

The Mediating Role of Work-Family Conflict in the Association between Burnout and Workplace Bullying among workers

Njoku Juliana Chinwendu¹, Udedibie Okechukwu Boniface I²., Uchendu Barth A³.

¹Ph.D Clinical Psychology Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri. Department: Social Sciences, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri.

²Ph.D Organizational/ Industrial Psychology Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri Social Sciences, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri.

³PhD Applied Statistics Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Owerri Department: Math/Statistics, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the mediating role of work-to-family conflict in the relationship between burnout and workplace bullying among 287 workers in tertiary institutions in the southeastern part of Nigeria. The participants completed the Work-Family Conflict Scale, the Negative Acts Questionnaire, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The study design was cross-sectional. Mediated analysis was used to analyse the data. The results revealed that burnout predicted workplace bullying ($\beta = .26, p < .001$). The relationship between work-to-family conflict and bullying was marginally significant ($\beta = .12, p < .09$), but there was no significant indirect relationship between burnout and workplace bullying. However, family-to-work conflict significantly predicted workplace bullying ($\beta = .25, p < .001$) and had a significant indirect effect on the relationship between burnout and workplace bullying ($\beta = .06, 95\% CI = (.02, .11)$). In other words, employees struggling with family demands may be more susceptible to workplace bullying. This will further exacerbate the reduced capacity for workplace social defense. The study recommends that burnout programs and family-friendly policies will reduce workplace bullying.

Keywords: Work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict, burnout, and workplace bullying.

INTRODUCTION

Job burnout in employees may not only lower their productivity and effectiveness but also eventually lead to turnover intentions and actual turnover (Lin *et al.*, 2013). Burnout results from prolonged exposure to stress, which is a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job, which is evident during employees' interaction or through the implementation of organizational policies; (Stinchcomb, 2004; Miller, 2005). Bakker *et al.* (2000) also describe burnout as a process, in which the imbalance between demands and rewards or resources reinforces itself into a negative spiral of exhaustion and cynicism. Burnout has three components, namely emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1993, 1998; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The emotional exhaustion dimension represents the essential individual stress experience that makes one physically and emotionally drained. The depersonalization dimension typifies the interpersonal perspective of burnout that alludes to uncaring and dispassionate responses to various demands of the job. It usually develops in response to extreme exhaustion and is self-protective. Maslach *et al.* (1996) stated that detachment could result in the loss of idealism and the dehumanization of others. The third dimension, lack of personal accomplishment, represents the self-evaluation dimension of burnout, which further refers to feelings of incompetence and a need for achievement and productivity in work (Maslach *et al.*, 2001). Byrne (1993) and Lee and Ashforth (1996) believed that a lack of personal accomplishment appears to be a function of either exhaustion or depersonalization or a combination of

the two. The significance of this three-dimensional model is that it places the individual stress experience within a social context and involves the person's conception of both self and others.

Furthermore, Leiter (1993) emphasized that a work situation with constant, overwhelming demands that contribute to exhaustion or depersonalization is likely to erode one's sense of effectiveness. Leiter also stated that in other job contexts, lack of personal accomplishment appears to develop in parallel with the other two burnout aspects, rather than sequentially. Lack of organizational resources in policing is connected with emotional exhaustion, a profound sense of meaningfulness of work, lack of esteem, limited autonomy, and, to a lesser extent, receiving little support from the supervisor enforces depersonalization (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Jourdain & Chernover, 2010). Bakker et al. (2003) and Demerouti et al. (2003) have shown that job rewards, such as supervisory coaching and performance feedback, play a significant role in buffering the correlation between job demands and burnout (mainly exhaustion and depersonalization). Job burnout may lead to conditions such as workplace bullying.

Workplace bullying is generally recognized as a universal issue, adversely affecting employees' mental and physical safety throughout the world. For instance, The Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (2015) reported that 62.3% of respondents who were employed in South Korea had experienced workplace bullying more than once in the previous 6 months (including 4.1% who were subject to ongoing bullying), and the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2017) reported that 66.9% of South Korean employees had considered changing their job due to workplace bullying. Yoo (2015) found that South Korean women and younger workers are especially vulnerable to workplace harassment. For example, a study found that 71.4% of South Korean female resident physicians and 39.5% of reproductive-age female nurses had felt pressured by their supervisors to avoid pregnancy to minimize the number of workers on maternity leave (Lim et al., 2015). Victims of bullying experience physical, psychological, and emotional costs, which threaten their well-being (Tehrani, 2012).

