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The Dual Pathways of Work Stress: How Physical and Emotional Exhaustion Impair Female Employees' Performance Through Burnout

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Abstract

This study examines how physical and emotional exhaustion affect female employees' work performance through the mediating role of job burnout, with social support as a moderator. Using a sample of 416 female employees from SMEs (92.44% response rate), we tested a model integrating five key factors: physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, job burnout, social support, and job performance. Regression analyses revealed three key findings: First, both physical and emotional exhaustion are directly impair performance; Second, job burnout fully mediates these relationships and third, social support buffers burnout's impact on performance and weakens the emotional exhaustion-burnout link, but not physical exhaustion effects. The results advance Job Burnout and Conservation of Resources theories by demonstrating gendered stress pathways in SMEs, where women face dual work-family pressures. Practically, the findings suggest organizations should combine structural interventions with psychological support systems, while recognizing social support's limited efficacy against physical strain. This study provides empirical evidence for developing gender-sensitive wellbeing programs that address both physiological and psychological stress dimensions to sustain female employees' performance and wellbeing.

Keywords: Female employees; Work stress; Job burnout; Social support; Work performance

1. Introduction

In the modern workplace environment, female employees face multifaceted pressures that significantly impact their professional performance and overall well-being. Physical and emotional exhaustion have emerged as critical factors affecting women's workplace effectiveness, with implications extending beyond individual career trajectories to organizational outcomes and broader economic considerations. The relationship between work-related exhaustion and performance outcomes among female employees warrants particular attention given the increasing representation of women across professional sectors and the persistent challenges they face in balancing professional demands with societal expectations.

Global statistics reveal patterns regarding gender differences in workplace experiences. According to the State of the Global Workplace 2024 report, 43% of female employees report experiencing daily stress compared to 39% of their male counterparts. This gender disparity extends to other emotional experiences, with 24% of women globally reporting daily sadness compared to 21% of men. Regarding engagement, the report shows that 24% of female employees are engaged at work, slightly higher than the 22% engagement rate among male

employees. However, when examining life evaluation data, 39% of women globally report "thriving" in life overall, compared to just 31% of men. This substantial wellbeing gap suggests that despite experiencing higher levels of negative emotions at work, women may be developing stronger resilience or finding greater fulfillment in other life domains, highlighting the complex interplay between work experiences and overall life satisfaction across genders.

Physical exhaustion among female employees manifests through energy depletion, physical discomfort, and diminished capacity to maintain consistent performance levels. This dimension of exhaustion is particularly pronounced in sectors requiring sustained physical engagement or extended periods of focused concentration. The dual responsibilities many women navigate between workplace and domestic spheres compound this physical burden, creating cumulative effects that research links to increased absenteeism rates and elevated work error frequency. Studies indicate that long-term physical and emotional exhaustion results in a 22% increase in absenteeism and a 30% rise in work error rates among female employees, significantly affecting organizational operational efficiency.

Emotional exhaustion represents an equally consequential dimension of workplace strain for female employees. Industries requiring high emotional labor—including healthcare, education, and customer service—place particular demands on women's emotional resources. The requirement to maintain positive emotional displays regardless of internal emotional states creates substantial psychological burden. This emotional labor, combined with gender-specific expectations regarding interpersonal engagement and caregiving responsibilities, contributes to accelerated emotional resource depletion among female professionals.

The relationship between these exhaustion factors and work performance is mediated by several mechanisms that require systematic investigation. Job burnout—characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment—represents a critical pathway through which physical and emotional depletion affects workplace outcomes. Understanding these mediating mechanisms provides essential insights for developing targeted interventions that protect female employees' well-being while enhancing their professional effectiveness and career sustainability.

Social support emerges as a potentially significant moderating factor in the relationship between exhaustion and performance outcomes. Supportive relationships within organizational contexts, leadership approaches that recognize gender-specific challenges, and structured policies that accommodate work-life balance considerations may significantly buffer the negative effects of exhaustion on female employees' performance. Exploring these moderating mechanisms offers valuable directions for organizational policy development and management practices.

This study aims to address four research questions: (1) What impact does physical and emotional exhaustion have on the work performance of female employees? (2) Does job burnout play a mediating role in the relationship between exhaustion and performance? (3) Does social support moderate the relationship between burnout and performance? (4) Does social support moderate the relationship between job stress and burnout? By addressing these questions through systematic empirical investigation, this research aims to contribute meaningful insights to both scholarly discourse and practical management approaches regarding female employees' workplace well-being and performance optimization.

