

Burnout Experience among Iranian Teachers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study represents the first attempt to explore teachers' burnout experience during one of the most critical phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. The main goals were to estimate the prevalence of burnout in Iranian men and women teachers and analyse the association of sociodemographic variables on burnout levels. A total of 125 Iranian teachers participated in this study. Results suggest that Iranian teachers perceive high levels of burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 24% of participants reporting high levels of overall burnout. Furthermore, 32% of the sample reported high levels of physical fatigue, 24.8% high levels of cognitive weariness, and 17.6% high levels of emotional exhaustion, suggesting that a considerable number of Iranian teachers are already struggling to deal with their job-related stressors. Significant differences were found for sex, with men reporting higher exhaustion than women. No significant differences were found between other sociodemographic characteristics and burnout. We analyse the results from a cultural perspective and discuss its implications for future research and psychological interventions in schools. Future studies explore how school contextual variables can mediate or moderate the effect of sociodemographic characteristics on teachers' burnout. Intervention programmes should consider local schools' characteristics and be sensitive to teachers' individual needs and consider the added weight of the pandemic to teachers' daily job-related stressors.

Keywords: teacher burnout, school context, mental health, Iranian teachers, COVID-19

1. Introduction

On 30th January 2020, the novel COVID-19 pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a public health emergency of international concern. In the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter referred as Iran), the first COVID-19 case was reported by 19th February 2020. Rapidly Iran became one of the most affected countries by the pandemic. At the beginning of 2021, more than 1.261.903 diagnosed cases and 55.830 deaths have been reported.

In addition to the impact on health and economy, COVID-19 has serious consequences on mental health. In an attempt to control the pandemic, strict health security measures were imposed worldwide (i.e., quarantine, lockdown, isolation, social distancing). These measures have led to drastic changes in individuals' familiar, social, cultural and professional life and routines. Since the beginning of the pandemic, few studies have already showed the emotional and psychological impact brought by the restriction of affections and loss of freedom: rumination, fear, uncertainty and boredom (Brooks et al., 2020; Pakpour & Griffiths, 2020; Satıcı et al., 2020).

According to the WHO, one of the biggest impacts of COVID-19 on mental health is on stress levels. Stress is the result of the interaction between a situation and an individual (Michie, 2002). How individuals respond and cope with stressors depends on their individual resources (i.e. social, emotional, psychological) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the words of the International Labour Organization (2016) "stress is not a health impairment but is the first sign of a harmful physical and emotional response" (p.2). In turn, long term exposure to job-related stress can progress to burnout (Psyháltö et al., 2011).

Traditionally, burnout has been defined as a syndrome of *emotional exhaustion*, *depersonalization* and *reduced personal accomplishment*. *Emotional exhaustion* refers to lack of emotional energy and tiredness at work; *depersonalization* describes negative or inappropriate attitudes and affections towards others (e.g., co-workers,

clients); and *personal accomplishment* relates to reduced productivity and negative perceptions about one's professional identity (Maslach et al., 1996). More recently, *emotional exhaustion* and *depersonalization* have been identified as the key elements of burnout (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). Other authors (e.g., Shirom & Melamed, 2006) have also included *physical exhaustion* as a key aspect of burnout, referring to the perception of low energy and chronic physical fatigue.

As a multidimensional construct, the causes of burnout may differ depending on individual and situational characteristics. Burnout has been recognized as a psychosocial syndrome mainly experienced in human service occupations (e.g., doctors, teachers, educators), because of the interaction of several factors in these occupational environments (i.e. social, political, economic) (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Previous research conducted with teachers offers a comprehensive picture on the role different variables play on burnout. In organizational terms, low income, job demands, workload or lack of social support have been associated with higher levels of burnout (e.g., Kinman et al., 2013; Koochani & Dayeri, 2019; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). From the classroom context, the number of students per class, students' misbehaviour and students' lack of motivation have been shown to contribute to burnout (Akbari & Eghtesadi, 2020; Evers et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, the role of sociodemographic characteristics on teachers' burnout remains unclear, as results from previous research are often inconsistent (cf. Purvanova & Muros, 2010). The same is true for studies conducted with Iranian teachers. For example, in a study with high school teachers, Alavinia and Ahmadzadeh (2012) found that women, younger and less experienced teachers perceive higher levels of burnout. In turn, results from a study carried out by Nazari and colleagues (2020) suggested no significant differences between sex, age or years of experience and burnout symptoms. Mehari and Radi (2015) found differences between education level, years of experience and teaching level and burnout levels; but found no differences between age and marital status and burnout. In turn, in a sample of 264 Iranian teachers, Akbari and Tavassoli (2011) found that more experienced men teachers exhibit lower levels of burnout than women.

