

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Gender differences in the experience of work burnout among university staff

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This study examined gender differences as a factor in the experience of work-burnout among University Staff. It made use of 1040 respondents (549 male and 491 female). Maslach Burnout Inventory was used as an instrument to assess the level of differences in the emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment of staff of both sexes. Three hypotheses were posited and were tested using t-test statistics. Results indicated that there is no difference in the levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation of both male and female staff. However, the mean of the scores on the reduced personal accomplishment of both sexes shows a significant difference. It was confirmed also that female staff experienced higher level of reduced personal accomplishment than their male counterparts. Implications of these results were given while recommendations were made on how best to tackle the growing phenomenon of burnout among both sexes.

**Key words:** Work-burnout, de-personalisation, emotional exhaustion, reduced accomplishment and gender.

## INTRODUCTION

Work-burnout as a syndrome is characterised by emotional exhaustion likely to be experienced by individuals who work with people. Another property of burnout is the development of negative, cynical attitudes and feelings towards co-workers and other recipients of the worker's attention. Researches have indicated that the consequences of burnout are potentially serious for staff and students alike (Maslach and Jackson, 1986) Work-burnout is reported to be correlated with numerous self-reported measures of personal distress such as depression, apathy, tension, fatigue and anxiety (Burke and Greenglass, 2001). Maslach and Jackson (1986) identified three aspects of burnout as: 1). The development of increased feelings of emotional exhaustion and fatigue by workers. As emotional resources are depleted, workers feel they are no longer able to give of themselves as they were able to do earlier; 2) A tendency for workers to develop negative, cynical attitudes toward their clients. This feeling is described as depersonalisation; 3) The tendency to evaluate oneself negatively, particularly with regards to one's clients.

People experiencing this aspect of burnout are not happy with their jobs or themselves. This feeling has been described as lack of feeling or reduced personal accomplishment.

Although, Maslach and Jackson (1986) provide clear evidence for these three aspects of burnout for people in the helping professions, Schwab and Iwanicki (1982) have warned that it is crucial to note that one aspect is not an inevitable consequence of another. In another words, one does not necessarily progress from emotional exhaustion through depersonalization to a lack of feeling of personal accomplishment.

As much as Maslach posited that the three factors included in the burnout phenomenon (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and lack of personal accomplishment) are independent and cannot be summed to produce one central burnout score, Cherniss (1989) felt that the three patterns he has identified do not necessarily co-occur. They simply represent three separate responses to stressful, frustrating or monotonous work in a helping profession.

The first cases of burnout were diagnosed in the 1970s, in the Nursing profession where the womenfolk hold sway. Later studies had indicated that the condition leading to burnout as a consequence of stress arising from intensive emotional involvement at work poses a particular threat to those people working in Health care, Social services and education; all fields which predominantly employ women. Recent studies has nevertheless confirmed what has already been observed at numerous workplace that increasing pace of work and the growing lack of job security have made burnout a common risk to the health and well being of both men and women in all occupations (Hakanen, 1999).

In 1997, a survey was carried out by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health among working-age population on the incidence of and seriousness of burnout cases. 5000 Respondents aged between 24 and 65 and working in different jobs and industries were requested to fill questionnaires. Out of the 3300 people that replied, 53% of them were women; 2300 were working at the time. The survey discovered that the totals number of burnout cases among women was slightly higher than among men on the sum of the three symptoms of burnout with special emphasis on exhaustion. Both Groups however showed high incidence of serious burnout syndrome (7%) while milder symptoms had been suffered by slightly more than half of the male and female respondents. Any difference between men and women was connected with work-related exhaustion; 21% of the women and 17% of the men said they were suffering from it. No symptoms of exhaustion were reported by 44% of men, but only 34% of women. Increasing cynicism at work was slightly more common among men than among women; in statistical terms, however, the difference was insignificant.