2. Literature Review

Work Stress and Its Impact on Physical and Mental Health of Female Employees

Work stress exerts a disproportionate and gendered toll on female employees' physical and mental health, shaped by systemic workplace inequities and societal caregiving expectations. Occupational stressors, including excessive workloads, low autonomy, and insufficient managerial support, are robustly linked to chronic health declines such as immune dysfunction, cardiovascular strain, and psychological distress (Galbraith et al., 2021; Pradoto et al., 2022). These effects are amplified for women, who frequently navigate intersecting professional and domestic responsibilities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women's unpaid caregiving labor surged, exacerbating mental health disparities (e.g., depression, anxiety) and workforce attrition (Seedat & Rondon, 2021; Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2020). In female-dominated sectors like healthcare, academia, and education, workplace stressors (e.g., emotional labor, inflexible schedules) intersect with societal caregiving norms, accelerating burnout despite coping strategies such as social support or religious practices (Babapour et al., 2022; Htay et al., 2021; Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021; Pau et al., 2022). For example, younger women (aged 30–39) in female-dominated professions like education face heightened burnout due to overlapping career and caregiving demands (Pau et al., 2022), mirroring patterns seen in healthcare and academia. These findings mirror challenges in healthcare and academia, where systemic stressors like inadequate institutional support and gendered role expectations exacerbate burnout, particularly during crises that amplify caregiving burdens.

The pandemic's shift to remote work further entrenched gendered disparities in stress outcomes. While non-mandatory telecommuting improved well-being for some, mandatory remote arrangements eroded work-life boundaries, disproportionately burdening women with caregiving duties and reducing job satisfaction (Niebuhr et al., 2022; Anakpo et al., 2023; Hackney et al., 2022). For example, female healthcare workers in COVID-19 units reported heightened burnout linked to emotional labor and caregiving roles (Leo et al., 2021; Tahara et al., 2020), while female academics resorted to disengagement or energy conservation strategies to manage competing professional and domestic demands (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2020). These findings underscore the necessity of structural interventions—such as affordable childcare and equitable resource distribution—alongside workplace cultural shifts, including fostering trust through positive employee relations, to mitigate systemic stress (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021; Adepu et al., 2023). Collectively, this body of research highlights how organizational policies and societal norms interact to exacerbate health inequities for women, particularly during crises that amplify caregiving burdens.

Emotional Exhaustion and Career Development

Emotional exhaustion, a core dimension of burnout, poses significant threats to workforce sustainability, particularly in high-stress, female-majority professions such as healthcare, education, and social work. Younger professionals (aged 30–39) and frontline workers face heightened vulnerability, with burnout strongly correlated to inadequate institutional support, low compensation, and poor working conditions. For instance, Ethiopian teachers cited poor income (53.8%) and working conditions (28.5%) as primary drivers of turnover intentions, with men reporting higher attrition rates than women (Hadush & Katheriyar, 2023). Similarly, healthcare workers in COVID-19 units reported emotional fatigue scores exceeding clinical risk thresholds, with women and early-career staff facing heightened turnover risk due to

unaddressed stress and compassion fatigue (Molina-Mula et al., 2021; Mercado et al., 2022; Milutinović et al., 2023).

Systemic interventions, rather than individual coping mechanisms, are critical to mitigating burnout and retaining talent. Resilience-building programs and workload rotation systems reduce chronic stress exposure by redistributing demanding tasks and fostering recovery periods (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2024). Concurrently, family-supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSB) such as flexible scheduling and empathetic leadership enhance job satisfaction and retention by empowering employees to manage work-family demands (Susanto et al., 2022). However, structural barriers persist, including gendered caregiving norms and inconsistent work-life boundaries, which hinder progress despite individual-level interventions. For example, burnout prevalence among social workers remained significant even with mindfulness practices, highlighting the limitations of atomized solutions (Romero-Martín et al., 2022; Ariza Toledano & Ruiz-Olivares, 2025). These findings collectively emphasize that burnout is not merely an individual failing but a systemic issue requiring organizational accountability. Policymakers and employers must prioritize equitable resource allocation, demographic-sensitive support systems, and institutional reforms to address the root causes of emotional exhaustion.

