manager's responsibility under the dignity at work policy***

The results collected show that the line managers that were respondents in this case have a clear understanding of their responsibility under the dignity at work policy to promote and maintain each employee's right to be treated with dignity and respect and to work in an environment that is safe and free from bullying, sexual harassment and harassment (Health Service Executive, 2009). This understanding of their role and responsibility and commitment to a safe working environment for all employees matches that set out by theories in best practise as set out by (Boyd & Carden, 2010) and (Salin, 2008). However, while the existence of an anti-bullying policy is a significant predictor of lower rates of workplace bullying and the most common organisational intervention (O'Connell, et al., 2007) (Hoel, 2013) (Salin, 2003), these policies are a complex intervention made in a complex environment (Campbell, et al., 2000) and this case study along with other qualitative research shows that bullying, harassment and sexual harassment is still prevalent in organisations.

This study demonstrates the knowledge and understanding of line managers, it is limited in the fact that it does not investigate or address the awareness or understanding of

employees and it can be argued that the policy is present to protect the organisation and those in power from redress or litigation (Hodgins, et al., 2020).

### ***5.3 Bullying, Harassment and Sexual Harassment***

This study found that there was an overall clear understanding of the behaviours that constituted sexual harassment; however, respondents were not as clear on the behaviours or definitions of harassment and bullying. Research shows that knowledge and awareness are a pre-requisite for policy use (Boyd & Carden, 2010) (Salin, 2008), however the findings here show a clear lack of knowledge, this will be further addressed in the recommendations.

### ***5.4 Prevalence, Under-reporting and employee silence***

During the course of this study, it was found that the majority of respondents thought that bullying, harassment and sexual harassment was not common or prevalent in SVUH, however this is contrary to recent reports in Ireland that state almost one in ten employees have recently experienced being bullied (Cullinan & Hodgins, 2021) with significantly higher rates recorded within the public sector and the health services (Hodgins, et al., 2018).

It was also found that the majority of respondents thought that bullying, harassment and sexual harassment are under-reported in SVUH, this view corresponds with that of the literature researched. According to the Irish Workplace Behaviour study, which categorizes ill-treatment under three main headings which are unreasonable management, secondly incivility or disrespect, and finally violence or injury, found that the prevalence rates across each of the three categories were 5% higher when people were asked if they had witnessed the behaviour as opposed to having been a victim of it (Hodgins, et al., 2018). A potential reason for this, that presented in the research conducted is that some employees do not realise that they are being bullied or the target of negative or inappropriate behaviour and research shows that employees that are targets of workplace bullying are often slow to identify or admit that they are a victim because they feel ashamed or embarrassed (Lewis, 2006) (Jenkins, 2011).

The respondents believed there are potentially a number of reasons for under-reporting such as stigma, fear of the consequences and potential lack of confidentiality, these reasons give rise to 'employee silence' and research has found that employees that are bullied and remain silent have suffered from exacerbated negative health outcomes (Cortina & Magey, 2003). Employees can experience two types of silence, that brought on by a sense of

futility, that if they speak up nothing will be done or a proactive silence brought on by fear of consequences if they make a complaint (Daherndorf, 1959) (MacMahon, et al., 2018). Employee silence in these situations gives rise to question the culture, micropolitics and power in an organisation, as culture influences and governs who makes decisions in an organisation and how they make them, what behaviours are rewarded and who is promoted therefore influencing all aspects of behaviour and how people are treated (Janicijevic, 2011) and in addition to cultural complexities managers can facilitate in the normalisation of bullying, through toleration or reward in some cases, or by lack of meaningful action (Daherndorf, 1959) (Aasland, et al., 2010). In this way management responses to the use of bullying procedures can construct employee silence (MacMahon, et al., 2018).

While under-reporting of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment is a significant issue, late reporting is also a significant issue as by the time an employee reports to their manager or HR that they are the victim of negative behaviour they more than likely will have been subjected to that behaviour for a significant period of time and already have feelings of injustice and have had these feelings become the dominant part of their work life and attempts to challenge, reframe or rebuff that narrative will only enhance that person's perception of injustice and wrong-doing (Harrington, et al., 2012) (Thirlwall, 2015) (Hodgins, et al., 2020), as the respondent also echoed during the course of this research.

### ***5.5 Line Manager's Interventions***

During the course of this study the majority of respondents stated the need to intervene in the situation at an early stage of the conflict as both parties tend to be more open to mediation tactics, this is supported by the literature and the early stages of conflict is seen as an optimal time for mediation to be an effect means of resolution, as both parties will engage and at this early stage there is thought to be no damage to the parties psychologically and other factors in the process such as fair management of the complaint can take quick affect (Jenkins, 2011) (Ferris, 2009).