The prevalence of burnout was also varied by sector of employment and occupation. According to the study, its prevalence among men and women in specific industries with highest incidence of burnout predominantly employed women (hotels and catering, banking and insurance, education and research), men (mechanical repairs) and both sexes equally (agriculture and forestry). On the other hand, the sectors showing lowest incidence of burnout predominantly employed either men or women, but also employing both sexes in equal numbers.

Cynicisms was most prevalent in male industries (machine repairs; transport and storage) and industries where both sexes were equally represented (agriculture and forestry); real estate maintenance. These findings are fairly consistent with those of earlier study of Schaufelli and Enzmann (1998). This difference of higher cynicisms for men and exhaustion for women had been interpreted to stereotypical gender roles or natural inclinations among both sexes.

According to such interpretations, women are better equipped for human relations and for sharing their negative emotions, while men tend to suppress their emotional impulses in order to live up to their roles, thereby

making them more inclined to adopt cynical attitudes as a means for coping with stress. It has also been explained that exhaustion does affect women than men because more often than not, women do carry double workload (job, housework, childcare). The inequality between the two sexes in the workplace has also been ascribed as another factor in explaining the differences (Kalimo and Hakanen, 1998).

Kalimo and Hakanen (1998) discovered that both sexes differ significantly in the ways they cope with stress. According to them, women do take sick leave more often than men and were clearly more active in seeking outside help for their problems, while men thought more and more of retiring as their burnout gets worse. All in all, women have a wider range of relationships than men and they also use these networks to build up their strength.

Research has also shown that family life with all its duties and responsibilities is not only a burden but a rewarding resource that strengthens one's emotional well-being, human contacts and interpersonal skills. Infact, the study carried out has shown that men who share housework and family responsibilities with their wives and support their career development are less prone to burnout than those who do not. This may therefore explain why women cope better with burnout than men in the long run.

### **Statement of problem**

The present study seeks to determine the level of differences experienced by staff of different gender in their level of work- burnout. This study aims at exploring their differences in the three subsets of Maslach Burnout inventory scales (emotional exhaustion, Depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment).

### **HYPOTHESES**

- 1) There will be no significant difference in the level of emotional exhaustion of University Staff of different gender.
- 2) There will be no significant difference in the level of Depersonalisation of University Staff of different gender.
- 3) There will be no significant difference in the level of reduced personal accomplishment of University Staff of different gender.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

#### **Design**

This study adopted the descriptive research approach of ex-post facto type. This was chosen simply because the researcher had no control and did not intend to control or manipulate any of the independent variables as they had occurred.

## Population

The target population for this study comprises members of staff of public Universities in the South Western part of Nigeria.

## Sample

The sample for this study consists of 10 Universities in six states with about 20,000 staff. However, because of the large size of the population, there was the need to select a representation of the population through sampling technique. A total of 1040 University staff participated in the study; they were made up of 541 male Staff and 499 female Staff. The staffs were randomly selected from the pool of over sixteen thousand staff of six Universities representing each of the six states of south western Nigeria.

## Sampling procedure

Multi-stage stratified sampling technique was used to select from the population. At the first stage, six Universities out of ten Public Universities in the geographical zone were selected through stratified sampling technique to represent each of the States, to participate in the study and to ensure even coverage. This makes up sixty percent of the study population. However, because Ekiti and Osun States has one University each (University of Ado Ekiti and Obafemi Awolowo University), the two made the list while the remaining four Universities were then selected through simple random sampling technique. At this stage, the names of the two Universities in each of the other States were written on the slips of papers, shuffled and one picked to represent the State in the study. This was done for each of the State to arrive at the list of the other Universities.