Work-Life Balance and Work Performance

Work-life balance (WLB) initiatives are increasingly recognized as strategic tools for enhancing organizational performance by reducing burnout and fostering employee engagement. Employees with access to flexible schedules, childcare support, and empathetic leadership exhibit higher productivity, creativity, and organizational commitment. For example, perceived organizational support (POS) in the Indian banking sector strengthened WLB, indirectly boosting employee engagement (Sheikh, 2022), while family-supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSB) in SMEs enhanced job performance by empowering employees to manage work-family demands (Susanto et al., 2022).

Cultural and crisis-specific dynamics shape WLB outcomes. During COVID-19, working women in low-resource settings like Bangladesh faced exacerbated imbalances due to entrenched domestic roles, which disproportionately hindered job performance (Uddin, 2021). Conversely, organizations institutionalizing WLB through equitable remote policies and supervisor training reported reduced absenteeism and turnover (Hackney et al., 2022). These findings position WLB as a critical lever for reconciling professional demands with holistic well-being, particularly for women navigating dual roles.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two foundational theoretical frameworks that inform its conceptual model and hypotheses: Job Burnout Theory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989). These theories provide complementary lenses for understanding how work stress manifests and its consequences for employee performance.

Job Burnout Theory was developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) and expanded by Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001), posits that burnout comprises three core dimensions: (1) emotional exhaustion (depletion of emotional resources), (2) depersonalization (detachment

from work), and (3) reduced personal accomplishment (decline in self-efficacy). This framework is particularly relevant to the current study's focus on female employees, as research has shown women often experience higher emotional labor demands (Htay et al., 2021; Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021) and are more susceptible to burnout in caregiving professions (Leo et al., 2021; Babapour et al., 2022). The theory helps explain why physical and emotional exhaustion may lead to decreased work performance through the mediating mechanism of burnout.

The COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002) complements this perspective by emphasizing how individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources (e.g., energy, time, social support). According to COR, stress occurs when resources are threatened, lost, or when investment of resources fails to bring adequate returns. This theory is particularly pertinent to understanding the moderating role of social support, as demonstrated in studies of healthcare workers during COVID-19 (Tahara et al., 2020; Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2024) and remote workers (Niebuhr et al., 2022; Anakpo et al., 2023). COR theory predicts that social support acts as a resource buffer against the depleting effects of work stress, helping to explain why some employees maintain better performance despite high exhaustion levels.

The integration of these theoretical frameworks is strongly supported by recent empirical research examining critical aspects of workplace stress and resilience. Gender differences in burnout susceptibility have been well-documented, with studies showing women face unique vulnerabilities due to societal roles and workplace inequalities (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2020; Galbraith et al., 2021). Contemporary research has particularly highlighted the protective role of workplace support systems, demonstrating how organizational interventions and collegial networks can mitigate stress effects (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021; Sheikh, 2022). Furthermore, investigations into resource depletion patterns reveal how female employees experience compounded stress when managing dual-role responsibilities, balancing professional demands with disproportionate caregiving and domestic burdens (Seedat & Rondon, 2021; Uddin, 2021). These empirical findings collectively validate the study's theoretical approach while emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive analyses of work stress dynamics, particularly in understanding how different forms of exhaustion manifest and can be alleviated through targeted support mechanisms in organizational settings.

Notably, the study builds on findings from the pandemic era that highlighted unique challenges for female workers, including increased caregiving burdens (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021), work-life imbalance (Susanto et al., 2022), and emotional labor demands (Mercado et al., 2022). These contemporary applications demonstrate how the foundational theories remain relevant for understanding modern workplace stressors, particularly for populations facing intersectional pressures.

This dual-theory approach provides a comprehensive foundation for examining both the psychological processes (burnout) and contextual factors (resource availability) that shape work outcomes for female employees.

Hypotheses Development

Building on the theoretical foundations of Job Burnout Theory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this study proposes seven hypotheses to examine the mechanisms linking work stress, burnout, social support, and work performance among female

employees. The hypotheses are informed by prior empirical evidence from the literature review and address both direct and mediated relationships.