In Iran, a large amount of research has been carried out on teachers' burnout. Interestingly, most of these studies are conducted exclusively with EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers (Alavinia & Ahmadzadeh, 2012; Akbari & Roudi, 2020; Fathi & Saedian, 2020; Javadi & Khatib, 2014; Koochani & Dayeri, 2019; Mehrabi & Radi, 2015; Nazari et al., 2020; Roohani & Irvani, 2020), with few studies including teachers from different teaching fields in their samples. Being in one of the occupations where the incidence of burnout is traditionally higher (Aronsson et al., 2017; Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2015), teachers also had to adapt to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., transition into digital classrooms, modifying instructional materials, maintaining and developing social support networks).

It is uncertain how long individuals' lives will remain impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Its massive consequences on job-related stress make it important to explore how burnout syndrome develops in the context of the pandemic. Although a reasonable number of studies on COVID-19 related burnout have already been conducted with healthcare workers (Bradley & Chahar, 2020; Giusti et al., 2020; Talaei et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020), studies with other populations are next to nothing.

1.1 The Present Study

In November 2020, Iranian government had to impose another lockdown in major cities, tightening restrictions in public, social and educational life. Schools were highly affected with the suspension of face-to-face classes and resumption/continuation of online teaching classes (Vahdat, 2020).

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of COVID-19's impact on mental health, by exploring the burnout experience of Iranian teachers during one of the most critical phases of the pandemic in Iran. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the prevalence of burnout in Iranian men and women teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic?; (2) Is there an association between Iranian men and women teachers and high levels of burnout?; and (3) Are there any differences between sociodemographic characteristics of Iranian teachers and their burnout levels?

2. Method

2.1 Sample

A total of 125 Iranian teachers participated in this study. Participants were 84 men (67.2%) and 41 women (32.8%), aged between 25 to 65 years old ($M = 42.74$, $SD = 7.84$). Further sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 125)

Characteristics	Frequency	%
Sex		
Men	84	67.2%
Women	41	32.8%
Age (in years)		
25 - 34	18	14.4%
35 - 44	54	43.2%
= or > 45	53	42.4%
Marital status		
Single/divorced/widowed	29	23.2%
Married	96	76.8%
Children		
Without children	37	29.6%
With children	88	70.4%
Education level		
Bachelor	52	41.6%
Master	52	41.6%
PhD	21	16.8%
Teaching experience		
= or < 3	5	4%
4 - 9	19	15.2%
10 - 20	44	35.2%
> 20	57	45.6%
Teaching level		
Primary school	27	21.6%
Secondary school	83	66.4%
University	15	12%
Teaching field*		
Elementary education	23	18.4%
Literature and culture	19	15.2%
Physics and mathematics	65	52%
Experimental sciences	15	12%

*Curricular fields defined by the Iranian Education System.

2.2 Measures

Sociodemographic Questionnaire. Participants answered a sociodemographic questionnaire developed for the purpose of this study. This questionnaire intended to collect participants' data regarding personal (sex, age, marital status, number of children and education level) and professional characteristics (teaching experience, teaching level and teaching field).

Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM). Participants answered the Persian version of the SMBM (Mota & Rad, 2020). This 14-item instrument accesses three dimensions of burnout, through three subscales: (a) *physical fatigue* (6 items), which evaluates the perceived low energy and feelings of physical tiredness; (b) *cognitive weariness* (5 items), which evaluates perceived difficulties to concentrate and cognitive tiredness; and (c) *emotional exhaustion* (3 items), which evaluates perceived decrease in sensitivity to others' needs and emotional tiredness. An overall burnout score can also be calculated. Participants answered using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*), with higher scores indicating higher burnout levels. Reliability of the measure was guaranteed with Cronbach's alphas of .88 for *physical fatigue*, .82 for *cognitive weariness* and .87 for *emotional exhaustion*.

2.3 Sampling Procedures

Data was collected online, between November and December 2020. The call for participants was made in different teachers' channels via Telegram messaging app. Interested participants accessed the questionnaire through a link, where the objectives of the study were first presented. Participants' informed consent was requested to use the data for research purposes. The confidentiality and anonymity of the data were guaranteed,

before the responses were collected.