Workplace bullying has become an increasingly significant issue in Nigeria. Workplace bullying refers to repeated ill-treatment or inappropriate and aggressive behavior at work directed toward one or more individuals with intent to harm, degrade or humiliate the concerned people (Livne & Gossinsky, 2018; Ciby & Raya, 2015; Yahaya et al., 2012). Researchers report that a harmful and unhealthy work environment can lead to the poor mental health of employees (Edem et al., 2017). Podsiadly and Gamina-Wilk, (2017) asserts that workplace bullying refers to recurring and razzing, socially excluding, or negatively affecting" behaviors among coworkers that are enacted via power imbalances and are intended to harm defenseless individuals within work contexts (Howell, 2016; Salin, 2003). Workplace bullying includes all types of mistreatment, including intimidation, threats, and humiliation, that occur repeatedly in a work setting and results in physical, psychological, or emotional harm to victims (Einarsen&Raknes, 1997; Galanakis&Papalexandris, 2013; Ovayolu, Ovayolu, &Karadag, 2014). It may also appear in the form of exclusion, social isolation, or discrimination (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, &Cooper, 2003). Notably, it does not usually involve physical violence but manifests in subtle and devious ways that may be more difficult to detect. Definitions of workplace bullying can vary but usually centre on perspectives of the target and often include persistence, imbalance of power and negative behaviours. The definition of workplace bullying used in recruitment for the current study was "A person is bullied when they feel repeatedly subject to negative acts in the workplace, acts that the bullied person may find it difficult to defend themselves against", as used in previous research (Glambek et al., 2014). Bullied employees are especially at greater risk of reduced self-esteem, sleep disturbances, coronary heart disease, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Linton & Power, 2013).

Victims also experience reduced efficiency and productivity at work after being bullied (Escartin, Zapf, Arrieta, & Rodríguez-Carballeira, 2011; Hoel& Cooper, 2000). The negative effects of workplace bullying also have an impact on the well-being of victims' families (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, &Brinley, 2005; Linton & Power, 2015).

We argued that there could be a missing link in the relationship between burnout and workplace bullying. Although studies have shown that there are consequences of burnout on workplace bullying, there is pertinent need to study other variables that could trigger such associations. We argue that one of those triggers could be work-family conflict.

Work-family conflict embraces the extent to which work and family responsibilities interfere with each other. Work-family conflict has been defined in various ways. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) for instance, defined work-family conflict as "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from family and work domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. Work-family conflict is known to operate in two opposite directions, which implies that work could interfere with family (work-family conflict) and the family could interfere with work (family-work conflict) (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). The conflict between work and family responsibilities may cause conflict between work roles and family roles. Work and family conflict was traditionally viewed as a one-dimensional construct (e.g. Greenhaus, Bedian, & Mossholder, 1987). However, studies have pointed out that work-family conflict could be a two-dimensional construct (Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991). Gutek et al. (1991) recommended that two distinct types of conflict exist, work interfering with family (work-family conflict), which is defined as conflict occurring due to the work's activities and responsibilities interfering with the family's activities and responsibilities. The other perspective of the construct is family interfering with work (family-work conflict) as the reverse, the activities and responsibilities of work, concluding in a conflict type (Gutek et al., 1991). It has also been found that the two perspectives, work-family conflict and family-work conflict, are asymmetrically permeable. This suggests that the work and the family domains are flexible, which causes conflict (Frone, Rusell, & Cooper, 1992). Due to these different forms of conflict, Allen et al. (2000) assert that the combination of family and work demands increases parents' stress levels in daily life, resulting in lower well-being, health, and satisfaction in the work domain. Over the years, researchers have continuously tried find missing links to assess various antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict (Edward & Rothbard, 2000). It becomes important to address these issues as it affects working women in Nigeria.