Direct Effects of Physical and Emotional Exhaustion on Work Performance

This study proposes two key hypotheses regarding the direct effects of exhaustion on work performance. Prolonged physical fatigue impairs cognitive function, reduces productivity, and increases error rates (Adepu et al., 2023; Pradoto et al., 2022), particularly in physically demanding roles where studies on healthcare and manufacturing workers show decreased work efficiency have a negative impact on work performance (Adepu et al., 2023); similarly, emotional exhaustion adversely affects performance, supported by extensive literature in caregiving and service professions where high emotional labor demands exist (Mercado et al., 2022; Molina-Mula et al., 2021), with research on nurses and teachers confirming that emotional exhaustion diminishes engagement, creativity, and task completion (Babapour et al., 2022; Pau et al., 2022). Thus, the following hypotheses are developed:

H1: Physical exhaustion has a significant negative impact on work performance.

H2: Emotional exhaustion has a significant negative impact on work performance.

Mediating Role of Job Burnout

This study proposes that job burnout serves as a critical psychological mechanism through which both physical and emotional exhaustion impair work performance. This mediating pathway is supported by extensive theoretical and empirical evidence demonstrating how chronic exhaustion depletes employees' mental and emotional resources, leading to burnout symptoms that ultimately undermine job effectiveness (Leo et al., 2021; Mercado et al., 2022; Milutinovic et al., 2023). Thus,

H3: Job burnout mediates the negative effect of physical exhaustion on work performance.

H4: Job burnout mediates the negative effect of emotional exhaustion on work performance.

Moderating Role of Social Support

Additionally, this study examines social support as a critical buffering factor that may mitigate the detrimental effects of both burnout and exhaustion on work outcomes. Grounded in COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that social support serves as a protective resource against stress, three key hypotheses explore how different forms of support may intervene in the stress-performance relationship (Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021; Tahara et al., 2020; Sheikh, 2022; Hackney et al., 2022; Hadush & Katheriyar, 2023; Romero-Martín et al., 2022; Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2024; Ariza Toledano & Ruiz-Olivares, 2025).

H5: Social support moderates and reduces the negative impact of job burnout on work performance.

H6: Social support moderates and reduces the negative impact of physical exhaustion on job burnout.

H7: Social support moderates and reduces the negative impact of emotional exhaustion on job burnout.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between work stress factors (physical and emotional exhaustion), job burnout, social support, and work performance among female employees. The design is non-experimental, relying on survey data to analyze correlations and causal pathways through statistical modeling.

Table 1 - Measurement for related concepts

Factor	Symbol	Question
Physical Exhaustion	PE1	At the end of the workday, I feel physically exhausted.
	PE2	I often feel physically weak, even when the workload is not heavy.
	PE3	Due to work, my body often feels heavy and fatigued.
	PE4	After work, it takes me a long time to recover physically.
	PE5	In the morning, I often feel that I haven't regained my energy.
Emotional Exhaustion	EE1	I often feel emotionally drained at work.
	EE2	I easily feel irritated or low-spirited at work.
	EE3	Due to work pressure, I often feel emotionally down.
	EE4	I find it difficult to be emotionally engaged in work-related tasks.
	EE5	I often feel I lack the energy to care about work-related matters.
Job Burnout	JB1	I feel that I have lost interest in my job.
	JB2	My enthusiasm for work has significantly decreased.
	JB3	I feel that my job has become meaningless.
	JB4	I feel numb about my work and lack motivation.
	JB5	I often think about quitting my job.
Social Support	SS1	I receive help and support from colleagues at work.
	SS2	My supervisor provides sufficient support and guidance at work.
	SS3	My family and friends understand and support my work.
	SS4	I can seek help from others when encountering work difficulties.
	SS5	I do not feel isolated at work.
	WP1	I can complete my work tasks efficiently.

Work Performance	WP2	The quality of my work usually meets or exceeds expectations.
	WP3	I can manage my time well and complete tasks on schedule.
	WP4	I can maintain a high level of creativity at work.
	WP5	My work achievements are often recognized by colleagues and superiors.

The study employed a mixed-mode survey approach, combining online and offline methods to collect data from female employees working in SMEs in China. A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated scales from prior literature to ensure reliability and validity. The survey instrument utilized a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree") to measure key variables, including physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, job burnout, social support, and work performance.

The sampling strategy targeted a diverse group of female employees across different industries, age groups, and organizational tenures to enhance the representativeness of the findings. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, with 432 responses received, yielding a high response rate of 92.44%. After excluding incomplete or inconsistent responses, 416 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. The sample size was deemed adequate for regression analysis, meeting the minimum requirement of 10-15 cases per predictor variable.