2.4 Analyses

Quantitative data analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. Burnout dimensions were treated as dependent variables and sociodemographic characteristics were treated as independent variables. Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test revealed that population data did not have a normal distribution, thus nonparametric tests were used. Performed statistical analyses are described alongside the results.

3. Results

3.1 Prevalence of Burnout Among Iranian Men and Women Teachers

Descriptive statistics were calculated to study the mean levels of burnout among Iranian teachers. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the three burnout dimensions and the overall score of burnout for men and women. Results indicate general low scores of burnout. Men have higher average scores than women in all burnout dimensions.

Table 2. Burnout Scores According to Sex (N = 125)

Burnout	Mean (SD)	Men	Women
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
<i>Physical fatigue</i>	2.68 (1.71)	2.89 (1.60)	2.24 (1.85)
<i>Cognitive weariness</i>	2.40 (1.58)	1.61 (1.52)	1.98 (1.64)
<i>Emotional exhaustion</i>	2.14 (1.49)	2.30 (1.44)	1.80 (1.57)
Overall burnout score	2.38 (1.48)	2.57 (1.43)	1.98 (1.51)

Note. SD = Standard Deviation.

Bivariate correlations (Chi-Square) were performed to explore associations between Iranian men and women teachers and high levels of burnout. According to Gomes (2012) and Mota and Rad (2020), SMBM scores equal or higher to 5 indicate high levels of burnout symptoms. Table 3 presents the prevalence of burnout (i.e. SMBM scores = or > 5) in Iranian men and women teachers. Results show that 24% of Iranian teachers perceive high levels of burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic, being *physical fatigue* the burnout dimension where teachers scored higher. Significant associations were found between sex and *physical fatigue*, *cognitive weariness* and the overall score of burnout, being that men perceive higher levels of burnout than women.

Table 3. Prevalence of Burnout According to Sex (SMBM scores = or > 5)

Burnout	n (%)	Men	Women	p-value
		n (%)	n (%)	
<i>Physical fatigue</i>	40 (32.0%)	28 (22.4%)	12 (9.6%)	.019
<i>Cognitive weariness</i>	31 (24.8%)	21 (16.8%)	10 (8%)	.004
<i>Emotional exhaustion</i>	22 (17.6%)	15 (12%)	7 (5.6%)	ns
Overall burnout score	30 (24%)	20 (16%)	10 (8%)	.012

Note. ns = Non-significant.

Next, mean comparison tests were calculated to compare significant differences between sociodemographic characteristics and the three burnout dimensions. Mann-Whitney tests (Table 4) and Kruskal-Wallis tests (Table 5) were performed to analyse the differences between burnout dimensions and dichotomous (i.e. sex, marital status, number of children) and polytomous (i.e. education level, professional experience, teaching level and teaching field) independent variables, respectively. Aware of the fact that the cut-off points (i.e. SMBM scores = or > 5) used for clinical diagnosis can reduce the broader understanding of the burnout experience, we considered the total scores obtained by teachers.

According to the results, participants who are men, married, between 35 and 44 years old, with a bachelor's degree and teaching in socio-economics field have higher mean ranks in the three dimensions of burnout. Additionally, participants with no children have higher mean ranks of *physical fatigue* dimension, and participants with children of *cognitive weariness* and *emotional exhaustion*. Participants with 3 or less years of experience have higher mean ranks of *physical fatigue*, while those who have 10 to 20 years of experience have higher ranks of *cognitive weariness* and *emotional exhaustion*. Secondary school teachers have higher mean ranks in the *cognitive weariness* dimension, while elementary teachers in the *cognitive weariness* and *emotional*

exhaustion dimensions. Nevertheless, results showed no significant differences between sociodemographic characteristics of Iranian teachers and the three burnout dimensions, except for sex. Iranian men teachers have significantly higher levels of *physical fatigue* and *cognitive weariness* than women.

Table 4. Differences (U) Between Sex and Burnout Dimensions (N = 125)

Characteristics	Burnout dimensions									
	<i>Physical fatigue</i>			<i>Cognitive weariness</i>			<i>Emotional exhaustion</i>			
	n	MR	U	p-value	MR	U	p-value	MR	U	p-value
Sex										
Men	84	66.81	1318.00	.031	67.49	1345.00	.044	64.79		ns
Women	41	55.15			53.80			55.24	1404.00	
Marital Status										
Single/Divorced/Widowed	29	62.55	1379.00	ns	59.72	1297.00	ns	59.05	1277.50	ns
Married	96	63.14			63.99			64.19		
Children										
No children	37	64.14	1568.00	ns	61.65	1578.00	ns	57.68	1431.00	ns
Children	88	62.52			63.57			65.24		

Note. MR = Mean Rank; ns = Non-significant.

