

## Burnout and Self Esteem among Social Workers in Gaza-Palestine

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**الملخص:** هدفت الدراسة لمعرفة مدى انتشار الإحترق النفسي لدى أخصائيي الخدمة الإجتماعية في محافظات غزة. استخدم الباحثون استبانة ماسلاخ للإحترق واستبانة التقدير الذاتي. وتم توزيع الإستبانتين على 250 أخصائياً وأرجعت 176 استبانة جاهزة للتحميل وبنسبة استجابة 70.4%. أظهرت النتائج وجود نسب عالية من الإحترق على النحو التالي: 56.2 درجة عالية من الإنهاك العاطفي، 67.0% درجة عالية من تبدد الشخصية و كذلك 85.8% درجة عالية من انخفاض الإنجاز الشخصي. وأظهرت النتائج علاقة سلبية بين تقدير الذات والاحترق. كما أشارت إلى فروقات ذات دلالة إحصائية في مستوى الإحترق تعود إلى العمر (الأصغر)، الخبرة الأقل ومكان العمل (خارج الحكومة والوكالة). وأظهرت النتائج أن النساء أكثر احترقاً من الرجال على الرغم من عدم وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية. ويمكن الإستنتاج أن معدل الإحترق النفسي لدى أخصائيي الخدمة الإجتماعية في محافظات غزة كان مرتفعاً وعليه يقترح الباحثون برنامجاً لتقليل مستوى الإحترق لديهم وكذلك العمل على خلق بيئة عمل مريحة لهم.

**Abstract: Purpose:** This study determined the prevalence of Burnout Syndrome among Palestinian social workers in Gaza Strip. Tools: The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and Self-Esteem Scale (Richardson & Benbow, 1990) questionnaire were distributed to all eligible social workers in Gaza (n=250). One hundred and seventy six (176) participants completed and returned the questionnaire with response rate 70.40%. **Result:** Participants reported high prevalence of burnout syndrome which represented as follows: 56.2% high level of Emotional Exhaustions (EE), 67.0% high level of Depersonalisation (DP) and 85.8% high level of Reduced Personal Accomplishment (RPA). Positive self esteem was correlated negatively with burnout. Results indicated significant differences in burnout due to age (being younger), experience (less experienced) and type of employer (neither governmental nor UNRWA). Females were more burnout but did not reach significant difference. **Conclusion:** It can be concluded that Palestinian social workers in Gaza are highly burnout. Burnout reduction programme is suggested and comfortable working

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environment is recommended.

**Key words:** Burnout, self-esteem social worker, Gaza

## **Introduction**

Social workers deliver a broad range of vital services and, thus, play a critical role in ensuring the well-being of society's most vulnerable members (Kim et al, 2011). Social workers are considered an occupational group at above-average risk for burnout (Soderfeldt et al, 1995). According to an American national study (Whitaker et al, 2006), social workers face increasing levels of paperwork and inadequate supervision.

In Maslach model, burnout is viewed as a syndrome that consists of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being depleted of one's emotional resources (Maslach et al, 2001). Depersonalisation refers to negative, cynical or excessively detached response to other people at work. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to feelings of decline in one's competence and productivity and to one's lowered sense of self-efficacy (Pines & Keinan, 2005).

Social workers experiencing burnout have an increased risk of psychological distress, such as depression (Stanley et al, 2007). Burnout can negatively affect overall self-rated health status (Peterson et al, 2008) and can lead to a broad range of health problems, including somatic complaints (Soares et al, 2007); cardiovascular diseases (Melamed et al, 2006); gastrointestinal problems (Sveinsdottir et al, 2007); sleep disturbances (Grossi et al, 2003); decreased immunity (Melamed et al, 2006); headaches, flu-like illnesses and common colds (Burke & Mikkelsen, 2006).

Social worker burnout is a serious problem because it can adversely affect the quality and stability of social services. Burnout in social workers may lead to poor services and deterioration in rapport and trust, treating others as objects, callous and cruel remarks made towards others, physical force being used and less time spent with clients, less eye contact, with workers making and taking longer breaks (Mor Barak et al, 2001).

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There is an abundance of literature in relation to social worker's burnout but nothing has been undertaken in Gaza. It is especially important to look at Gaza given the conditions in which many social workers have to work after the war and continuous comprehensive siege that affects all life aspects in Gaza.

### **Research questions**

#### ***Main question***

What is the nature of association between burnout and self-esteem among social workers in Gaza Strip?

#### ***Sub-questions***

- What is the prevalence of burnout among social workers in Gaza Strip?
- Are there any differences in the level of burnout among social workers in Gaza associated with pertinent variables such as gender, salary, age, years of experience, type of employer and marital status?
- Is there a significant correlation between level of burnout and its dimension and level of self-esteem?

### **Materials and methods**

The descriptive correlational design was used in this study. The survey was conducted from May 2011 to July 2010. The population studied comprised all social workers in Gaza Strip. After obtaining ethical approval from the authorised administrations, the Arabic versions of questionnaire were handed to all eligible social workers (n=250) to participate as study respondents. Participants provided their consent prior the completion of the questionnaire, after reading a summary of information regarding the purpose of the survey, and their confidentiality and anonymity were assured on at the front page. The total time required to answer the questionnaire was estimated at approximately 20 minutes.