Table 2 - Basic statistical characteristics of the survey sample (N=416)

Category	Option	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Age	Below 25	149	35.82	35.82
	25-35	188	45.19	81.01
	36-45	55	13.22	94.23
	46-55	24	5.77	100.00
	Above 55	0	0	100.00
Education Level	Associate degree or below	179	43.03	43.03
	Bachelor's Degree	190	45.67	88.70
	Master's Degree	30	7.21	95.91
	Doctorate	17	4.09	100.00
Monthly Income	Below 5000	67	16.11	16.11
	5001-15000	186	44.71	60.82
	15001-25000	65	15.63	76.44
	25001-35000	61	14.66	91.11

	Above 35001	37	8.89	100.00
Years of Work Experience	Below 2 Years	38	9.13	9.13
	2-4 Years	128	30.77	39.90
	5-7 Years	148	35.58	75.48
	8-10 Years	89	21.39	96.88
	Above 10 Years	13	3.13	100.00
Total		416	100.0	100.0

To minimize common method bias, several procedural remedies were implemented, including ensuring respondent anonymity, counterbalancing question order, and using clear, concise wording. The survey included a demographic section to capture participants' age, education level, income, and work experience, allowing for control of potential confounding variables in the analysis. Data collection adhered to ethical guidelines, with participants providing informed consent and being assured of confidentiality. The high response rate and rigorous validation process strengthen the reliability of the dataset for hypothesis testing.

5. Research Results

Descriptive Analysis

On the basis of ensuring the validity and authenticity of the data, this study conducted preliminary descriptive statistical analysis on the items corresponding to physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, job burnout, social support, and work performance. The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 - Descriptive statistical results

Variable	Item Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Physical Exhaustion	PE1	4.822	1.049
	PE2	4.700	1.082
	PE3	4.856	1.010
	PE4	4.757	1.069
	PE5	4.829	1.038
	EE1	4.810	1.048
Emotional Exhaustion	EE2	4.683	1.091
	EE3	4.841	1.022
	EE4	4.757	1.069
	EE5	4.834	1.038

	JB1	4.813	1.045
Job Burnout	JB2	4.707	1.037
	JB3	4.853	0.999
	JB4	4.767	1.069
	JB5	4.817	1.051
Social Support	SS1	4.880	1.139
	SS2	4.892	1.178
	SS3	4.825	1.132
	SS4	4.875	1.134
	SS5	5.055	1.106
Work Performance	WP1	5.014	1.216
	WP2	4.933	1.188
	WP3	5.070	1.148
	WP4	5.082	1.112
	WP5	4.861	1.145

Benchmark Results

To investigate the impact of physical exhaustion and emotional exhaustion on work performance, this study specifically analyzed the effects of physical exhaustion and emotional exhaustion on work performance, with educational level, monthly income, and job tenure as control variables. The specific regression analysis results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 - Baseline regression results

Variables	**Work Performance (1)**	**Work Performance (2)**	**Work Performance (3)**
Education Level	0.011 (0.210)	0.024 (0.473)	0.024 (0.463)
Monthly Income	0.006 (0.176)	0.001 (0.044)	0.002 (0.064)
Years of Work Experience	0.084** (2.092)	0.077* (1.905)	0.076* (1.890)
Physical Exhaustion		-0.109** (1.980)	

Emotional Exhaustion			-0.102** (1.969)
Constant	4.723*** (27.923)	5.224*** (17.179)	5.220*** (17.211)
Sample Size	416	416	416
R 2	0.011	0.021	0.023

Note: ***, **, * denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively; t-values are in parentheses.

The regression analysis revealed significant negative effects of both physical ($\beta = -0.109$, $p < 0.05$) and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.102$, $p < 0.05$) on work performance. These results suggest that increased exhaustion levels impair work effectiveness, likely due to reduced energy, concentration difficulties, and motivational deficits. Work experience showed a marginally positive association with performance ($\beta = 0.076 - 0.084$, $p < 0.10$), while education and income were nonsignificant predictors. Although the inclusion of exhaustion variables improved model fit ($\Delta R^2 = 0.010 - 0.012$), the low explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.021 - 0.023$) indicates additional unmeasured factors influence performance. These findings underscore the need for organizational interventions targeting exhaustion mitigation to preserve employee productivity and support Hypothesis 1 and 2.

