

Predicting Workplace Violence through Empathy and Self-Esteem in Working Women

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the relationship between empathy and self-esteem with workplace violence against female employees in language institutes in Mashhad. The present study was descriptive-correlational, and sampling was conducted using the convenience method. The final sample included 138 employees who completed online questionnaires, including the Jolliffe and Farrington Empathy Questionnaire (2006), the Eysenck Self-Esteem Questionnaire, and the Workplace Violence against Women Questionnaire (Salehipour, 2021). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation tests and multiple regression analysis. The results indicated that empathy ($\beta=.332$, $p<0.001$) and self-esteem ($\beta=.170$, $p=0.037$) are significant predictors of workplace violence against women. Empathy showed a stronger effect than self-esteem, highlighting the importance of developing emotional skills in the workplace. The findings of this study can contribute to the design of educational programs and organizational interventions to reduce workplace violence.

Introduction

Workplace violence is a prevalent and complex phenomenon that can have detrimental effects on the psychological, physical, and social well-being of employees. This phenomenon is defined as any behavior or action occurring in the workplace that aims to harm others, exert control over them, or create stress. The importance of examining this issue lies not only in its direct impacts on individuals but also in its broader implications for productivity, job satisfaction, and interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Lim et al., 2022). Workplace violence manifests in various forms, each presenting unique challenges and requiring effective management by organizations. Workplace violence can be classified into several main categories. Psychological violence, one of the most common types, includes behaviors such as humiliation, deliberate neglect, spreading rumors, or indirect threats aimed at undermining self-confidence and increasing individual stress (Pai et al., 2018). Verbal violence involves the use of abusive, aggressive, or derogatory language to harm an individual psychologically (Nurhasanah et al., 2024). Financial violence refers to actions that limit or deprive employees of their financial rights, such as pay discrimination or withholding benefits. Physical violence, directly referring to bodily harm, includes physical attacks or threats (Salehipour, 2021). Sexual violence encompasses inappropriate behaviors or



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sexual harassment that violate individual dignity and privacy. Each of these forms of violence has devastating impacts on employee well-being and organizational performance (Acquadro Maran et al., 2022).

The prevalence of workplace violence is a concerning issue, with significant statistics reported in Iran. A study by Sadeghzadeh et al. (2022) revealed that 61% of employees experienced some form of workplace violence in the past year. Among the reported types, verbal violence was the most prevalent at 54.3%, followed by physical violence (19.3%), ethnic violence (18%), and sexual violence (10%). Another study conducted in 2020 on emergency medical personnel in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province reported alarming findings: 88% of employees experienced workplace violence in the past year, including verbal violence (54.4%), physical violence (36%), and cultural violence (9.6%) (Dalahi et al., 2020). These statistics underscore the severity and breadth of this phenomenon in Iranian workplaces. The significance of this issue lies in the fact that violence acts as a barrier to professional development and employee well-being, necessitating serious attention from organizations and policymakers. Several factors contribute to the emergence and intensification of workplace violence. One of the most significant factors is job stress (Afshari Saleh et al., 2020). High workloads, long hours, and lack of social support are among the factors that can exacerbate violent behaviors in the workplace (Sheppard et al., 2022). Moreover, weak organizational culture and the absence of clear and fair policies for managing violence can increase the prevalence of this phenomenon (Rasool et al., 2021). Organizations lacking adequate support structures often create an environment where violence thrives. Poor communication among employees, including misunderstandings, lack of transparency, and insufficient training on conflict management, can escalate workplace violence. Additionally, deficiencies in human resource management and a lack of proper training on professional behavior and mutual respect may lay the groundwork for violent behaviors (Matsson & Jordan, 2022). One factor associated with workplace violence is empathy. Empathy refers to an individual's ability to understand and feel the emotions and experiences of others from their perspective. Widely studied in psychology and social sciences, empathy is considered a key tool for strengthening human relationships (Moudatsou et al., 2020). Empathy has two main dimensions: emotional empathy and cognitive empathy. Emotional empathy involves the ability to understand and share others' emotions through emotional connection. For instance, when someone is sad, another person can understand and empathize with their sadness. In contrast, cognitive empathy involves understanding the mental state and perspective of others without necessarily experiencing those emotions (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Thompson et al., 2022).

In the workplace, empathy is recognized as a critical soft skill that plays a pivotal role in effective communication and conflict resolution. Empathy can reduce misunderstandings, enhance teamwork, and increase job satisfaction (Jin & Ikeda, 2023). Different types of workplace empathy include interpersonal empathy and organizational empathy. Interpersonal empathy refers to direct relationships between individuals, while organizational empathy refers to the ability of organizations to understand the needs and emotions of employees as a whole (Burch et al., 2016). The relationship between basic empathy and workplace violence can be examined from multiple perspectives. Firstly, individuals with higher empathy levels typically use problem-solving and dialogue instead of aggressive or violent approaches to manage conflicts. In other words, empathy can reduce aggressive behaviors in the workplace. Additionally, empathetic individuals are more likely to identify early signs of workplace violence and intervene effectively to prevent escalation (Li et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022).