All respondents stated that in almost all cases of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, they had managed that when explained to the alleged perpetrator that their behavior was inappropriate under the dignity at work policy, explained how it was causing upset to the complainant and the consequences if they continue the behavior and all respondents reported that in the majority of cases the behavior stopped. They identified the behavior had stopped, however because it had not been brought to their attention as an issue again, this could mean that the behavior genuinely ceased or it could be that the victim was

not satisfied with the previous intervention and is of the impression that it would be futile to complain to management again, or they could be further victimised and fear the consequences of repeating their complaint, as discussed above under the phenomenon of employee silence (MacMahon, et al., 2018).

In addition to the stage of the conflict at which steps are taken by management to mediate the complaint between both parties there are a number of other issues at play that should be taken into account that were not mentioned by respondents. Firstly the impartial party in an organisation not be trained or experienced in the techniques needed to engage in meaningful and efficient mediation, secondly within the process of mediation there is a power dynamic that may have been an antecedent to the situation that should be addressed for meaningful redress, thirdly this approach does not take into account the cultural factors that may have caused the conflict, which does not effectively prevent re-occurrence (Jenkins, 2011) (Ferris, 2009). The fourth issue is that it may be difficult to identify the perpetrator and the victim, research has found that many victims blame themselves for being a target of negative behaviour and many bullies can impart their view or perception of the situation, on the victim and directly or indirectly on HR, fifth issue with mediation as a form of intervention is that studies have shown that HR personnel can be sceptical of employee's accounts and often align themselves with the view of the manager (Catley, et al., 2016) (Harrington, et al., 2012). The fifth and final issue with mediation as an intervention is, if a complaint goes to formal investigation where a third party has been appointed to investigate the case, ultimately the organisation is the final adjudicator, the recommendations of the third party are not automatically enforceable and their use is at the discretion of the organisation therefore significant power still remains with the organisation not with any other party involved, especially the victim (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Sullivan, 2010) and as a result of these findings the target of bullying may be at an immediate disadvantage at the initiation of the mediation process (Ferris, 2009) and these issues should be taken into account by line manager's at the early stages of intervention.

### ***5.6 Accountability***

This research found that all of the respondents were of the opinion that the responsibility for a resolution of a complaint fell with the line manager in conjunction with the support and guidance of HR. This finding was in contrary to literature which discusses role ambiguity between line manager and HR as to who is responsible, with line manager frequently stating that complaints under the dignity at work policy are the responsibility of

HR and HR stating that it is clearly a line management issue to resolve (Hodgins, et al., 2020).

### ***5.7 Fairness and Equality***

In this study the majority of respondents were of the opinion that the policy was applied with equity to all individuals in the organisation, apart from one respondent who stated that the higher up the hierarchy you go the less people are held accountable for inappropriate behaviour and this is a view that is confirmed by literature. Management have been found to be the largest cohort of perpetrators of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and research has found that HR personnel and managers both have a tendency to frame or reframe the situations or complaints presented to them by victims as 'just' interpersonal conflict, personality differences or as the victims own defensive reactions to a manager questioning or trying to 'manage' their performance (Hutchinson, et al., 2010) (Harrington, et al., 2012) (Crimp, 2017). In addition to this in one of the few studies conducted on the views of alleged perpetrators, they did not see their behaviour as bullying, they saw their behaviour as managing and the alleged victim resisting this management (Jenkins, 2011). The re-framing of complaints of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment by management, is an area for further review.

### ***5.8 Resolutions of a complaint***

Further to the above analysis the six respondents stated that local informal interventions had a positive outcome in the majority of cases and there was no-reoccurrence, and this has been analysed in the above paragraphs.

In the event of an action being taken this rarely leads to any vindication or satisfaction for the victims, in fact victims or targets of negative behavior often feel further victimized and intimidated by management responses and the use of anti-bullying policies can construct employee silence (Hodgins, et al., 2018) (Ferris, 2009) (Mannix McNamara, et al., 2017). Many victims report bullying being represented to them as a communication or interpersonal problem or as personal weakness, this view is similar to that set out in the dignity at work policy set out by the HSE and the popular notion that bullying and negative behavior are problems of interpersonal behavior (Thirlwall, 2015) (Jenkins, 2011) (Mannix McNamara, et al., 2017) and this was a view echoed by respondents.

