





ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Gender and Australian school leaders' experiences of workplace violence by students, parents, and colleagues

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## Abstract

While gender-based violence (GBV) is increasingly recognised as a significant social and political issue, its impact on women educators remains underexamined. In the context of growing concerns about violence against educators and the prevalence of GBV in educational institutions, this study investigates gendered patterns of violence against school leaders in Australian schools. Drawing on 18,172 observations from reports by principals and deputy principals, this analysis explores incidents of bullying, threats of violence, and physical violence to identify disparities in the experiences of men and women school leaders. The analysis determined that women school leaders were more likely to experience threats of violence and bullying at work than their male counterparts. Logistic regression analyses revealed that gender, school sector, and role significantly influence the likelihood of experiencing various forms of workplace violence, with women in secondary schools and those in government or Catholic sectors being particularly vulnerable.

**Keywords:** Gender-based violence; school leadership; violence in schools; workplace violence; COPSOQ

## Introduction

As a caring profession, women constitute over 72% of the teacher workforce but are under-represented in the principalship in Australia across public and non-government sectors and primary and secondary schooling (ACARA 2024). The context for the data reported in this article is a teacher workforce in crisis and a failure to attract and retain teachers (Rahimi and Arnold, 2025; AITSL 2024). Research identifies contributing factors to the crisis to be the low status of the profession, administrative overload, increased accountability, teaching out-of-field, reduced professional autonomy, and incidents of workplace violence (Gavin et al., 2021; Heffernan et al 2022; Arnold and Rahimi, 2024; Rahimi and Arnold, 2025). These challenges are compounded by the broader societal issue of gender-based violence (GBV), which impacts women teachers and leaders in particular, contributing to workplace stress and insecurity for these professionals. Political recognition of violence, including GBV in the home and workplaces, has been linked to international evidence of the harmful effects of misogynistic attitudes, which are perpetuated by various sources, including online influencers, and which contribute to a culture of violence against women (Megar et al 2024; Wescott et al 2024). This connection has led to federal legislation and policy initiatives aimed at addressing both GBV and the broader crisis in education (Megar et al

2024; Wescott *et al* 2024). However, less attention has been paid to the issue of violence against teachers and principals and how GBV specifically impacts on women in these roles.

This paper addresses an emerging issue of heightened GBV and its impact on the occupational health and safety of women in educational leadership roles. Longitudinal studies of principals indicate that violence against principals and teachers is a significant issue requiring concerted policy action (Riley *et al* 2021; Arnold *et al.*, 2024; Arnold *et al.*, 2023). This paper draws on data from a longitudinal survey sample of 18,172 Australian school leaders over 10 years to examine gendered patterns of workplace violence in the school leadership workforce.

### **What is the problem here?**

Patterns of GBV have been charted over decades globally. UNIFEM and the WHO report that one in three women globally experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, mostly by an intimate partner (UNIFEM 2024; WHO 2024). GBV refers to violence that disproportionately targets women and girls and is rooted in structural inequalities, most fundamentally related to unequal power relations and social norms that privilege certain genders over others (UN Women 2020). Raewyn Connell (2006) refers to these socio-economic and cultural factors as the gender order in which the everyday social relations of gender are normalised, shaping power dynamics in society and legitimising certain forms of violence against women and other gender minorities. Victims of this violence are primarily, although not exclusively, women. Structural factors, such as social class, ethnicity, geographic location, and economic status, intersect with gender, to make some women more vulnerable to such violence. Long-standing patriarchal relations linked to organisational power, gender divisions in organisations and labour markets, religious, cultural, and familial norms cause GBV to manifest differently across cultural contexts and settings – whether in the home, workplace, or wider community (Keddie *et al* 2024).

In Australia, public, media, and political concern about violence against women has intensified in recent years in response to high-profile incidents of physical and sexual violence, as well as persistently high national rates of abuse (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). Multiple campaigns and organisations such as OurWatch (2024) have called for systemic change to reduce violence against women through preventative measures (Powell 2024). Workplace safety has also come under scrutiny, particularly following allegations of rape in Parliament House (AHRC 2024), which have drawn national attention to the prevalence of GBV in professional settings. These developments have contributed to broader political recognition of GBV as a critical national issue, prompting government reforms that include education on respectful relationships and consent as a key strategy (Keddie & Ollis 2021; Parliament of Australia, 2022).

Workplaces are situated within a broader gender regime, where structures, discourse, and regulations often advantage men, although not all men equally (Connell 2006). Connell's (2000) work highlights how different masculinities and femininities are constituted in relation to each other, with implications for workplace interactions and power dynamics. Critical masculinity research builds on Connell's research and argues that changing men's behaviour is difficult because they are often informed by cultural, religious, or populist discourses – many of which are now reinforced and amplified through digital platforms (Pease 2020). Some populist men's movements argue feminism has gone too far and gender equality is a threat to male status. More extreme versions promote misogynist narratives that position men and boys as victims of social change (Wescott *et al* 2023). These narratives intersect with broader socio-economic changes, such as the decline of traditionally male-dominated industries and the expansion of feminised service sector roles which have disproportionality impact men with lower levels of education (Pease 2020). Understanding this socio-economic and cultural context is

important for examining the interaction between workforce dynamics and workplace violence, particularly in education, where women educators have been shown to be disproportionately affected by certain forms of workplace violence by certain perpetrators (Riley et al 2021; Rahimi and Arnold, 2025).