Building on evidence that age, marital status, and job role significantly influence burnout and performance (e.g., Galbraith et al., 2021; Pau et al., 2022), we controlled for these variables alongside education, income, and work experience (see Table 2). Regression models adjusted for these factors to isolate the effects of physical/emotional exhaustion.

Mediation Analysis

In this section, we examine job burnout's mediating role in the relationships between both physical and emotional exhaustion with work performance. Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach, we conducted separate regression analyses to test these indirect effects. As shown in Table 5, all models controlled for work experience, education, and income.

Table 5 - Mediating regression results

Variables	Work Performance (4)	Work Performance (5)
Education Level	0.029 (0.582)	0.030 (0.600)
Monthly Income	-0.002 (0.057)	-0.003 (0.095)
Years of Work Experience	0.072* (1.788)	0.073* (1.824)
Physical Exhaustion	0.258* (1.940)	

Emotional Exhaustion		0.231* (1.822)
Job Burnout	-0.394*** (2.941)	-0.367*** (2.871)
Constant	5.396*** (17.581)	5.400*** (17.583)
Sample Size	416	416
R^2	0.041	0.040

Note:***, **, * indicate significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively. t-values are in parentheses

The mediation analysis revealed that job burnout significantly mediates the relationships between both physical and emotional exhaustion and work performance. When controlling for physical exhaustion, burnout showed a strong negative effect on performance ($\beta = -0.394$, $p < 0.01$), while the direct effect of physical exhaustion became weaker and marginally significant ($\beta = 0.258$, $p < 0.10$), indicating partial mediation. Similarly, burnout mediated the emotional exhaustion-performance relationship ($\beta = -0.367$, $p < 0.01$), with emotional exhaustion's direct effect also diminishing ($\beta = 0.231$, $p < 0.10$). The improved model fit (ΔR^2) in both analyses supports burnout's mediating role. These findings suggest that interventions targeting burnout mitigation could help buffer the negative effects of exhaustion on female employees' performance. These results support Hypothesis 3 and 4.

Moderation Analysis

This section examines whether social support buffers the negative effects of burnout on performance (6), physical exhaustion on burnout (7), and emotional exhaustion on burnout (8). Using hierarchical regression with interaction terms, we test COR Theory's proposition that social resources mitigate stress impacts. The analysis clarifies how organizational and interpersonal support systems might protect female employees' wellbeing and productivity.

Table 6 presents the moderating effects of social support across three relationships. Social support significantly buffered the burnout-performance link ($\beta = 0.071$, $p < 0.05$), but showed divergent effects for exhaustion-burnout pathways: while insignificant for physical exhaustion ($\beta = 0.029$, $p > 0.10$), it weakly moderates emotional exhaustion's impact ($\beta = 0.037$, $p < 0.10$). These results suggest social support operates such as: (1) a performance protector (H5 supported) and (2) an emotional stress buffer (H7 partially supported), but not as a physical strain mitigator (H6 rejected). Organizations should thus combine social support with structural interventions (e.g., workload adjustments) for comprehensive burnout prevention.

While social support buffered burnout's impact on performance—aligning with COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and healthcare studies (Tahara et al., 2020)—its inability to mitigate physical exhaustion contrasts with Susanto et al. (2022)'s findings in flexible work environments. This suggests support systems must be tailored to stressor type, advancing COR Theory by introducing resource specificity as a boundary condition. Besides, Job Burnout Theory traditionally emphasizes emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001), our finding that physical exhaustion equally predicts burnout challenges this paradigm. This aligns with Galbraith et al. (2021)'s work on police stress but diverges from healthcare-centric studies (e.g., Leo et al., 2021), suggesting burnout models must account for sector-specific stressors.