Another important variable associated with workplace violence is self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to an individual's evaluation of their worth and abilities, which shapes their identity and performance in social and professional environments. Self-esteem plays a fundamental role in human interactions and can influence behavior in the face of challenges and conflicts (Wang et al., 2022). Given the limited research on workplace violence among employees in Iran, as opposed to medical personnel, and the potential influence of empathy and self-esteem as variables affecting this type of violence, this study was designed to predict workplace violence against women based on empathy and self-esteem.

Research Hypotheses:

1. There is a significant relationship between empathy and workplace violence among teachers.
2. There is a significant relationship between self-esteem and workplace violence.

This study aims to analyze these relationships and provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of empathy and self-esteem in mitigating workplace violence among educators and language institute staff. The findings could inform effective interventions and improve educational workplace conditions.

Method

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between empathy and self-esteem with workplace violence among employees of language institutes. The study followed a descriptive-correlational design, and the statistical population included all female employees of language institutes in Mashhad during the academic year 2024. The sample was selected using the convenience sampling method. The appropriate sample size for the study was estimated at 120 participants; however, considering potential attrition, the initial sample size was set at 150. After excluding 12 incomplete or invalid responses, the final sample consisted of 138 participants.

Tools Used

The questionnaires were designed online and distributed to participants through the Porsline platform. Eligibility criteria included being employed in a workplace for at least one year and a willingness to participate in the study. Participants who did not fully complete the questionnaires or provided irrelevant responses were excluded from the sample. Data collection utilized a set of instruments, including the Eysenck Self-Esteem Questionnaire, the Jolliffe and Farrington Empathy Questionnaire (2006), the Workplace Violence Against Women Questionnaire (Salehipour, 2021), and a demographic information form.

The Workplace Violence Against Women Questionnaire This questionnaire was developed by Salehipour (2021), is a standardized tool designed based on a literature review, qualitative interviews, and quantitative analyses. This tool assesses various forms of workplace violence experienced by women and includes six main dimensions: psychological violence, verbal violence, financial violence, physical violence, sexual violence, and women-to-women violence. To develop the questionnaire, qualitative interviews were first conducted with female employees, followed by a comprehensive literature review. A pool of 105 items related to these dimensions was created, which was then assessed for content validity by experts. Afterward, 52 items remained and were subjected to field testing for validity and reliability. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that 37 items significantly loaded on six main dimensions, which explained 57.7% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha values for the tool's subscales ranged from 0.648 (for physical violence) to 0.863 (for sexual violence). Intraclass correlation coefficients ranged between 0.718 and 0.915. Analysis of the data indicated that psychological violence had the highest prevalence among the types of violence, followed by women-to-women violence, financial violence, verbal violence, physical violence, and sexual violence, respectively. This tool serves as a suitable instrument for assessing workplace violence against women and identifying related factors, making it useful for future research in this area.

Jolliffe and Farrington Empathy Questionnaire The empathy questionnaire was designed to measure empathy across two dimensions: cognitive and emotional empathy. Initially, the questionnaire comprised 40 items and was tested on 363 adolescents aged 15. Through factor analysis, the scale was reduced to 20 items and confirmed in a separate sample of 357 adolescents. Confirmatory factor analysis validated the two-dimensional structure of the questionnaire, encompassing emotional and cognitive empathy. The tool demonstrated positive associations with traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, and intelligence (in women). It also showed positive correlations with parental supervision and socioeconomic status. Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) reported a Cronbach's alpha reliability of 0.76 for the questionnaire. In Iran, the Persian version of this scale has been psychometrically validated by Afsari Rad et al. (2021) and

Omidpour et al. (2020). Afsari Rad et al. reported an overall reliability of 0.84, with 0.78 for the emotional scale and 0.74 for the cognitive scale. Omidpour et al. reported a reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating high reliability in the Iranian population.

The Eysenck Self-Esteem Questionnaire this questionnaire consists of 30 items, with respondents selecting “Yes,” “No,” or “?” for each item. Items marked with “?” score 0.5, while “Yes” or “No” responses score 1. The total scores range from 0 to 30 (Biabangard, 2011). Hormozi Nezhad, Shahni Yeylagh, and Najarian (2000) reported validity coefficients of 0.74 for female and 0.79 for male students at Shahid Chamran University in Ahvaz. Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was calculated at 0.88. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was calculated at 0.82, indicating acceptable reliability.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to all ethical research principles. Participants were informed about the study's objectives before participation, and confidentiality of their information was assured. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any stage. The questionnaires were distributed online, and participants received sufficient instructions on how to complete them before submission.

Results

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, and Pearson correlation tests were used to examine the relationships between variables. In this section, the findings of the study on predicting Violence against Women in the Workplace through empathy and self-esteem are presented. The results are organized into descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis.

Table 1 provides the means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis of the study variables, including empathy, self-esteem, and Violence against Women.