Schools are required to educate students and challenge harmful gender norms to promote gender equality from a young age. However, while schools are frequently positioned as critical spaces for reducing violence against women and girls by challenging harmful gender norms and promoting healthy relationships, they are also widely recognised as sites where violence against women and girls can be perpetuated. For example, there have been high-profile cases, especially in elite private schools including issues of sexual abuse of students by teachers (Crotty 2020). The Teach Us Consent campaign led by Chanel Contos collected thousands of testimonies of sexual assault by boys and men, many of which occurred during schooling (<https://www.teachusconsent.com/>).

In response, the government launched the Current and Proposed Sexual Consent Laws in Australia (2023), which ultimately determined that school-based incidents of sexual harassment and violence, particularly against girls, were far more prevalent than previously understood (Commonwealth of Australia 2023). More recently, concerns about GBV in schools have extended to the safety of female educators amid rising concerns about sexism and misogyny among male school students (Variyan & Wilkinson 2022; Wescott et al 2024).

Critical masculinity studies on boys and schooling have demonstrated the relationships between different masculine identities and school-based attitudes and behaviours (Keddie 2021; Keddie et al 2022), highlighting how gendered norms, assumptions, and pedagogies in schools (the gender regime of any specific school) encourage boys to adopt unhealthy forms of masculinity (Keddie 2020). Concerted efforts to address these issues within schools have been challenged by the rise of various men's movements within the online space known as the Manosphere (Sugiura 2021), promoted through influencers, blogs, forums, and websites, and have gained significant traction among young men and boys (eSafety Commissioner 2024; Wescott et al 2024; Pease 2020). The growing influence of these influencers who argue feminism has overreached, with extreme factions promoting openly misogynistic views, fostering hostility toward women and gender equality, complicate efforts to promote gender equality and challenge harmful masculinities in schools. This online environment encourages young men to resist changing their attitudes and behaviours towards women while perpetuating misogyny and hostility towards female students and teachers.

The following analysis focuses on exploring workplace gendered violence against school leadership professionals in their schools. Our definition of workplace violence is based on EU-OSHA (Milczarek 2010, p.9-10), which describes it as “incidents where a person is abused, threatened, or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being, or health.” In terms of GBV at work, we adopt the UN Women (2024) definition, which states that GBV is “violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty.” In this study, we draw on large-scale survey data to focus on violence that affects women disproportionality and examine disparities between men and women school leaders and differences in prevalence and impact across gender groups.

### **Gendered workplace violence in Australian Schools**

Australia is reported to have the worst disciplinary climate in schools of all OECD countries (OECD 2023). The effects of long COVID lockdowns are impacting now on student

engagement and behaviour (Fray *et al* 2023). Prior research has demonstrated that significant numbers of Australian school leaders have experienced workplace violence and that the situation has worsened. For example, the proportion of Australian school principals reporting at least one experience of physical violence in the previous 12 months of work increased from 27% in 2011 to 48% in 2023 (Dicke *et al* 2024). The same researchers report that over the same period, which includes COVID lockdowns, the proportion of principals reporting threats of violence increased from 38% to 54%. Moreover, the prominent forms of workplace violence, such as physical violence and bullying, are gendered, with female leaders in Australian government schools being more likely to experience them than their male counterparts (Arnold *et al.*, 2024).

Research on violence against educators in schools consistently shows that students are primarily responsible for acts of physical aggression against teachers, while parents and students are found to make threats of violence (Arnold *et al.*, 2024; Garne, 2014). Although a minority of students in schools are responsible for workplace violence against educators, boys are more likely to engage in physical aggression, including violence directed at teachers, while girls are less frequently involved in such behaviour (Billett *et al* 2019). Additionally, a larger proportion of Australian boys hold significantly higher pro-violence attitudes and lower gender equality attitudes compared to girls and gender-diverse students (Cahill *et al* 2023).