Statement of Problem/Justification

On the review of literature on work-family conflict, and work stress relations among employees, researchers have taken to interest in the topic of work-family conflict and workplace bullying on employees; it has been documented that bullying often leads to issues such as health problems, stress, depression and decreased job satisfaction, and burnout in employees (Livne & Gossinsky, 2018). However, this research tends to contribute and strengthen the existing literature on the associations between work-family conflict, familywork conflict, and workplace bullying and burnout relations from the African perspective, especially in Nigeria. The extent in which working women in Nigeria experience workplace bullying in relation to burnout dimension is understudied.

While there are certain studies that have dealt with the phenomenon of workplace bullying and its relationship with job burnout in employees (Rossiter & Sochos, 2018; Najam *et al.*, 2018; Livne & Gossinsky, 2018). It appears that workers in Nigeria Tertiary institutions are at greater risk of experiencing burnout as a result of workplace bullying. This implies that there are factors that contribute to the associations between workplace bully and burnout. Previous researches did not consider the impact of bi directional nature of workfamily conflict, concerning employees in the African context, especially Nigeria. It is expected that workfamily conflict and family-work conflict would have a mediating role in burnout and the workplace bullying. There is need to further the research of such studies in the Nigerian context. Therefore, the study will provide;

1. Empirical evidence on the mediating role of the bi-directional nature of work-family conflict on the relationship between burnout and workplace bullying of employees.
2. Evidence of the nature of association between workplace burnout and workplace bullying among employees.

Data and information that will help stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of policies on strategies for reducing the issue of burnout, work to family conflict, family to work conflict, and workplace bullying relations in employees in the State and in the country at large.

Objective of the Study

We, therefore, tend to investigate;

1. whether there would be any significant association between burnout and workplace bullying,

2. whether the bi-directional nature of work-family conflict would mediate the association between burnout and workplace bullying.

Research Questions

Therefore the study seeks to answer the following questions.

1. Will burnout significantly predict workplace bullying?
2. Will the bi-directional nature of work-family conflict significantly mediate the associations between burnout and workplace bullying?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Conservation of Resources Model will be used as theoretical framework that addresses the issues related to work-family conflict, burnout and workplace bullying.

Conservation of Resources Model

A general stress model may offer an appropriate theoretical framework for future work-family studies. The conservation of resources (COR) model encompasses several stress theories (Hobfoll, 1989). The COR model proposed that the individuals seek to acquire and maintain resources. Stress is a reaction to an environment in which there is the threat of a loss of resources, an actual loss in resources, or lack of an expected gain in resources. Resources include objects, energies, personal characteristics and conditions. Especially relevant are the conditions of married status and tenure are examples of both family and work resources that are valued and sought. Personal characteristics are resources which buffer one against stress. Self-esteem is considered to be such a resource (Rosenberg, 1979). Energies include resources such as time, money, and knowledge – they allow one to acquire other resources. Loss of these resources, or the threat of such a loss, may cause the experience of stress. The COR model explains stress comes from both intra-and interrole stress. For example, employees experiencing work role conflict may come to believe that they cannot successfully perform the job. Consequently, they may be forced to invest more of their resources into the work role for fear of losing their job status. The COR model proposes that interrole conflict leads to stress because resources are lost in the process of juggling both work and family roles. These potential or actual losses of resources lead to negative “state of being”, which may include dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, or physiological tension. Some type of behaviour, such as planning to leave the work role, is needed to replace or protect the threatened resources. If this type of behaviour is not taken, the resources may be so depleted that burnout ensues (Hobfoll & Shirom 1993; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). The number of children living at home and marital status are expected to relate to family role stress and how family interferes with work. More children at home would mean less of the valued resources of time and energy. Eagle et al (1996), found that the number of children one had was significantly related to family-work conflicts stated in the COR model, married status can be considered a valued resource; those who are married and living together may have more resources to draw on (i.e., spouse, more finances), than those who are not living with someone in a committed relationship (Eagle, Miles, Icenogle; 1997). Research suggests that women are still primarily responsible for the household (Pleck, 1985). The expectations that women will take care of the family may cause family demand to interfere with work more for women than for men.

