

Burnout and Emotional Labour Among Junior Lawyers in Kerala

Vimala Anna Martin¹, Anitha Mary Mathew²

¹Student, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous), Bangalore, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College (Autonomous), Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT

This research examines the connection between burnout and emotional labour among junior lawyers in Kerala, emphasizing gender differences as a possible moderating variable. Burnout, which includes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal achievement, is common in high-pressure fields like law. Emotional labour, which involves the management and regulation of emotions to fulfil professional standards, is believed to play a significant role in the burnout experienced by this group. A cross-sectional design and snowball sampling method were employed to gather data from 150 junior lawyers aged 25 to 40, ensuring equal representation of both genders. Spearman's correlation analysis demonstrated significant positive relationships between emotional labour and all aspects of burnout. Further regression analyses indicated that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment were significant predictors of emotional labour levels. Notably, independent samples t-tests revealed no significant differences in burnout or emotional labour between genders, suggesting that these experiences are not inherently influenced by gender within the legal field. These results highlight the necessity for workplace interventions, such as training in emotional resilience and the development of emotional intelligence, to assist junior lawyers and mitigate burnout. Future studies should explore additional moderating factors, including the work environment and individual coping mechanisms, to enhance understanding of the varied experiences of emotional labour and burnout in legal contexts.

Keywords: burnout, emotional labour, emotional fatigue, depersonalization, personal achievement, gender disparities, junior attorneys, legal field, workplace strategies.

Burnout is a psychological condition that arises as a prolonged reaction to ongoing interpersonal stressors in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). It consists of three primary components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal achievement. In high-pressure professions such as law, burnout has become a significant and widespread concern, driven by heavy workloads, emotionally intense interactions with clients, and continuous exposure to conflict.

Simultaneously, emotional labour is crucial in legal professions, particularly in roles that involve direct client interaction. Initially defined by Hochschild (1983), emotional labour involves the management and regulation of emotions to align with organizational and professional standards. Lawyers are expected to exhibit empathy, composure, and authority, even when their true emotional state may contradict these expectations.

Burnout within the legal profession is a complex condition marked by severe physical, emotional, and mental fatigue that arises from extended exposure to high-pressure situations, intense emotional exchanges, and the necessity for meticulousness. Lawyers frequently endure demanding schedules, manage intricate client relationships, and bear the burden of critical decisions, all of which heighten their susceptibility to burnout. Pines and Aronson (1988) define burnout as a state of comprehensive fatigue, with emotional exhaustion being particularly pronounced among legal professionals due to the nature of their work with clients. A significant factor contributing to this phenomenon is emotional labour, which involves the regulation and management of emotions to fulfil professional standards. Legal practitioners often find themselves needing to suppress or modify their emotional expressions to uphold a professional demeanour, particularly during emotionally charged interactions with clients. This ongoing emotional regulation, while essential for effective legal practice, can gradually deplete psychological resources, resulting in chronic stress and emotional fatigue. When combined with heavy workloads and the constant demand for precision, emotional labour greatly intensifies the likelihood of burnout. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for creating targeted strategies to promote lawyer well-being and improve sustainability within the legal profession.

Numerous theoretical frameworks shed light on the relationship between burnout and emotional labour in the legal field. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Demerouti et al., 2001) suggests that burnout occurs when emotional demands and workload exceed the available resources, such as autonomy or support, which are often lacking in legal environments. Hochschild's Theory of Emotional Labor (1983) points out that lawyers frequently engage in either surface or deep acting, resulting in emotional dissonance, a significant precursor to burnout. Likewise, Maslach and Jackson's (1981) Burnout Theory identifies emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment as fundamental aspects of burnout commonly experienced by lawyers facing emotional challenges. The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) Model (Siegrist, 1996) further indicates that when the emotional effort exerted by lawyers is not reciprocated with adequate recognition or compensation, the likelihood of burnout increases. The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) emphasizes that ongoing emotional labour gradually depletes psychological resources. Additionally, theories such as Social Exchange (Blau, 1964), Person-Environment Fit (French et al., 1982), and Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) provide further context on how emotional strain, discrepancies between job demands and individual capabilities, and emotional triggers contribute to burnout among legal practitioners. Collectively, these models offer a thorough framework for understanding burnout in the context of emotionally taxing legal work.

This study aims to investigate the connection between emotional labour and burnout among junior lawyers in Kerala. It also assesses whether gender differences influence this relationship, thereby enriching the ongoing discussion regarding gender and occupational health. Utilizing a quantitative approach, this research employs a cross-sectional design. The sample comprises 150 junior lawyers, aged between 25 and 40, who are employed in courts, legal firms, and corporate environments throughout Kerala. The study ensured equal representation of genders. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, where existing participants referred peers who satisfied the inclusion criteria. To protect the rights of participants, the study emphasizes the importance of informed consent and the confidentiality of data. This entails providing participants with a comprehensive overview of the study's objectives, methodologies, potential risks, and benefits, as well as ensuring their autonomy in deciding whether to participate.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), as adapted and translated by Kokkinos, was utilized to evaluate burnout levels among the participants. This well-established instrument consists of 22 items, each assessed on a 7-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 6 (every day), focusing on three primary aspects of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment. To assess emotional labour, the study employed the Emotional Labour Scale (ELS) created by Brotheridge and Lee in 2003. This scale includes 15 items that address five essential dimensions of emotional labour: the frequency of emotional expression, adherence to display rules, the range of emotions required, surface acting, and deep acting. Participants rated each item using a 5-point Likert scale, facilitating a thorough evaluation of both the frequency and intensity of emotional regulation strategies applied in their work environments.