### **The Australian education system**

Incidents of violence, including workplace violence, in the Australian school system vary considerably by school sector. Australia has three sectors of schooling: Government (educating 64% of Australian children), Catholic (20%), and Independent (16%) (ACARA 2024). Government schools are legally obliged to enroll any student in their zone. They teach 85% of students experiencing disadvantage and those with additional needs (MacDonald *et al* 2023). Over decades, government schools have been chronically underfunded relative to non-government schools, yet must also compete for students with fee paying non-government schools which also receive significant government funding (AEU 2024). Market competition has also intensified within the public sector in devolved systems (e.g. Victoria, WA) in which schools are funded according to student numbers and student equity needs (MacDonald *et al* 2023). Many are unable to address their students' needs adequately, as many public schools are in communities experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage in terms of geographical isolation, high levels of unemployment or underemployment, lack of community infrastructure such as transport and sporting facilities, poor health facilities, and a parental incapacity to contribute either financially or as volunteers (Rowe and Parry 2020). Underfunded public schools therefore face significant resource constraints, struggle to attract and retain experienced teachers, and have restricted capacity to meet the additional needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds or to create enrichment opportunities. Because of the cultural and socio-economic diversity of students, they offer both academic and vocational programs and expend significant school funds on student welfare rather than enrichment programs in the arts and sports (MacDonald *et al.*, 2023).

Catholic and Independent schools are predominantly faith based. Unlike government schools, they can charge fees, but they also receive significant government funding, and many offer only an academic curriculum. Religious educational institutions can legally discriminate against staff based on their gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy, and marital status. Non-government schools also can exclude students who are misbehaving or underachieving, and therefore benefit from various mechanisms of selectivity-fees, academic curriculum, uniform, exclusion policies, and the like. Compared to independent schools, Catholic schools charge lower fees and play a greater role in supporting students

from diverse backgrounds, with one in five students having a disability, 40% located in regional areas, and 41.9% receiving equity funding for socio-economic disadvantage (Catholic Education Office 2024). Schools in the Independent sector vary from low fee small faith-based schools to elite private schools with exceptionally high fees and low numbers of students with disabilities (MacDonald et al 2023).

Since 2000, schooling policies have led to significant shifts of funding from public to non-government schools (MacDonald et al 2023). The discourse of parental choice together with parent anxiety about education providing social mobility for their children in more precarious employment contexts have led to greater assertion of a sense of parental rights and increased expectations of schooling and teachers to enhance their child's success (Blackmore 2009). This competitiveness between schools and sectors is intensified because parents can find comparable information about 'like' school performance on MySchool website. These pressures are greater on public schools because they experience more teachers teaching out-of-field (Hobbs & Porsch 2022), with many teachers exiting the profession (Heffernan et al 2022) and fewer teachers entering teacher education (AITSL 2024). The effect of within and between sector differences is evident in greater inequality between schools and sectors, creating a pattern of socio-geographical school segregation because chronic underfunding of government schools means more of those parents who can afford to choose private schools or choose to buy houses in high achieving public school zones (ACARA, 2024; Perry et al 2021). These are the conditions of the workplace for school leaders that vary across school sectors with unequal access to resourcing across these sectors. The conditions of leading and teaching are the conditions of student learning. Thus, these organisational factors can be expected to play a major role in workplace violence as multiple studies in health indicate, in particular insufficient staffing and resources to meet parent demands, lack of security, and poor staff support (Lim, et al 2022).

Finally, and pertinent to this discussion, in the last five years, elite private all-boys' schools have become a focus of media and researchers' attention after evidence of sexist behaviour, bullying, and homophobia displayed on public transport, in university colleges, including behaviour such as the ranking of fellow female students on their sexual desirability (Westcott et al 2023). This has raised questions of how the form of hypermasculinity that is encouraged in elite boys' schools and university colleges can also produce toxic masculinities in which male privilege is exercised against women (Crotty 2020; Charles et al 2024).

## Methodology

This study aimed to explore variation across school sectors of the impact of gender on experiencing three types of violence (threats of violence, violence, and bullying), the kinds of leaderships roles (principals and deputy, or acting principals), and school levels (primary, secondary).

## Participants

This study uses longitudinal data from the Australian Principal Health and Wellbeing survey, collecting annual information on the health and well-being of school leaders from 2011 to 2020. Over this period, data were gathered from more than 19,000 school leaders, with the analysis here focusing on the stacked data from 2011 to 2020 to ensure a sufficiently large sample for robust statistical analysis. After cleaning, the dataset comprised 18,172 observations with an age range of 25 to 76 years, with an average age of 53 years.

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic characteristics

		Frequency	%
Gender	Female	10,499	57.8%
	Male	7,673	42.2%
Role	Principal	13,587	74.8%
	Deputy/Assistant/Acting	4,585	25.2%
Level	Primary	12,907	71.0%
	Secondary	5,265	29.0%
School Sector	Government	13,982	76.9%
	Catholic	2,831	15.6%
	Independent	1,359	7.5%

The gender distribution within the sample was predominantly female, constituting 57.8% of the total, with males making up 42.2% which indicates this issue is of more significance to women. Males are over-represented in this sample in comparison to the overall gender breakdown of educators in Australia. The gender breakdown of school principals in Australia indicates that 63% are female and 37% are male (Australian Government 2024). In terms of role distribution, 74.8% were principals and 25.2% were Assistant/Deputy/Acting (ADA) principals. The majority of the school leaders, 76.9%, were employed in government schools, with 15.6% in Catholic and 7.5% in Independent systems which does not reflect overall provision as public schools educate 64% of students, Catholic schools 19.7% and Independent schools 16.3% (ACARA 2024). Most school leaders, 71%, were responsible for primary levels while 29% were responsible for secondary levels. See Table 1 for a detailed breakdown of these demographic characteristics. Consistent with the study's objectives and as detailed in the analysis section, the chosen method for data analysis is robust for identifying associations and risk factors, even when the sample is not perfectly representative of the population.