Table 5. Differences (X²) Between Sociodemographic Characteristics and Burnout Dimensions (N = 125)

Characteristics	Burnout dimensions									
	<i>Physical fatigue</i>			<i>Cognitive weariness</i>			<i>Emotional exhaustion</i>			
	n	MR	X ²	p-value	MR	X ²	p-value	MR	X ²	p-value
Age (in years)										
25 – 34	18	61.33	1.143	ns	59.03	.395	ns	53.61	1.577	ns
35 – 44	54	66.86			64.92			65.69		
= or > 45	53	59.63			62.40			63.44		
Education level										
Bachelor	52	64.65	.306	ns	65.96	.955	ns	66.57	1.055	ns
Master	52	60.92			59.35			59.41		
PhD	21	64.05			64.71			63.05		
Teaching experience (in years)										
= or < 3	5	72.30	4.512	ns	64.60	1.327	ns	68.20	3.332	ns
4 – 9	19	53.05			56.53			50.76		
10 – 20	44	70.85			67.23			68.25		
> 20	57	59.44			61.75			62.57		
Teaching level										
Elementary	24	60.69	3.766	ns	64.28	1.607	ns	66.50	2.424	ns
Secondary	75	66.65			64.56			64.24		
University	15	47.50			52.07			49.83		
Teaching field										
Elementary Education	23	59.65	1.173	ns	58.89	.750	ns	60.11	1.541	ns
Literature and Culture	53	66.21			62.05			66.50		
Socio-Economics	4	71.83			66.33			77.67		
Physics and Mathematics	11	64.30			65.33			64.02		
Experimental Sciences	14	56.47			59.73			55.67		

Note. MR = Mean Rank; ns = Non-significant.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to estimate the prevalence of burnout in Iranian men and women teachers and analyze the association of sociodemographic characteristics on burnout levels. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to date exploring teachers' burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran.

4.1 Prevalence of Burnout during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Our results suggest that 24% of Iranian teachers perceive high levels of burnout during one of the most critical phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. Moreover, 32% of the sample reported high levels of physical fatigue, 24.8% high levels of cognitive weariness, and 17.6% high levels of emotional exhaustion, suggesting that a considerable number of Iranian teachers are already struggling to deal with their job-related stressors.

Previous studies conducted in Iran found lower rates, with teachers reporting general low levels of burnout (e.g., Koochani & Dayeri, 2019; Mehrabi & Radi, 2015; Nazari et al., 2020). These data seem to suggest that the

COVID-19 pandemic did intensify the burnout experience among Iranian teachers. However, we are not able to reliably compare our results to results found in pre-COVID-19 era, because the sample participants are not the same and because studies had used different measures to assess teachers' burnout.

Burnout has been considered a contextual phenomenon that is not restricted to single individuals, meaning that burned out teachers are important visible indicators of their scholar maladjustment. For this reason, the representative weight of teachers who reported high levels of burnout should not be underestimated, as it might be more impactful than what 24% in 100% represents. In a recent study with 931 teachers, Meredith and colleagues (2020) found that burnout is a contagious syndrome that spreads through the interpersonal interactions established at work, with long-term effects on individuals' burnout. The literature has been identifying how burned-out teachers can broadly and negatively impact the school organization (e.g., retention, performance, attendance, interpersonal relationships between colleagues and superiors), the students (e.g., learning, motivation, academic performance), and the teachers themselves (e.g., self-efficacy, engagement, satisfaction) (Kinman et al., 2013; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Schaufeli & Salanova (2007); Shen et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Furthermore, the development and prevalence of burnout frequently leads to severe physical and mental health problems, such as depression, cardiovascular diseases, insomnia or psychotropic drug use (Armon et al., 2008; Bianchi & Schonfeld, 2016; Leiter et al., 2013; Madsen et al., 2015; Toker et al., 2012).

The absence of previous studies on Iranian teachers' burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic does not allow us to understand if the pandemic intensifies the burnout experience among Iranian teachers. Nevertheless, one possible explanation for the results found in our study is based on the unique characteristics of Iranian culture. According to Savicki (2002), the prevalence of burnout seems to depend on cultural elements (e.g., type of society, social security systems, social values, life values). Although we have not measured cultural elements in this study, it can be argued that the political-economic situation in Iran has had serious consequences for the living standards and unemployment rates (The World Bank, 2021). Having a job in a qualified field, as in the case of teaching, is considered a privilege. In that sense, we argue that Iranians who are privileged to be employed tend to value their work and devalue the daily stressors associated with their job.