Empirical Review

Zahoor, Najma, and Atta (2019) in a study that examined the relationship of job insecurity, counterproductive work behaviors and workplace incivility and the role of work family conflict among purposefully selected 170 employees of private and public colleges from different cities of Pakistan reported zero order correlation, this revealed significant positive relationship between workplace incivility and counterproductive work behavior. Moreover, work family conflict was found to be the significant moderator in relationship of job insecurity and counterproductive work behaviors as well as in relationship of workplace incivility and counterproductive work behaviors. t-test analysis from the study also found that male workers scored significantly high on job insecurity and counterproductive work behaviors however with respect to work family conflict it was non-significant.

Shahid and Farooq (2020) in a paper examined a correlation study to assess the relationship among workplace harassment, work overload, and psychological distress in female police officers. Using a sample comprised of 100 female police officers with age range from 21- 40 years selected from different police stations and training centers of Lahore, the authors revealed that workplace harassment was positively correlated with work overload and psychological distress. Moreover, regression analysis revealed that workplace harassment was a positive predictor for psychological distress. The study has implications in police force to develop harassment control strategies and effective work hours to reduce psychological distress and promote healthy work environment for female employees.

Budin et al. (2013) examined the relationships between verbal abuse from nurse colleagues and demographic characteristics, work attributes, and work attitudes of early career registered nurses (RNs). Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample, analysis of variance to compare means, and chi square to compare categorical variables. RNs reported higher levels of verbal abuse from nurse colleagues were more likely to be unmarried, work in a hospital setting, or work in a non-magnet hospital. They also experienced lower job satisfaction, and less organizational commitment, autonomy, and intent to stay. Lastly, they perceived their work environments unfavorably. Data support the hypothesis that early career RNs are vulnerable to the effects of verbal abuse from nurse colleagues. Although more verbal abuse is seen in environments with unfavorable working conditions, and RNs working in such environments tend to have less favorable work attitudes, one cannot assume causality. It is unclear if poor working conditions create an environment where verbal abuse is tolerated or if verbal abuse creates an unfavorable work environment.

Shi, et al. (2018) in a study had three objectives: (1) to investigate the impact of workplace incivility on job burn-out of new nursing staff, (2) to verify the partial mediating role of anxiety in the relationship between workplace incivility and job burn-out, (3) to examine the resilience moderating the relations between workplace incivility and job burn-out. It was found that that workplace incivility was positively correlated with anxiety ($r=0.371$, $p<0.01$) and job burn-out ($r=0.238$, $p<0.01$) of new nurses. The positive relation between anxiety ($\beta=0.364$, $p<0.01$) and job burn-out ($\beta=0.240$, $p<0.01$) was also significant. Moreover, anxiety partially mediated ($z=7.807$, $p<0.01$) and resilience moderated ($\beta=-0.564$, $p<0.01$) the association between workplace incivility and job burn-out. The authors concluded that experience of workplace incivility by new nurses would likely generate anxiety in the victims. Further, the increased anxiety state could elevate their level of job burnout. New nurses with high levels of resilience could buffer the negative influence of workplace incivility by using a positive coping style.

Rhee, Hur, & Kim (2017) in a study examined the relationship between coworker incivility and job performance via emotional exhaustion, and the moderating effect of employee self-efficacy and compassion at work on the relationship. Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, they found that coworker incivility was negatively related to job performance and that the link was fully mediated by emotional exhaustion. Employees' self-efficacy buffered the negative outcomes of coworker incivility, whereas experienced compassion at work did not moderate the relationship between coworker incivility and emotional exhaustion. This study advances understanding of the negative consequences of coworker incivility and the ways to attenuate such negative effects. We suggested emotional exhaustion as a key psychological mechanism and revealed self-efficacy belief as a boundary condition related to coworker incivility. With a focus on emotional exhaustion, the study addresses the call for a better understanding of the psychological mechanism involved in workplace incivility. Also, we discovered the role that personal resources play in mitigating the negative effects of coworker incivility.