**Gender and workforce patterns**

The Australia wide figures on school leadership are not reported, but in Victoria, for example, while 76% of the Victorian government teaching workforce are women, 56% of principals and 62% of ADA principals are women (Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership 2023).

**Instrument**

The Australian Principal Health and Wellbeing Survey, a longitudinal tool, has been annually collecting data from school leaders across Australia for a decade. This survey gathers comprehensive demographic and background information, such as age, gender, school system, and role type. To measure workplace violence, the survey employs the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ-II) (Pejtersen et al 2010), which is renowned for its reliability across various professions and contexts, including school leadership (Dicke et al 2018; Rahimi et al 2025).



The Offensive Behaviours Scale within COPSOQ II captures several forms of workplace violence, including bullying, conflicts, gossip, physical violence, sexual harassment, threats of violence, and unpleasant teasing. School leaders reported their exposure to these behaviours over the preceding year with response options ranging from ‘daily’ to ‘never’ over the 12-month period. The survey questions explicitly asked whether they had experienced each specific type of workplace violence within the past 12 months. Those reporting any form of workplace violence within the past year were marked as ‘1’, others as ‘0’. This coding aided in rescaling COPSOQ domain scores from 0 to 100 for comparative purposes. Each survey cycle is considered a unique event, allowing for annual tracking of incidents without overlap, despite the same individuals participating across different years. Only participants who confirmed experiencing any workplace violence, within a 12-month period, identified the perpetrator from a set list, which included students, parents, colleagues, managers/superiors, and subordinates.

This article utilises a variety of terms to refer to aggressive, violent, and offensive actions directed at educational leaders. We specifically use the term ‘workplace violence’ to concentrate on three types: physical violence, threats of violence, and bullying.

## Analysis

The analysis in this study incorporated both explanatory and exploratory methods. We defined pooled prevalence as the proportion of school leaders who reported exposure to workplace violence within the last year. This metric was specifically calculated to gauge the extent of various forms of workplace violence among school leaders in schools, reflecting the proportion affected within the overall principal cohort. We calculated percentages to elucidate the proportion of school leaders subjected to workplace violence by different perpetrators. The focus was on overall prevalence rather than incidence rates, as our interest lay in the total occurrences of workplace violence within the studied population rather than newly reported cases alone.

Logistic regression analysis was used to examine the relationships between socio-demographic factors, perpetrators, and the occurrence of workplace violence. Logistic regressions were conducted in two tiers: first, across the entire dataset to explore general demographic influences on the frequency of workplace violence, and subsequently within specific data subsets focusing on differences within school leaders who had experienced bullying, threats of violence, or physical violence. According to Hosmer et al (2013) and Harrell (2015), logistic regression is robust for identifying associations and risk factors, even when the sample is not perfectly representative of the population.

To investigate the factors contributing to bullying, threats of violence, and physical violence against school leaders, logistic regression models were employed to assess the impact of various predictors, including gender, the level of education managed (Primary vs. Secondary), school sector, and the role of the school leader. Interactions between gender and the other predictors were also explored to determine if the effects of gender varied across different conditions. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how different factors might exacerbate or mitigate the risk of violence in educational settings in relation to gender.

## Results

### *Workplace violence against school leaders*

The data summarised in Table 2 illustrates the percentages of school leaders who reported experiencing various forms of workplace violence at least once over the last decade (2011–2020). The results are segmented by school level, role, and sector, with further distinctions

**Table 2.** Percentage of school leaders experiencing workplace violence at least once in the last 12 months (2011–2020)

			Bullying	Threats of Violence	Physical Violence
Level	Primary	Female	36.0	41.4	33.1
		Male	27.4	37.4	28.2
	Secondary	Female	41.4	42.4	33.0
		Male	35.8	45.1	31.8
Role	Principal	Female	37.6	43.5	33.0
		Male	30.1	40.6	29.3
	Deputy/Assistant/Acting	Female	36.4	37.2	33.3
		Male	30.8	37.5	29.7
Sector	Government	Female	38.4	46.4	37.7
		Male	31.5	46.5	35.2
	Catholic	Female	35.4	27.8	17.6
		Male	28.7	27.3	17.1
	Independent	Female	29.5	14.4	10.3
		Male	22.5	9.0	5.7

by gender. Female school leaders consistently report higher incidences across all categories of offensive behaviour- bullying, threats of violence, and physical violence – compared to their male counterparts. This trend holds across primary and secondary levels, different roles, and across school sectors. Notably, government sector leaders reported experiencing the highest rates of threats and physical violence, while those in Independent schools report the least.