Table 1- Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Empathy	62.59	5.95	0.57	-0.837
Self-Esteem	18.04	6.35	-0.59	2.75
Workplace Aggression	67.20	10.41	-0.61	-0.53

The descriptive analysis reveals moderate levels of empathy ($M = 62.59$, $SD = 5.95$) and self-esteem ($M = 18.04$, $SD = 6.35$) among participants, while Violence against Women shows a lower mean value ($M = 67.20$, $SD = 10.41$). This results also indicate that skewness and kurtosis values for all variables fall within acceptable ranges (-3 to 3), suggesting that the data approximates normal distribution. This ensures the validity of subsequent parametric analyses.

The Pearson correlation analysis highlights significant relationships between the study variables, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2- Pearson correlation coefficients between Study Variables.

Variable	1	2	3
1. Self-Esteem	1		
2. Empathy	.222**	1	
3. Violence Against Women in the Workplace	.244**	.369**	1

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 2, self-esteem was positively correlated with empathy ($r = .222, p = .009$), indicating that individuals with higher self-esteem tend to have higher levels of empathy. Additionally, both self-esteem ($r = .244, p = .004$) and empathy ($r = .369, p < .001$) were positively correlated Violence against Women. These findings suggest that while self-esteem and empathy are individually related to Violence against Women, empathy demonstrates a stronger association with Violence.

To ensure the validity of the regression analysis, key assumptions were tested. Multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance. Additionally, residual plots confirmed homoscedasticity, and normality was validated using histogram and Q-Q plots. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.6, indicating no significant autocorrelation.

Table 3- ANO VA Results.

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	2437.583	2	1218.791	13.245	.001
Residual	12422.278	135	92.017		
Total	14859.861	137			

Table 3 shows that The overall model was statistically significant, $F(2, 135) = 13.245, p < .001$, indicating that the predictors explain a significant proportion of variance in workplace aggression ($R^2 = 0.164$).

Table 4-Regression Coefficients for Predicting Workplace Aggression.

Predictor	B	SE	β	T	p	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	25.890	8.659		2.990	.003		
Self-Esteem	0.279	0.132	0.170	2.112	.037	0.95	1.05
Empathy	0.580	0.141	0.332	4.108	< .001	0.95	1.05

Table 4 summarizes the regression coefficients and multicollinearity statistics. Both empathy ($\beta = 0.332, p < .001$) and self-esteem ($\beta = 0.170, p = .037$) are significant positive predictors of Violence against Women. These results suggest that individuals with higher levels of empathy and self-esteem are more likely to report Violence against Women in the Workplace. The observed tolerance values (0.95) and VIF values (1.05) indicate no significant multicollinearity issues among the predictors.

Discussion

According to the findings of this study, self-esteem was identified as one of the significant predictors of workplace violence against women. This result aligns with previous research, such as those by Hu et al. (2023) and Lu et al. (2023). Individuals with higher self-esteem typically exhibit greater sensitivity to violence. This sensitivity may stem from the higher value they place on themselves and their stronger inclination to confront violence in their surroundings. Furthermore, individuals with high self-esteem may possess better emotional regulation skills, which can mitigate the negative effects of workplace violence. Regarding empathy, the results indicated that this variable also significantly and positively predicts workplace violence against women ($\beta = 0.332, p < 0.001$). These findings are consistent with studies by Wang et al. (2022), Littlejohn (2018), and Lo Cricchio et al. (2022). Individuals with higher levels of empathy generally show greater sensitivity to violence against others and are better able to perceive and understand workplace violence. This is because empathy enables individuals to better recognize the feelings and needs of others and to be more aware of the negative effects of violence on them. As a result, more empathetic individuals are likelier to identify and report workplace violence. These findings underscore the importance of empathy and self-esteem as critical factors in understanding and identifying

workplace violence. However, as the results of this study also demonstrated, empathy has a stronger predictive role than self-esteem. This could be because empathy, as an emotional and social skill, has a more direct connection to the ability to understand others' needs and feelings, which in turn facilitates the identification and reporting of workplace violence against women.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that empathy and self-esteem play significant roles in predicting and identifying workplace violence. Individuals with higher levels of empathy and self-esteem exhibit greater ability to understand and recognize violence in workplace settings. These findings highlight the importance of developing and enhancing psychological skills such as empathy and self-esteem in work environments. Organizations can utilize these findings to design interventions and educational programs aimed at reducing violence and improving employees' mental well-being.

Recommendations

For future research, it is recommended to:

- Examine the mediating roles of factors such as self-efficacy and resilience in the relationship between empathy, self-esteem, and violence.
- Conduct similar studies across different cultures and workplace settings to assess the generalizability of the findings.
- Design and evaluate training programs focused on fostering empathy and self-esteem in workplace environments.

Limitations

This study has several limitations:

- Data were collected through self-reported measures, which might be influenced by response biases.
- The sampling was limited to a specific workplace type, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other work environments.
- Other variables, such as organizational and cultural factors that might influence workplace violence, were not examined in this study.

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