Results:

The present study examined the relationship between the dimensions of burnout and emotional labour among junior lawyers.

Table I Descriptive statistics and Correlation Among Study Variables (N=150):

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Exhaustion	150	13.1	5.31	—			
2. Depersonalization	150	14.5	6.35	0.689	—		
3. Personal Accomplishment	150	19.4	9.08	0.634	0.689	—	
4. Emotional Labour	150	54.8	15.6	0.695	0.654	0.761	—

The study revealed significant positive relationships between emotional labour and all three dimensions of burnout such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment based on Spearman's correlation (all p-values < .001). Notably, the strongest correlation was observed between personal accomplishment and emotional labour ($\rho = 0.761$), suggesting that junior lawyers who engage more in emotional labour tend to experience a heightened sense of achievement. This dual role of emotional labour, as both a potential stressor and a source of fulfilment, aligns with prior research emphasizing its complex psychological outcomes (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). Exhaustion and depersonalization also showed strong positive correlations with emotional labour ($\rho = 0.695$ and $\rho = 0.689$, respectively), reinforcing the notion that the emotional demands inherent in legal practice can lead to burnout over time (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Linear regression analyses further supported these findings. Depersonalization ($R^2 = 0.342$), personal accomplishment ($R^2 = 0.422$), and exhaustion ($R^2 = 0.408$) each significantly predicted emotional labour (all p-values < .001). These results suggest that increased emotional labour is closely linked with both negative and positive aspects of burnout, reflecting the emotionally intensive nature of legal work and its influence on professionals' psychological well-being.

Table II Welsch's t-test for gender differences in Emotional Labour:

Variable	Statistic	p
Emotional Labour	-1.034	0.303

The results of the independent samples t-test revealed no statistically significant gender differences across the dimensions of burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment—as

well as emotional labour, with all p-values exceeding the 0.05 threshold. Both Student's t-test and Welch's t-test yielded consistent results, confirming the robustness of the findings. The highest t-value was observed for emotional labour ($t = -1.034$, $p = 0.303$), yet this did not approach statistical significance. These results suggest that gender does not play a moderating role in the relationship between burnout and emotional labour among junior lawyers.

Previous research has indicated that women often face greater emotional labour due to societal and occupational expectations associated with gender roles (Wharton, 2009). However, the current findings are consistent with studies that demonstrate the legal profession places similar emotional demands on both men and women (Tracy, 2005). The structured nature of legal practice, which is marked by significant emotional intensity and a degree of professional detachment, may lead to this gender-neutral experience. Future investigations should examine additional moderating factors, such as years of professional experience, organizational culture, and individual coping mechanisms, to gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between emotional labour and burnout in various legal settings.

The current research identified notable connections between burnout dimensions and emotional labour among lawyers, highlighting the complex relationship between these psychological factors. In particular, depersonalization, exhaustion, and personal accomplishment were found to be significant predictors of emotional labour. The results indicate that as legal professionals experience greater emotional and mental strain, they are more inclined to engage in emotional labour, whether through surface acting or deep emotional regulation. Notably, the analysis did not reveal any statistically significant differences in burnout or emotional labour dimensions based on gender. This finding suggests that the emotional challenges and burnout experienced by legal professionals are not inherently affected by gender, reflecting the widespread nature of emotional strain in the field. These results challenge conventional beliefs regarding gender-specific emotional work and emphasize the consistent effects of occupational stressors in demanding legal settings. Future studies should explore additional moderating factors such as professional seniority, legal practice areas, coping mechanisms, or organizational support systems. Gaining insight into these elements may inform the creation of targeted interventions aimed at alleviating emotional strain and improving psychological well-being among legal practitioners operating in high-stress environments.

This study provides valuable insights into the connection between burnout and emotional labour among junior lawyers; however, it does have certain limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional research design employed limits the ability to establish causal relationships regarding the directionality of the observed associations. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to gain a deeper understanding of how burnout and emotional labour develop over time within the legal field. Secondly, the data collection relied solely on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by social desirability and recall biases. To enhance the validity of the findings, subsequent studies could incorporate alternative methods such as behavioural observations or physiological measurements to triangulate the data. Thirdly, the focus on a sample of junior lawyers in Kerala restricts the applicability of the results to other professional groups or geographical areas. Expanding research to include a variety of occupational sectors and cultural contexts would improve external validity and offer a more comprehensive perspective on the interplay between emotional labour and burnout across different professions. Addressing these limitations could lead to more effective, generalizable, and context-aware interventions aimed at enhancing employee well-being and resilience in the workplace.

The implications of this study are significant both theoretically and practically. From a theoretical standpoint, the research adds to the growing body of literature in occupational health psychology by empirically demonstrating the relationship between burnout and emotional labour in the legal profession. By underscoring the important correlations between these concepts, the study supports established frameworks such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Hochschild's theory of emotional labour, which propose that roles requiring high emotional engagement are associated with increased levels of burnout.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the critical necessity for workplace initiatives aimed at preventing burnout. Legal organizations ought to emphasize training in emotional resilience and establish comprehensive support systems to help lawyers cope with occupational stress. These efforts can improve psychological well-being and job satisfaction, thereby decreasing turnover rates and fostering a healthier work environment. Additionally, the study provides recommendations at the policy level, suggesting the incorporation of emotional intelligence training into legal education and professional development programs. By equipping legal professionals with effective tools to manage emotional challenges, it may be possible to not only reduce burnout but also enhance professional performance and interpersonal skills. Future reforms in the legal sector should take these insights into account to cultivate a more sustainable and emotionally intelligent workforce.

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