***The influence of sector, role and level of education on workplace violence against school leaders***

Logistic regression analyses were carried out examining the factors influencing threats of violence, physical violence, and bullying against school leaders, highlighting the effects of gender, school system, role, and educational level responsibilities (Table 3).

***Bullying***

The logistic regression analysis indicated that gender is a significant predictor of experiencing bullying among school leaders, with women leaders being more likely than men to experience bullying. Additionally, school leaders in government and Catholic schools were more likely to experience bullying compared to those in Independent schools. Although no significant differences were found linking exposure to bullying with school level alone, a significant interaction was found between gender and school level, suggesting that the impact of gender on bullying experiences varies depending on whether the leader is in a primary or secondary school. There were no statistical significance indicating that interactions of gender and sector or role altered the effect of gender on bullying experiences among school leaders.



**Table 3.** Logistic regression analysis of bullying, threats of violence, and physical violence against school leaders by gender, sector, role, and school level (2011–20)

Bullying	Predictor	OR	95% CI
	Gender (Female vs. Male)	1.794***	[1.50, 2.15]
	School level (Primary vs. Secondary)	0.956	[0.78, 1.17]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	1.418*	[1.01, 1.99]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	1.32**	[1.07, 1.63]
	Leadership Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	1.108	[0.89, 1.38]
	Gender x Year levels responsible	1.178*	[1.02, 1.36]
	Gender x Sector	0.987	[0.88, 1.11]
	Gender x Role	1.045	[0.89, 1.23]
Threats of Violence	<b>Predictor</b>	<b>OR</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
	Gender (Female vs. Male)	1.376*	[1.05, 1.81]
	School level (Primary vs. Secondary)	1.258*	[1.01, 1.57]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	4.09***	[3.45, 4.84]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	2.223***	[1.88, 2.63]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	1.371**	[1.10, 1.71]
	Gender x Year levels responsible	1.262**	[1.10, 1.45]
	Gender x Sector	0.873*	[0.76, 1.00]
	Gender x Role	1.122	[0.96, 1.31]
Physical Violence	<b>Predictor</b>	<b>OR</b>	<b>95% CI</b>
	Gender (Female vs. Male)	1.235	[0.90, 1.69]
	School level (Primary vs. Secondary)	1.314*	[1.05, 1.65]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	5.032***	[3.75, 6.74]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	2.177***	[1.85, 2.57]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	0.931	[0.73, 1.18]
	Gender x Year levels responsible	1.161*	[1.00, 1.34]
	Gender x Sector	0.907	[0.78, 1.05]
	Gender x Role	1.02	[0.87, 1.19]

$p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Threats of violence

Women are also more likely than men to experience threats of violence, and more so if in government or Catholic schools. A significant interaction was found between gender and the school levels with gender a factor more so in secondary schools, although threats of violence did not differ for principals and ADA principals. Similarly, while the interaction between gender and school sector was significant, the negative coefficient suggests that gender and school level responsibility, such as ADA principal or principal, play a crucial role in the risk of experiencing threats of violence.

**Table 4.** Proportional distribution of workplace violence among school leaders by perpetrator type

Type of Violence	Colleagues (%)	Manager/Superior (%)	Subordinates (%)	Parents (%)	Students (%)
Bullying	8.5	5.9	13.3	22.6	4.8
Threats of Violence	0.6	0.2	1.2	32.3	30.5
Physical Violence	0.1	0	0.2	9	32.2

*N* = 18,171

### Physical Violence

While gender alone did not emerge as a statistically significant predictor of experiencing physical violence among school leaders, the interaction between gender and school level is significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that female leaders are more likely to experience increased physical violence at the secondary level (see also Billett *et al* 2022). School leaders in government and Catholic systemic schools also reported more experiences of physical violence than those in Independent schools. Role and sector categorisations did not exhibit significant impacts on the likelihood of experiencing physical violence with regard to gender.

### Perpetrators

As indicated by Table 4, there is a significant variation in the sources of bullying, threats of violence, and physical violence named by school principals and deputies. For bullying, colleagues (8.5%), subordinates (13.3%), and parents (22.6%) were more frequently identified as perpetrators compared to students (4.8%) and managers/superiors (5.9%). Threats of violence were predominantly reported from parents (32.3%) and students (30.5%) (see also Billett *et al* 2022). Physical violence shows a similar trend, with students (32.2%) and parents (9%) again being the most common sources, while colleagues, managers/superiors, and subordinates are far less frequently involved.

Colleagues, managers/superiors, and subordinates were not included in the detailed perpetrator analysis for threats of violence and physical violence due to their relatively low incidence rates in these categories, so we focus our analysis on the most impactful sources of these behaviours.

### Perpetrators for Bullying

This section explores the specific roles and demographics that significantly influence the likelihood of identifying various school community members as sources of bullying (see Table 5).