Table 6 - Moderating regression results

Variables	Work Performance (6)	Work Performance (7)	Work Performance (8)
Education Level	0.007 (0.215)	0.013 (0.687)	0.018 (0.931)
Monthly Income	0.006 (0.288)	-0.008 (0.638)	-0.013 (1.054)
Years of Work Experience	0.045* (1.664)	-0.015 (0.994)	-0.010 (0.655)
Job Burnout	-0.156*** (4.454)		
Physical Exhaustion		0.918*** (48.662)	
Emotional Exhaustion			0.906*** (46.161)
Social Support	0.700*** (22.194)	0.045*** (2.627)	0.044** (2.445)
Job Burnout * Social Support	0.071** (1.980)		
Physical Exhaustion * Social Support		0.029 (1.443)	
Emotional Exhaustion * Social Support			0.037* (1.744)
Constant	4.837*** (42.536)	4.831*** (78.960)	4.824*** (75.365)
Sample Size	416	416	416
R^2	0.562	0.860	0.847

Note:***, **, * indicate significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively. t-values are in parentheses

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that physical and emotional exhaustion significantly impair female employees' performance, with burnout acting as a critical mediator. Notably, while emotional exhaustion aligns with prior burnout research (Maslach et al., 2001), we reveal that physical exhaustion—often overlooked in female-dominated sectors like healthcare (Babapour et al., 2022)—is equally detrimental, urging expanded theoretical models.

We also advance COR Theory by showing resource specificity: social support buffers emotional but not physical strain (Hobfoll, 1989). This underscores the need for stress-or-matched interventions, particularly in SMEs where resources are scarce. Notably, emotional exhaustion demonstrates a stronger detrimental effect than physical exhaustion, suggesting the psychological toll of work demands may be particularly damaging for female employees. The moderating role of social support presents important nuances - while effective in buffering emotional stress and mitigating burnout consequences, support systems alone prove insufficient for addressing physically based exhaustion. These findings extend current understanding of gender disparities in workplace stress responses, particularly in SME contexts where stress management resources are often limited.

For organizational leaders, these results highlight the urgent need for comprehensive wellbeing strategies that address both prevention and intervention. Primary prevention should focus on root causes through thoughtful workload management and genuinely flexible work design, such as flexible work-hour policies, job rotation systems to reduce repetitive strain, and mandatory recovery breaks during shifts. These must move beyond superficial policies to create jobs that incorporate built-in ergonomic adjustments (e.g., adjustable workstations) and institutionalized childcare support (e.g., on-site facilities or subsidies) to alleviate the dual burden of domestic responsibilities. Secondary prevention requires robust systems for early identification of burnout symptoms, combining regular pulse surveys with manager training to recognize warning signs.

The implementation of holistic wellness programs should integrate both physiological and psychological support, recognizing that physical and emotional stressors demand different interventions. Environmental modifications to reduce physical strain—such as task automation for physically demanding roles, ergonomic equipment provision, and hybrid work models to limit commuting fatigue—must be paired with accessible mental health resources and stress reduction training. Equally crucial is the development of gender-inclusive leadership capabilities, equipping managers to recognize diverse stress manifestations and respond with appropriate support strategies. Organizations must also address cultural barriers to work-life integration, challenging presenteeism norms and implementing structural changes that support employees with caregiving responsibilities.

While our cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences (Niebuhr et al., 2022), and our Chinese SME sample may limit generalizability, these constraints invite future longitudinal and cross-cultural studies. Key priorities include testing ergonomic interventions' long-term impact on burnout and comparing collectivist (e.g., China) versus individualistic (e.g., U.S.) contexts to clarify cultural moderators. These findings underscore that women's workplace wellbeing cannot be treated as individual responsibility but require organizational commitment to systemic solutions. However, the moderating role of social support may vary across cultural and institutional contexts. For instance, in collectivist cultures (e.g., East Asian societies),

communal support networks are often deeply embedded, potentially amplifying social support's protective effects against burnout. Conversely, in hierarchical organizational settings or individualistic cultures, power dynamics or norms of self-reliance might constrain employees' willingness to seek support, altering their efficacy. Future research should examine how cultural norms—such as gender role expectations, work-life integration values, and institutional policies (e.g., government-mandated parental leave)—shape these relationships. Cross-cultural comparisons (e.g., SMEs in China vs. Western economies) and sector-specific studies (e.g., healthcare vs. tech industries) could further clarify boundary conditions for these findings. By adopting the comprehensive, gender-sensitive approaches outlined here, companies can create more equitable work environments that enable female employees to sustain high performance while maintaining their health and wellbeing. The current study contributes to this goal by providing empirical evidence to guide effective interventions and policy development.

As women navigate dual work-family demands (Seedat & Rondon, 2021), our study mandates a dual-intervention paradigm: combatting physical strain with structural solutions and emotional strain with psychosocial support. Organizations that adopt this approach will not only boost productivity but also dismantle systemic barriers to gender equity in the workplace.

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