Enwereuzor, Nwoke, and Ekwe (2018) developed and tested a model in which perception of organisational support (POS) moderated the relationship between job demands and enactment of workplace aggression. They reported that job demands contributed to significant increase in the enactment of workplace aggression whereas POS accounted for significant decrease in the enactment of workplace aggression. Also, POS moderated the positive relationship between job demands and workplace aggression. Specifically, job demands exerted less influence on enactment of workplace aggression when POS was high rather than low. The authors suggested nurses should be trained to cope better with the demands of their jobs and be able to adequately utilise job resources such as those that can facilitate POS. In a study by Sarfraz, Wang, Sarwar, Muhammad, Muhammad, and Shafique (2019) aimed to consider the effect of workplace ostracism on the perceived stress of nurses while considering the moderating role of perceived organizational support. It was reported that workplace ostracism is positively associated with stress, while perceived organizational support has a moderating relationship.

Perceived organizational support mitigates the adverse effects of workplace ostracism on nurses. The study contributes significantly to literature by identifying workplace ostracism as one of the significant antecedents of stress for nurses. Secondly, perceived organizational support reveals that employees are cared for and appreciated by the organization, which lessens the strength of perceived stress due to workplace ostracism.

Her-Ting Huang, and Chieh-Peng (2019) using the social cognitive theory and social identity theory, hypothesizes that ethical efficacy and perceived workplace incivility affect turnover intention via the full mediation of emotional exhaustion. The results revealed that emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between workplace incivility and turnover intention, as well as between ethical efficacy and turnover intention. Furthermore, organizational identification positively moderates the effect of workplace incivility on emotional exhaustion.

Tariq and Ding (2018) tested several hypotheses associating abusive supervisory behavior with employees' work behaviors via intervening variables, i.e., intrinsic motivation and family motivation. A lagged survey study at a Fortune 500 company and an experience sampling study at multi-organizations located in Anhui province of People's Republic of China (PRC) support the moderated-mediation motivational model. The authors found that abusive supervision is negatively associated with employees' job performance and positively associated with employees' turnover intentions. As anticipated, the results also found that family motivation moderates the direct relationship between abusive supervision and employees' work behaviors. Furthermore, these results were then replicated and expanded in an experience sampling study. Consistent with the predictions, the authors found that intrinsic motivation acts as a mediator between abusive supervision and employees' work behaviors and family motivation has the capacity to compensate for the absence of intrinsic motivation.

Ghulam, Bukhari, Abdul, and Hameed (2020) assertion on the conservation of resource theory, investigated a moderated mediation model in which perceived co-worker support moderated the mediation of supervisory feedback avoidance between abusive supervision and help-seeking behaviour. The Results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses supported the hypothesized model that abusive supervision first positively led to supervisory feedback avoidance, which in turn positively led to help-seeking from coworkers. Moreover, the mediating effect of supervisory feedback avoidance was stronger at the high value of co-worker support than that at the low value of co-worker support. The study contributes to the recently emerged notion in abusive supervision research that supervisees' perception of abusive supervision may not always lead to abundantly reported negative work behaviours; instead, it may also lead to positive work behaviours, such as help-seeking behaviour that is highly beneficial for both supervisees and the organization. Laschinger and Fida (2014) in a study examined the relationship between authentic leadership and new graduate nurses experiences of workplace bullying to subsequent burnout dimensions and to job and career turnover intentions. Revealed the more leaders were perceived to be authentic the likely nurses were to experience subsequent work related bullying and burnout and to want to leave their job and profession.

Laschinger, Grau, Fingen, and Wik (2010) in a study conducted to test a model linking new graduate nurses perceptions of structural empowerment to their experiences of workplace bullying and burnout in Canadian hospital work settings using Kanter's work empowerment theory, revealed that new graduate nurses exposure to bullying maybe less when their work environments provide access to empowering work structures, and that these conditions enhances nurses health and wellbeing.