#### Students

Gender, school level, sector, and role significantly predicted the likelihood of students being reported as perpetrators. Men were more likely than women to experience bullying by students as perpetrators but primary school leaders less so than secondary school leaders. Leaders in government and Catholic sectors were more likely to experience bullying by students than those in the Independent sector, and principals less likely than ADA principals to report students as perpetrators.

**Table 5.** Predictors of bullying perpetrators among school leaders

	Predictor	RO	95% CI
Students	Gender (Female vs. Male)	0.750***	[0.640, 0.879]
	School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	0.592***	[0.503, 0.696]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	5.704***	[3.017, 10.785]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	3.148***	[1.591, 6.230]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	0.704***	[0.592, 0.837]
Parents	Gender (Female vs. Male)	0.986	[0.884, 1.099]
	School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	1.355***	[1.210, 1.518]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	0.979	[0.783, 1.224]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	1.246	[0.961, 1.616]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	2.063***	[1.827, 2.331]
Colleagues	Gender (Female vs. Male)	1.378***	[1.225, 1.551]
	School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	0.736***	[0.652, 0.831]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	1.478**	[1.167, 1.872]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	1.536**	[1.168, 2.020]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	0.639***	[0.564, 0.724]
Manager/ Supervisor	Gender (Female vs. Male)	0.787**	[0.679, 0.913]
	School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	1.232*	[1.051, 1.444]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	0.758*	[0.581, 0.989]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	0.628**	[0.450, 0.877]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	0.297***	[0.255, 0.346]
Subordinates	Gender (Female vs. Male)	1.079	[0.965, 1.207]
	School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	0.491***	[0.437, 0.552]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	1.019	[0.802, 1.296]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	0.708*	[0.536, 0.934]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	1.807***	[1.582, 2.063]

$p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Parents

Gender was less a factor of bullying by parents whereas school level and role significantly predicted reporting parents as perpetrators. Leaders in primary school leaders were more likely than those in secondary schools to experience bullying by parents, and principals were more likely than ADA principals to experience bullying by parents.

### Colleagues

Women were more likely than men to experience bullying by colleagues but less so in primary schools. Government and Catholic systemic school leaders were more likely to experience bullying by colleagues compared to Independent school leaders and principals less likely than ADA principals to experience bullying by colleagues across all sectors.

**Table 6.** Predictors of threats of violence perpetrators among school leaders

Students	Predictor	OR	95% CI
	Gender (Female vs. Male)	1.04	[0.939, 1.151]
	School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	1.097	[0.980, 1.228]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	2.468***	[1.794, 3.395]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	1.278	[0.904, 1.808]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	0.535***	[0.468, 0.610]
Parents	Gender (Female vs. Male)	0.640***	[0.574, 0.714]
	Year School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	0.979	[0.871, 1.101]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	1.178	[0.842, 1.650]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	1.237	[0.851, 1.799]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	2.072***	[1.837, 2.337]

*p* < .05.,   *p* < .01.,   *p* < .001.

**Subordinates**

School level and role were more significant predictors than gender for bullying by subordinates, with greater likelihood in secondary schools, and principals more so than deputies. Leaders in Catholic schools were less likely to experience bullying by subordinates than those in Independent schools.

**Managers/Superiors**

Gender, school level, sector, and role were significant factors in bullying by managers or superiors, with women less likely to report bullying from managers/superiors compared to men and primary leaders more likely to experience bullying by managers/superiors than secondary leaders. Government and Catholic school leaders were less likely to experience bullying by managers/superiors compared to those in Independent systems, and principals were less likely than ADA principals to experience bullying by managers/superiors.

**Main perpetrators for threats of violence**

**Students**

The analysis reveals significant effects for sector and role. The likelihood of reporting threats of violence by students does not vary substantially between men and women or between primary and secondary schools. However, leaders in government schools were more likely to report threats of violence by students compared to those in Independent schools, while principals were less likely to report threats of violence by students compared to ADA Principals. There were no significant differences between reporting of threats of violence by students. There were no significant differences for leaders in Catholic and Independent schools reporting of threats of violence by students (see Table 6).

**Table 7.** Predictors of physical violence perpetrators among school leaders

Students	Predictor	OR	95% CI
	Gender (Female vs. Male)	1.358**	[1.119, 1.648]
	School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	1.215	[0.979, 1.508]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	1.033	[0.498, 2.145]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	0.545	[0.253, 1.176]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	0.576***	[0.443, 0.747]
Parents	Gender (Female vs. Male)	0.720***	[0.637, 0.815]
	School Level (Primary vs. Secondary)	0.747***	[0.653, 0.855]
	Sector (Government vs. Independent)	1.526	[0.922, 2.524]
	Sector (Catholic vs. Independent)	1.487	[0.866, 2.553]
	Role (Principal vs. Deputy/Assistant)	1.677***	[1.439, 1.955]

$p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Parents

Women are less likely to report threats of violence by parents compared to men in leadership, with a significant predictor that principals are more likely to report threats of violence by parents compared to ADA principals with school sector having no significance.