Two of the six respondents also discussed 'listening to both sides of the story, suggesting everything is not black and white and not everything perceived as negative behavior really is

inappropriate and two respondents also discussed previous experience of interventions, both occurred between a senior member of staff and a subordinate, similarly to previous themes presenting from the respondents answers constructive feedback and poor performance seems to be a cause for conflict and accusations of bullying and/or harassment. Research has shown that HR personnel and managers both have a tendency to frame or reframe the situations or complaints presented to them by victims as ‘just’ interpersonal conflict, personality differences or as the victims own defensive reactions to a manager questioning or trying to ‘manage’ their performance (Hutchinson, et al., 2010) (Harrington, et al., 2012) (Crimp, 2017). This shows a complete failure on the part of organisation to consider employee’s difficulties, it is well established the effect that bullying, harassment and sexual harassment has on victims and by-standers mental health in the workplace and it is also well documented that mental health difficulties can interfere with communication and perceptual processes which can affect someone’s perception of their colleagues behaviors (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018) (Einarsen, et al., 2011).

The link between employees experience of bullying and turnover intention is well established (Hodgins, et al., 2020) (Jenkins, 2011) (O’Connell, et al., 2007) (Silvia, et al., 2010) and one particular respondent attributed a number of resignations within their department due to the management of dignity-at-work related issues, this could also be an area for further review

## **Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusion**

### ***6.1 Introduction***

This final chapter will discuss a greater understanding and contribution that this piece of research has made to the topic of bullying harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace in particular the role of line managers in the management of these complaints. This chapter will outline the implications, the limitations of the research project and finally provide recommendations for the organisation and for future research.

### ***6.2 Implications of the study***

Bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace is an area of growing concern and it is beyond doubt that it is necessary to introduce changes to improve employee health and well-being. the main objective of this dissertation was to add to the body of literature by exploring the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment



and sexual harassment under the dignity at work policy specifically within St. Vincent's University Hospital, in order to assess current practices, any gaps in current practice and to identify areas for improvement. In order to fulfill the objectives of this project a qualitative research methods approach was taken by means of semi structured interviews with six line managers within SVUH.

The main findings of the research were that all respondents had a clear understanding of their role, their responsibilities under the dignity at work policy as a line manager and a clear understanding of the behavior that constitutes sexual harassment; the majority of respondents had a colloquial understanding of harassment and also did not seem to understand the repetitive nature of bullying and similarly the singular nature of harassment; in addition respondents seemed to rely on their own judgement to largely inform part of the process, taking into account the intent of the alleged perpetrator and their own perception of what constitutes bullying and harassment. Every respondent was clear on the behavior that constitutes sexual harassment, and that intent or perception was irrelevant.

The majority of respondents stated that they did not believe bullying, harassment and sexual harassment were common in SVUH, however the majority of respondents also believed that incidences were under-reported, for reasons including lack of confidentiality, that making a complaint has a stigma attached to it or that some employees do not realise that they are being bullied. The interventions used by line managers in the event of a complaint were largely similar, however half of the respondents discussed this included where transferred, to remove risk or limit interactions or resigned or that the issue was not brought to their attention again. In response to equity one respondent identified inequity in application of interventions and the remainder believed that the policy was applied equitable. These findings were discussed and critically analysed against current literature in the analysis chapter.

### ***6.3 Limitations***

The main limitation associated with this research project was the small sample size, as discussed during the methodological limitations this research project used convenience sampling. Initially, approximately thirty line managers showed interest in participating in the research however unfortunately the week that the researcher commenced the semi structured interviews was the same time that the HSE was victim to a cyber-attack this coupled with the demand on hospital services following the COVID-19 pandemic meant that only six line managers had sufficient time to partake in the study.

## ***6.4 Future Research***

Following the analysis of the data collected during this study and the literature reviewed during course of this research study, future research on the topic of the role of line management in the management of bullying harassment and sexual harassment would be beneficial in many ways. This research shed light on the lack of knowledge of the definitions of harassment and bullying, management interventions, under-reporting and employee silence, accountability, equality and the resolutions and opens many opportunities for future research. Future research into the role of line managers would be beneficial however, but a similar study conducted with employees as the participants could shed further light on gaps in practice and areas for improvement.

## ***6.5 Recommendations***

The following section presents three recommendations that SVUH could adopt, following further review, in order to address the issues identified in this study. As discussed throughout this study a dignity at work or anti bullying policy is not a sufficient preventive intervention and there is a gap in research discussing meaningful and effective interventions to prevent and manage bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace. One author went so far as to say “we are not aware of examples of organisations where bullying has been effectively managed and even prevented” (Hodgins, et al., 2020).

### *6.5.1 Training*

One issues that was identified during the course of this research study was a lack of knowledge on what behaviours constitute harassment and bullying, This is an issue that could be corrected by providing training and education to line managers, this could be provided by the organization's human resources department at minimal cost.

### *6.5.2 Move from individual to collective*

Many studies aimed at reducing bullying or incivility discussed “educational programs, increasing awareness and recognition of negative behaviors or coaching better responses to negative behaviors, these actions are underpinned by the assumption that workplace mistreatment will be lessened if people know more about it, know how to recognise it and be more assertive in their responses to it. This is a flawed assumption” (Hogins, et al., 2014).