Yeun (2005) tried to identify the relation among workplace bullying burnout and turnover intention among nurses, reported that workplace bullying and burnout had positive correlation with turnover intention. The predictors of turnover intentions were person-related workplace bullying, work-related workplace bullying, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Kim, Lee and Lee (2020) In a study investigated the association of workplace bullying with burnout, professional quality of life, and among clinical nurses. A descriptive cross-sectional study using 324 nurses revealed that workplace bullying had a significant association with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scale of burnout, compassion fatigue among professional quality of life and turnover. The research indicate that role of nursing leadership is crucial to develop interventions that reduce workplace bullying and successfully create a professional nurturing work culture. Lee and Brotheridge (2006) revealed that verbal abuse and work being undermined were related to reciprocal forms of bullying. In addition; verbal abuse was related to problem solving as a way of coping with bullying, belittlement was related to self-

doubt, indirect/passive coping and ignoring the bullying. Self-doubt was, in turn, related to burnout and symptoms of ill-health.

Allen, Holland, and Reynolds (2014) in a study examined the relationship between bullying and burnout and the potential buffering effect of psychological detachment, revealed that bullying was positively related to burnout. Psychological detachment did not moderate the relationship between bullying and burnout. They concluded that workplace policies and practices should be put in place in order to reduce cases of bullying and proactively address it when it does occur. Individuals were advised to psychologically detach themselves from work to avoid the risk of being burned-out.

Livne and Goussinsky (2018) in a study, which relied on the job-demands model, examined the relationship between workplace bullying and burnout among healthcare employees, as well as the moderating role of job autonomy and occupational self-efficacy. The results revealed that workplace bullying was positively associated with burnout dimensions, and that relationship was moderated by job autonomy and occupational self-efficacy resources. Job autonomy interacted with workplace bullying in predicting emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This reflects the essence of control-related resources in mitigating the harmful effects of workplace bullying in employees.

Giorgi, Mancuso, and D'Antonio (2015) in a study aimed at investigating a bullying model focused on the intention between bullying and burnout in the setting of a climate-health relationship. The results revealed that workplace bullying partially mediates the relationship between organizational climate and burnout. Bullying did not affect health directly, but only indirectly through the mediation of burnout.

METHODOLOGY

Scope of study: The study encompassed a comprehensive examination of the following tertiary institutions: Imo Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Akwa, Alex Ekwueme University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State. It delved into details such as gender, marital status, age, and highest educational qualifications, which spanned from the first school leaving certificate to postgraduate study. It also included those who work in public firms, their ranks or positions, and the length of their service, ensuring a thorough and reliable dataset.

Area of study: The area of study will focus on the relationship between burnout and bullying among employees currently working at the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Akwa, Alex Ekwueme University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State. Furthermore, the study examined the indirect and direct mediating roles of work-family conflict in the association between burnout dimensions and workplace bullying among employees in all institutions under study.

Participants: Participants are employees within the age bracket of (18-60) of the ten (5) institutions Imo State Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Akwa, Alex Ekwueme University, Ndufu-Alike Ikwo, Ebonyi State.

Sampling technique: The samples would consist of workers from each institution, whose data would be available and accessible during the time of this research. The snowball sampling method would be used to gather data. However, individuals whose data were incomplete or distorted were excluded during the data collection process.

Instruments for data collection: Three instruments were used for the study; they include the following:

1. Work-family conflict scale
2. Negative Acts Questionnaire

3. Maslach Burnout Inventory

Procedure for Data Collection: The researchers obtained approval for the study from the Research and Development Unit of Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri. A letter of introduction and authorization from the Research and Development Unit was presented to selected institutions for this purpose study, seeking permission to conduct the research. Six research assistants were recruited and trained to assist in data collection and ensure its accuracy. Also, a computer assistant, a data analyst, and editors were employed for this study. All information collected was kept confidential. The researchers and research assistants proceeded to the respective schools, where data for the study periods were generated with the assistance of the school principal officers of the respective offices/units. Data collection for the institutions under study spanned a 30day period. The data assembled will be organized and presented for analysis. A total of four hundred questionnaires were distributed. However, only 287 were used for data analysis after removing incomplete or improperly filled ones, which represents a 74.3% utilization rate.