## Main perpetrators for physical violence

### Students

Women leaders were more likely to report physical violence by students compared to men leaders, with ADA principals being more likely than principals likely to experience physical violence by students compared to ADA principals. Neither the school level nor the school sector significantly predicted the likelihood of experiencing physical violence by students (see Table 7).

### Parents

Women were less likely to report parents as perpetrators of physical violence compared to men and primary school leaders were less likely to report parents as perpetrators compared to secondary leaders. Principals were more likely than ADA principals to report parents as perpetrators. However, school sector differences do not play a substantial role in physical violence towards school leaders by parents (see Table 7).

## Discussion

The significance of this study is that it shows a pattern of workplace violence against leaders in the Australian school system that is gendered. Women in school leadership are more likely to experience threats of violence and bullying at work than their male counterparts and faced disproportionate risks of emotional and psychological harm. This supports research demonstrating that this pattern of gender based violence is apparent in other professions such as healthcare, service sectors, and frontline public service staff (Munns 2023; Sheppard et al 2022) As microcosms of society, schools are key sites where the norms, attitudes, and behaviours of the community are reflected and across Australian society. In Australia, women continue to be disproportionately impacted by family,

domestic, and sexual violence (Commonwealth of Australia 2022, p.14). The concern is that schools are also the focus of a range of interventions in addressing broader concerns about GBV in Australian society (Cahill *et al* 2023; Commonwealth of Australia 2022; Keddie and Ollis 2019). So change within schools cannot be achieved unless school programs and ongoing funding and support seeking to change attitudes and behaviours towards women in schools are coordinated with programs more generally in local communities and workplaces. This integrated approach is necessary to challenge the societal norms and power dynamics that perpetuate gender inequality.

Secondly, there were differing patterns of GBV based on the role of the leader (Principal or Assistant), the level of schooling (primary or secondary), and sector, as well as type of perpetrator. In secondary schools, Assistant Principals more than Principals are responsible for student behaviour and were more likely to experience threats from students. Principals with the authority to enact disciplinary measures for students were more likely to meet parents and experience threats of parental violence. In secondary schools, men still dominate the principal position and women the assistant principalship, but there were no differences evident in the data. Secondary schooling is also a period of heightened anxiety for both parents and students, as they navigate increased academic pressures, social and economic challenges. This anxiety is intensified due to the role high stakes exams play of the Australia school system in determining university admission and future career opportunities. Additionally, school choice policies have led to parents as consumers to view education as a service which teachers are expected to provide with little regard for their expertise and therefore it is a parental right to exercise demands on schools (Rowe 2017).

Thirdly, women leaders experienced all three forms of workplace violence – bullying, harassment, and physical threats – compared to men. Women in this study were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to experience physical violence from students but significantly less likely to experience violence from parents. Secondary school students are at a key developmental stage of adolescence, where they are more likely to be influenced by peers and have the increased likelihood of encountering and internalising gender norms or hostile attitudes against women during this time. Recent reports indicate that senior boys often practice intimidation of women teachers as well as verbal harassment (Australian Education Union 2019). Consequently, the Human Rights Commission has established online resources to assist schools.

Finally, in terms of perpetrators, gender, school level, and school sector are critical predictors of school leaders reporting bullying, threats, and physical violence. Women leaders were generally less likely to experience violence from subordinates and managers/superiors but significantly less likely than male leaders to experience bullying from students and more likely to experience bullying from colleagues. The latter is indicative of women unfriendly workplace cultures and an issue for school principals to address. That primary school leaders (men and women) were consistently less likely to experience any type of violence compared to those in secondary education is indicative of what is usually a feminised workplace with a closer relationship between parents (particularly of mothers) and school staff (Blackmore & Hutchison 2010). At secondary level where the competitive nature of schooling is heightened, the perpetrators are parents and students more than colleagues. Adolescents are informed by, and more likely to act out, learned parent and peer attitudes and behaviours and participate in everyday use of social media which also differs by gender.

While the data did not ask the gender of the perpetrator, research indicates that young women tend to bully each other, they are also more subject to body shaming, sexual harassment, sexting in school with significant health and well-being effects (eSafety Commissioner 2021). Many young men, as the primary perpetrators of (or threats of) violence, are more likely to access online populist toxic masculinity forums and



pornography (eSafety Commissioner 2024; Sugiura 2021). Jewkes et al (2015, 1580) found that 'men's use and experiences of violence are upheld by commonly held versions of manhood' where 'physical strength and toughness are very frequently associated manly attributes' and 'violence against women and girls is more common where men themselves encounter high levels of violence'.