The dignity at work policy places the onus on victims to report and complaints are individualized, these procedures have the effect of isolating victims and poor management

responses to complaints cause employee silence which further perpetuates the problem (MacMahon, et al., 2018) (Hutchinson, et al., 2010). While this study focused on the role of line managers, it is recommended based on the research conducted and discussed that the issues of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace are tackled as a collective cultural problem as opposed to being re-framed as an interpersonal issue to truly address the issues and ensure that all employees have dignity at work.

### *6.5.3 CREW intervention*

The CREW intervention has been shown to effectively reduce incivility and improve civility in organizations (Leiter, et al., 2011). CREW is civility, respect and engagement in the workplace, this intervention has not yet been widely researched but some authors believe it could be a successful health promotion initiative to address bullying in the workplace; the intervention focuses on behavior but it also includes preparatory work engaging the organization's leaders and management to build a learning community of leaders and facilitators, training facilitators and communicating management buy-in into employees (Hodgins, et al., 2020). CREW aims to create a social context dedicated to improving civility, the roots of the intervention are in organisational development and it aims to foster a change in attitudes values and beliefs and focuses on healthy relationships and processes between individuals and groups across the organisation and is strongly associated with facilitating a change in organizational culture (Hogins, et al., 2014). The CREW intervention has shown to be successful in the reduction of incivility and the promotion of civility in workplaces, incivility is seen to be at the lower end of the spectrum of abusive behavior in the workplace, however, it can be its precursor for more aggressive forms of workplace mistreatment and while it could be said that incivility is easier to address than bullying in the workplace, incivility affects more employees so it may be easier to engage workers to address incivility (Cortina & Magey, 2003) (Hogins, et al., 2014). This intervention is grounded in the principles of participation, responsiveness, contextual embeddedness and empowerment making it consistent with good practice in workplace health promotion and to promote mental health and employees actions that operate at different levels of the organisation (Hogins, et al., 2014) (Barry & Jenkins, 2007).

## **6.6 Conclusion**

This chapter provides the conclusion forward this research study by outlining the implications, limitations, suggested future research and recommendations.

## **Self-Reflection Analysis**

Upon embarking on my research journey, I felt excited and apprehensive as this is the largest project I have undertaken, but I was looking forward to gaining a deeper understanding of my chosen topic as it is an area that I'm interested in.

I have learned that the topic of bullying harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace is widely recognized as an issue in all workplaces but often ignored and this project was a valuable experience and it has helped me to realise why I am drawn to this particular field of work.

I found the research for my literature review enjoyable and relatively easy as it was something I enjoyed learning more about, although it can be difficult to stay focused and not stray from the topic. Given the sensitivity of the topic I thought I would struggle to find line managers that would be happy to discuss the issue in SVUH however, there was significant interest from the management population which is a strong indicator that further study should be undertaken as unfortunately due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent cyberattack on the HSE not as many line managers had the time to partake in the research.

Following the data collection, I struggled with the findings and discussion chapter because of the enormity and complexity of the data and literature, despite this I have learned many new skills from this research project I learned how to conduct primary research how to adjust my research focus and problems solve along the way.

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## Appendix 1: Letter of Consent

Dear Participant,

As part of the hospital's Dignity at Work initiative and as part of my personal studies in Human Resource Management at National College of Ireland, I am conducting research into the role of line managers in the management of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment and the impact of training in St. Vincent's University Hospital. I am inviting you to take part in this research project by participating in two semi-structured interviews before and after Dignity at Work training being provided to line managers.

Along with this letter of consent you will find a list of questions that will be asked in the interview. The purpose of the interviews is to gain an understanding of the following topics: the dignity at work policy and its application, behavior and antecedents of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment, prevalence and awareness, interventions by management, access to supports, engagement with HR and finally the resolution of complaints.

If you are happy to take part in the study, I anticipate the interviews will take 30 minutes each and I will endeavor to keep the interview as brief as possible.

Upon participation I wish to ensure you that:

- Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the research at any time
- Participants will be provided with a copy of the research findings
- All information compiled will be held confidentially and will be deleted upon completion of the findings
- Information obtained for the purposes of my research in partnership with National College of Ireland will be confidential, the information will not be disclosed to any third parties and the findings will not identify any participant personally
- Data and information obtained will also be confidentially reported within HR in St. Vincent's University Hospital to measure the effectiveness of the Dignity at Work Campaign, to allow for the development of further initiatives and supports for employees
- All information obtained will not be used for any purpose other than research

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this letter and look forward to interviewing you.

Yours sincerely,  
Fionnuala Dennehy