## Instrument

Work-burnout was measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (form ed.). This scale is also a self-report survey that uses a Likert scale. It has a 22 items (comprising of 8 items for emotional exhaustion, 9 items for depersonalisation and 5 items for reduced personal accomplishment) where respondents are asked to respond to each statement in terms of the following; never, a few times in a year or less, once a month or less, a few times a month, once a week, a few times in a week and everyday. Respondents are to indicate how frequently "they feel burned out from their work", "frustrated by their jobs," fatigued when they get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job" and "feeling like they are at the end of the rope". Many studies had substantiated the validity and reliability of the MBI Form Ed. (Leiter, 1993; Wolpin et al., 1994). The Alpha reliability co-efficient for this measure is estimated at 0.90 for emotional exhaustion, 0.76 for Depersonalisation and 0.76 for personal accomplishment in the Cronbach alpha scale. Ubangha (1997) validated this scale and successfully used it in a study among secondary school teachers in Cross River State of Nigeria.

## Data collection

The six universities were visited by the researcher to distribute questionnaires to respondents. This was done through the staff union congresses. Several visits were made to the institutions to retrieve the completed questionnaires. In all, a total of 1458 questionnaires were returned out of the 1600 distributed which represent 91%. However, 318 completed questionnaires were excluded, because the respondents did not respond to all items.

Analyses were then conducted on a total of 1040 complete questionnaire sets.

## Data analysis

The data collected from the administered questionnaires were subjected to t-test statistics for data analysis

## RESULT

The results of the data analysis for all three hypotheses are as shown in Table 1. From Table 1, it could be deduced that there are no significant difference in the level of emotional exhaustion of both male and female staff ( $t = 0.012$ ,  $df = 1038$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Hypothesis 1 is therefore accepted. From the same table, it is observable that there are no significant difference in the level of depersonalization of male and female staff ( $t = 1.267$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Thus, the second hypothesis was also accepted. However, the table shows a significant difference in the level of reduced personal accomplishment of male and female staff. ( $t = 2.431$ ,  $df = 1038$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). It was observed that the mean scores of female staff are higher than those of male staff. The third hypothesis was therefore rejected.

## DISCUSSION

Results of the data analyses presented in the table showed that both female and male staffs of Nigerian Universities are experiencing high level of burnout. However, it is confirmed that no significant difference in the level of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization of staff of both sexes exist. However, female staff experienced reduced personal accomplishment than their male counterparts. The first two hypotheses were rejected based on the result. The result is a confirmation of earlier studies (Hakanen, 1999; Adekola, 2006). However, the result which indicates that female staff experience higher level of reduced personal accomplishments than their male counterparts is a negation of the findings of many earlier studies (Schaufelli and Enzmann, 1988; Adekola, 2006). However, the result agrees with those of Kalimo et al., (1997) which discovered that both sexes differ significantly in the ways they cope with stress. However, their conclusion was that women have a wider range of relationship than men and that they use these networks to build up strength with which they cope with burnout. It is possible however to explain the present result with the economic situation in the country that have forced most women to work full time to the normal workload of housework and childcare. The inequality between the treatments of both sexes in the workplace could also be responsible for the feelings of the female staff in terms of reduced personal accomplishment.

**Table 1.** T-test showing the difference between the level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment of male and female staff of Nigerian Universities.

Group/Category	Sex	n	X	SD	Mean difference	Df	t. cal	t. crit.	p
Emoexhau	Male	541	18.8078	5.62501	0.0042	1038	0.012	1.960	<0.05
	Female	499	18.8036	5.25967					
Deperson	Male	541	11.1091	3.90455	0.3034	1038	1.267	1.960	<0.05
	Female	499	10.8056	3.81030					
Personal	Male	541	20.4492	6.84915	1.0198	1038	2.431	1.960	>0.05
	Female	499	21.4689	6.65927					

## IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The result of this study implies that both sexes do not differ significantly in the experience of burnout. The implication of this study is that biological factor of gender may not be a reasonable starting point for understanding and explaining burnout among staff of Nigerian Universities. It is however recommended that there is an urgent need for to tackle the issue of burnout among staff generally. This can be done by ensuring that staffs do have opportunities to have their annual leaves to rest and have a break from their workplace for a change. It is equally recommended that women should be assisted by their husbands to share housework and family responsibilities to support their career development. This will assist them to cope better with burnout in the long run.

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