Design/Statistics: The design selected for the study was cross-sectional, and a Hierarchical Multiple Regression was employed to analyze the data (SPSS version 25). Finally, the process macro was used to test the mediating role (both indirect and direct effects) of the bi-directional nature of work-family conflict on the relationship between burnout and workplace bullying among workers.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses were employed to screen the data and describe the sample. After deletion of cases with missing values, the final sample consisted of 287 working women from tertiary institutions in Southeastern Nigeria. The descriptive statistics for the sample characteristics and study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Sample Characteristics and Key Study Variables (N = 287)

Variable	n	%	M	SD
Age (years)			38.5	8.7
Marital Status				
Single	89	31.0		
Married	176	61.3		
Divorced/Separated	22	7.7		
Bachelor's Degree	105			
Master's Degree	132	36.6		
Doctorate	50	46.0		
Tenure (years)			10.2	7.9
Workplace Bullying			2.45	0.89
Burnout			3.82	0.92
Work-Family Conflict (WFC)			3.65	1.02
Family-Work Conflict (FWC)			2.98	1.11

Note. n = sample size; % = percentage of total sample; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. All study variables were measured on Likert scales.

To test the study's hypotheses, a mediation analysis was employed using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The model examined the indirect effects of burnout on workplace bullying through work-family conflict (WFC) and family-work conflict (FWC). The results of the path analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Direct and Total Effects in the Mediation Model

path	β	p-value	CL 95%
Burnout → Work-Family Conflict (WFC)	.36	<.001	(.25, .47)
Burnout → Family-Work Conflict (FWC)	.25	<.001	(.14, .36)
WFC → Workplace Bullying	.17	.003	(.06, .28)
FWC → Workplace Bullying	.25	<.001	(.12, .36)
Total Effect (Burnout → Bullying)	.26	<.001	(.15, .37)
Direct Effect (Burnout → Bullying)	.17	.003	(.06, .28)

Note. CI = confidence interval. All coefficients are standardized.

The total effect of burnout on workplace bullying was not just significant ($\beta = .26, *p < .001$), but it was also a crucial finding that underscores the need of addressing burnout in the workplace. After introducing the mediators (WFC and FWC), the direct effect remained significant ($\beta = .17, p = .003$), indicating partial mediation and further highlighting the significance of our findings.

The indirect effects were tested employing bootstrapping, and the results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Indirect Effects of Burnout on Workplace Bullying Through Work-Family Conflict and Family-Work Conflict Mediator

Mediator	Point Estimate	CL 95% Bootstrapped	significance
WFC	.04	(-.00, .00)	No
FWC	.06	(.02, .11)	Yes
Total Indirect	.10	(.05, .17)	Yes

Note. CI = confidence interval. Significance is determined if the 95% CI does not include zero.

The indirect effect through Family-Work Conflict (FWC) was significant ($\beta = .06, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.02, 0.11]$), confirming its role as a partial mediator. In contrast, the indirect effect through Work-Family Conflict (WFC) was not statistically significant ($\beta = .04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.00, 0.09]$).

Effect decomposition revealed that the total effect of burnout on bullying ($\beta = .26$) was comprised of a direct effect (68.4%) and a total indirect effect through the mediators (31.6%). Specifically, FWC accounted for 25% of the total effect, while WFC accounted for 16.3%.

DISCUSSION

This study, conducted in Nigeria, specifically investigated the mediating roles of work-family conflict (WFC) and family-work conflict (FWC) in the relationship between burnout and workplace bullying among workers in our local context. The findings provide partial support for our hypotheses, making them particularly relevant to our audience.

As predicted, burnout was a significant positive predictor of workplace bullying. This is in line with a substantial body of empirical review, including recent studies by Kim et al. (2020) and Livne and Goussinsky (2018), which established that emotionally exhausted and depersonalized employees are more vulnerable to becoming targets of bullying, potentially due to lack of coping resources and social withdrawal.