In relation to school sector, leaders working in government and Catholic schools experienced all forms of workplace violence more than colleagues in the Independent sector. This is indicative of effects of a segregated system of education and school and school sector characteristics. Government schools educate over 85% of students with some form of disadvantage and Catholic schools provide in disadvantaged communities, and both sectors cater greater cultural and academic diversity of students. Chronic underfunding of government schools leads to lack of resources for both student and staff support. Both Catholic and Independent schools have greater freedom to exclude students such as young people based on disability, behaviour and GBV, as has occurred in recent cases, with public schools obligated to take in students in their zone (Edser 2024; Kelly 2024).

Significantly, women working in the Independent school sector were more likely than men to experience threats of violence, with the gap being greater than the gap between men and women in the other sectors. There is evidence that a sense of entitlement, associated with the masculinities that are cultivated in elite schools, may play a role in this disparity. The issue may also be compounded by the transactional nature of high-fee schools parents, where parents may feel entitled to put pressure on school leaders to enhance their child's opportunities (Charles et al 2024; Crotty et al 2022). Elite Independent schools are well resourced with high parent fees and significant public funding for facilities and student health and well-being support (MacDonald et al 2023). They are usually located in wealthy suburbs or regional towns with high concentration of community resources and receive significant professional parent contributions. At the same time, elite boy schools have alumni that can reinforce rather than challenge hypermasculinity (Charles et al 2024; Variyan 2021, Variyan and Wilkinson 2022). Only the pressure of parents on boards and market forces and school leadership prepared to adopt a gender inclusive program will produce significant change in both attitudes and behaviours. Within the Independent sector, small faith-based schools often view faith-based engagement as being a double-edged sword: on the one hand, faith communities have the potential for addressing GBV; and on the other hand, faith community influence may perpetuate and condone beliefs and practices (even if unwittingly) facilitating GBV. This is a tension that faith-based engagement with schools needs to address.

## Limitations

The strength of the study is notably the large sample size collected from multiple sectors and the longitudinal nature of the data. This enhances reliability of the analysis regarding school leaders' experiences with workplace violence and allows for valid inferences to be made about the dynamics between violent behaviours at work, perpetrators, and contextual factors.

However, limitations to be considered when interpreting the findings include the retrospective design that required participants to self-report their experiences of workplace violence over the past 12 months. This could introduce recall bias that occurs when participants inaccurately recall or omit some key experiences (e.g. Espelage et al 2013; McMahon et al 2014). Additionally, self-reporting may result in underreporting of workplace violence (Arnetz et al 2015). Despite binary regression models are typically employed to examine for identifying associations and risk factors, even when the sample is not perfectly representative of the population (Hosmer et al 2013), the results should be

interpreted with caution due to the sample not being perfectly representative of the population. While the study highlights associations between experiences of workplace violence, their perpetrators, and contextual characteristics, the analysis does not establish causality. Also, there is no data as to the gender of perpetrators of any form of GBV. Therefore, further research is necessary to explore causal links between victimisation from workplace violence, perpetrators, and contextual factors.

## Conclusion

While the data only drew on the experiences of principals and assistant/deputies/acting principals, it is indicative of a wider problem faced by teachers, and women teachers in particular (Variyan 2021; Wescott *et al* 2024). It indicates that government and Catholic systems need to provide additional resources to address GBV as well as support for principals and teachers and programs which intervene in the pathway of young men becoming perpetrators of GBV. There is recognition that programs such as Respectful Relations and Informed Consent are effective, but they are often ad hoc and short term (Keddie & Ollis 2021; Keddie *et al* 2022). They do not address issues such as balancing the power of school principals to exclude and rights of students or parent attitudes and behaviours. Critical masculinity researchers argue that there is a need to change the behaviour and attitudes of many young boys and men within society as schools cannot do it all. This requires parents as well as government and community organisations to be actively involved.

In 2025, the Australian Federal Government continues to pressure global ed-tech companies to take more responsibility for addressing GBV; is developing policies to protect under-age children, young people, and women online from bullying, harassment, and abuse; is promoting advertising about consent, explaining coercive control and encouraging men take more responsibility for changing their own and other men's behaviour; and has developed The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, with a \$3.9 billion investment on sexual, domestic, and family violence services in partnership with state governments. The SA government is considering banning the use of social media to all young people in early teens to protect them from bullying among other health and well-being factors, and the WA government is toughening laws against repeat offenders of domestic violence.

These actions signify a shift in policy aiming to change societal norms that shape the context of schooling and how young people learn attitudes and behaviours about gender from a wide array of influences – family, friends, social media, and communities. These attitudes and behaviours inform the culture of school workplaces and how women in schools experience GBV, threats of violence, and bullying. This has yet to be adequately addressed by relevant systems and employers and now required under WorkSafe legislation. The irony is that school principals are held responsible for the health and safety at work without systemic support even though the employer (government) is legally responsible. For women, there is need to strengthen gender equity policy and increase resources in all schools and sectors. All gender equity reform benefits boys and men as well as women and girls in terms of both their health and well-being but also society generally (McKenzie *et al* 2018).

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