4.1 Sociodemographic Characteristics and Burnout

Results of our study suggest that sociodemographic characteristics play an insignificant role in the burnout experience of Iranian teachers, since no significant differences were found between sociodemographic characteristics and their perceived levels of burnout, except for sex. We found that the burnout experience tends to be significantly different among Iranian men and women, with men reporting higher levels of burnout, specifically of physical fatigue and cognitive weariness. Similar results were found by Mehrabi and Radi (2015) and by Roohani and Iravani (2020) in Iran, with women reporting lower levels of burnout, when compared to Iranian men teachers.

One possible explanation to why burnout seems to be more common among male Iranian teachers has to do with the traditional role of men in Iranian culture and society. Traditionally, men are considered the family's breadwinner within the Iranian culture. This argument could explain why men perceive more stress levels than their female counterparts during pandemics and worsening economic conditions. One could also argue that males are traditionally (especially in cultures like Iran) supposed to be more in control of their emotions and do not share their worries and stressful conditions with others; this would make them more vulnerable to burnout

As most international studies have found women to report higher levels of burnout (cf. Purvanova & Muros, 2010), we therefore argue that the nature of our results may have a cultural background and may be explained by the specificities of Iranian culture. This argument is also present in a meta-analysis conducted by Purvanova and Muros (2010), where the authors concluded that studies conducted in the USA tend to find larger sex differences than studies conducted in European countries. Nevertheless, as our sample was predominantly male, our results may be sex-biased and hinder accurate sex comparisons.

We found no significant differences between other sociodemographic characteristics and the levels of burnout. We hypothesize that this result can be better explained from the sociocultural characteristics of our sample, since similar non-significant results are more likely to be found in studies conducted with Iranian teachers (e.g., Alavinia and Ahmadzadeh, 2012; Nazari et al., 2020; Mehrabi & Radi, 2015; Roohani & Iravani, 2020). Yet, we are not aware of other studies comparing burnout levels of Iranian teachers with different numbers of children and from different teaching fields, thus we are not able to compare our findings with previous studies conducted with Iranian teachers. This is one of the few studies to include general teachers' samples, thus contributing to broadening the understanding about the prevalence of burnout among teachers from different teaching fields.

In international literature, significant differences are often found between sociodemographic characteristics and

burnout. For example, while younger and unmarried teachers are often found to be more exhausted (e.g., Lau et al., 2005; Luk et al., 2010; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021), in our study middle-aged and married teachers have higher average levels of burnout, but the differences between other age and marital status groups were not significant. Similarly, less experienced teachers are considered to perceive higher levels of burnout (e.g., Lau et al., 2005; Luk et al., 2010), but in our study were those in the middle of their career path who reported higher mean ranks.

Summing up, we believe the results of our study on the role of sociodemographic characteristics in Iranian teacher' burnout offer a valuable contribution to the research field, considering the inconsistent results often found in the literature.

Generally, our findings on the role of sociodemographic characteristics in the burnout experience of Iranian teachers support Leiter and Maslach (2016) perspective. According to these authors, burnout should not be considered an individual syndrome but rather a combination of individual and organizational variables. In fact, our results suggest that sociodemographic characteristics do not make a significant difference on the perceived levels of burnout of Iranian teachers. In this sense, we recommend that future studies explore how school contextual variables can mediate or moderate the effect of sociodemographic characteristics on teachers' burnout.

Although the novel COVID-19 pandemic is a recent global health crisis, its impact on mental health is beginning to be confirmed by several recent studies (Bradley & Chahar, 2020; Giusti et al., 2020; Talaei et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020). It is therefore urgent that the different education agents (i.e., principals, school and educational psychologists, municipalities) begin early to design initiatives to support teachers. Results of our study suggest the importance of developing preventive intervention programmes with teachers who exhibit low levels of burnout, focused on the sociocultural and contextual variables. In remedial intervention programmes to help teachers who already perceive high levels of burnout, it may be important to consider individual differences for a more effective support. Thus, intervention programmes should consider local schools' characteristics and be sensitive to teachers' individual needs. Psychosocial support should consider the added weight of the pandemic to teachers' daily job-related stressors.

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