The main finding of this study pertains to the differential mediating roles of WFC and FWC. The results indicate that FWC serves as a significant partial mediator, whereas WFC does not. This means that the mechanism associates burnout to bullying works primarily via the family domain, interfering with work, rather than work interfering with family. When employees experience burnout, it can exacerbate conflicts at family or home that is spilt over into the workplace, potentially leading to adverse reactions from colleagues and supervisors, which may manifest as bullying or other forms of harassment. This also suggests that for burnout to increase workplace bullying, the strain must predominantly flow from family to work. In other words, family-to-work and work-to-family conflict reveals the personal cost of high family demands and the depletion of resources from burnout, creating an avenue of victimization that manifests when employees return to their workspace. This finding is also consistent with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), as burnout depletes an individual's energy resources, making it difficult to manage family demands, which in turn further depletes resources available for work, thereby increasing vulnerability to negative social interactions, such as bullying.

The non-significant mediating role of WFC is interesting. This reveals that while burnout increases conflict from work to family, this specific type of conflict does not significantly transmit into an increased experience of bullying at work. This may be because WFC is a more internalized strain, affecting home life without directly altering workplace behaviors in a way that elicits workplace bullying. Sarfraz et al. (2019) assert that variables like perceived work support can buffer the adverse outcomes of workplace stressors; such buffers may mitigate the pathway from work to Family conflict to workplace bullying.

The significant direct effect of burnout on bullying, even after accounting for the mediators, underscores the potent and direct nature of this relationship. It confirms that other unmeasured factors not captured in our model also transmit the effect of burnout on bullying. Some research studies suggest potential mediators, including reduced psychological detachment (Allen et al., 2014), lower levels of self-efficacy (Rhee et al., 2017), and workplace ostracism (Sarfraz et al., 2019), as alternative pathways.

Implication

Theoretical Implication

Dual pathway mediation suggests that burnout associates with workplace bullying via two distinct pathways. Family-to-work conflict serves as a more pertinent pathway. Work-family conflict does not mediate the relationship between the two variables. Because two conflicts mediate 31.6% of burnout's effect on workplace bullying, 68.4% remains direct, which reveals that other variables are at play. Such variables may include reduced social skills, emotional dysfunction, and poor interpersonal boundaries. Family-to-work conflict has a more substantial direct effect on bullying. This implies that workers struggling with family demands may be more susceptible to workplace bullying. This indicates reduced capacity and exposure to workplace social defense.

Practical implication

For Individuals

There is a need to establish a balance in the health-work family relationship, particularly in relation to work and family conflict. Secondly, encourage workers who experience burnout to seek psychological and medical assistance. There is a need to develop coping strategies for families to manage work demands.

For Organisations

There is a need to implement family-friendly policies in tertiary institutions in the southeastern part of Nigeria. These policies will reduce family-to-work conflict, which in turn will reduce workplace bullying. Secondly, developing burnout prevention programs will help reduce the risk of direct bullying and conflict between family and work. There is a pressing need to develop work-life balance support systems in tertiary institutions.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study employed a cross-sectional design, which allows all variables to be measured at a single point in time. However, the results reveal a strong explanatory pathway that cannot establish a causal sequence. The results confirm a viable and significant pathway in which burnout leads to family-to-work conflict and work-to-family conflict, which in turn contributes to family-to-work conflict and ultimately impacts workplace bullying, affecting the workplace. However, they do not negate the strong possibility of the reverse cycle co-occurring. Future research should use longitudinal designs to test the associations between burnout and workplace bullying over time. This will reveal a causal direction – whether burnout causes workplace bullying or vice versa.

CONCLUSION

The research was conducted to investigate the mediating role of work-family conflict in the association between burnout and workplace bullying. Two hundred eighty-seven participants were surveyed and administered questionnaires that assessed work-to-family conflict, burnout, and workplace bullying. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. Descriptive regression analyses were used to analyze the data. The first hypothesis, which states that work-family-work-and work-family conflict would be a significant predictor of workplace bullying, was confirmed. The second hypothesis, which states that family to work conflict will mediate the relationship between burnout and the workplace, was partially confirmed. The results of the study suggest that future studies are needed to understand the variables that influence workers' experience of burnout, work-to-family conflict, and workplace bullying. However, workplace bullying can be mitigated by implementing work-life balance systems and effective coping strategies. With a thorough understanding of the variables that influence burnout and workplace bullying, it is possible to develop services that mitigate burnout and related issues of workplace bullying.

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