#### ***Instrument***

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to measure burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). MBI is the most commonly used instrument for the measurement of burnout. It consists of 22 items

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assessing three components of Burnout Syndrome, namely Emotional Exhaustion (nine items), Depersonalisation (five items) and Reduced Personal Accomplishment (eight items). It asks respondents to indicate the frequency over the work year with which they have experienced each feeling on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). Low burnout: EE score  $0\pm 18$ , DP score  $0\pm 5$ , PA score  $40+$ ; Moderate burnout: EE score  $19\pm 26$ , DP score  $6\pm 9$ , PA score  $34\pm 39$ ; High burnout: EE score  $27+$ , DP score  $10+$ , PA score  $0\pm 33$ . It should be noted that high levels of EE and DP and low levels of PA are anticipated in the individual who is burned out.

Respondents' self-esteem was measured using Richardson & Benbow's (1990) Self-esteem Scale consisting of the following six items: first, 'I take a positive attitude toward myself'; second, 'I feel am a person of worth, on an equal place with others'; third, 'I am able to do things as well as most other people'; fourth, 'On the whole, I'm satisfied with myself'; fifth, 'at times I think I am no good at all'; and finally, 'I feel I do not have much to be proud of'. The scale had acceptable reliability.

Back-translation and bilingual technique was used in this study. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic by two independent translators. Each translation was compared and double checked for accuracy and the communication of the Arabic meaning for the words. As the questionnaire translation was reviewed, the meaning, clarity and the appropriateness to the cultural values of the intended subjects were assured. The final Arabic version was then translated back into English by two Arabic experts who were fluent in both the English and Arabic languages, and checked against the original English version.

***Participants***

Due to the small number of Palestinian social workers, it was decided that the questionnaire should be given to all members of the population to ensure more reliability of data. The response rate was 70.40%; 176 out of 250 social workers returned the completed survey forms.

***Data analysis***

SPSS.16 (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL, USA) statistical system was used

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to analyse the data in this study. Statistical assumptions were tested prior to running the analyses, and all variables were found to satisfy the assumptions for the normal distribution, homogeneity of variance and independence of observations. In this study, reliability Coefficients (Cronbach's Alpha) of Self-esteem Scale was 0.82 and of the MBI subscales were: 0.85, 0.82, 0.88 respectively. According to Moore (2000), the use of a total score to represent total burnout has been avoided, so no reliability tests were performed on the total score measuring burnout.

### **Results**

A total of 176 questionnaires were returned and females represented 51.1% respondents. Most of participants are married (76.7%), while 48.3% respondents came from UNRWA (see Table 1). The average age of the sample was 34.21 years (SD=8.3), and the average monthly salary was \$706.7.

**Table 1: General characteristics of the respondents (N = 176)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	85	48.3
	Female	91	51.7
<b>Employee type</b>	UNRWA	85	48.3
	Government	52	29.5
	Others	39	22.2
<b>Age</b>	19-30	56	31.8
	31-40	85	48.3
	41-50	27	15.3
	51-60	8	4.5
<b>Experience</b>	1-5	102	58.0
	6-10	49	27.8
	11-15	15	8.5
	>15	10	5.7
<b>Salary</b>	<500	60	34.1
	>500	116	65.9
	Single	30	17.0

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<b>Marital status</b>	Married	135	76.7
	Divorced/widowed	11	6.2

As shown in Table 2, about two thirds of the respondents fell into a 'high depersonalisation' category, and an additional 31.2% (n=55) were in the 'average' group. More than 56% (n=99) of the respondents scored high on the emotional exhaustion subscale, and about 38.6% (n=68) scored in the medium emotional exhaustion group. Of the respondents, 85.8% (n=151) scored high on the reduced personal accomplishment subscale. Only 4.5% (n=8) scored low on this measure. It is very clear that social workers fell into the high categories of burnout in all subscales. To sum up, 56.2, 67.0 and 85.8 percent of social workers in Gaza who participated in this study experienced high burnout in the aspects of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment respectively.

**Table 2: Prevalence of burnout in social workers**

<b>Subscale</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Emotional Exhaustion (EE)</b>	High	99	56.2
	Moderate	68	38.6
	Low	9	5.2
<b>Depersonalisation (DP)</b>	High	118	67.0
	Moderate	55	31.2
	Low	3	1.8
<b>Reduced Personal Accomplishment (RPA)</b>	High	151	85.8
	Moderate	17	9.7
	Low	8	4.5

The independent sample t-test output Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference between males and females in MBI subscales except in PA (P=0.032). Obviously, but not significantly, female social workers had higher means of emotional exhaustion (trivial effect size: 0.14) and depersonalisation (trivial effect size: 0.11). Also, it shows no significant difference in all MBI subscales due to monthly salary.

**Table 3: Differences in MBI due to gender and salary**

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MBI		N	Mean	SD	t value	P	Diff-means (95% CIs)	d
EE	Male	80	27.5	7.5	-1.887	0.061	-2.3 (-4.6, 0.1)	0.14
	Female	85	29.8	7.9				
DP	Male	85	11.5	4.7	-1.447	0.150	0.6 (-2.2, 0.3)	0.11
	Female	86	12.4	3.6				
PA	Male	83	26.4	5.6	-2.163	<b>0.032</b>	0.8 (-3.5, -0.2)	0.17
	Female	85	28.2	5.3				
EE	<\$500	56	27.5	8.2	-1.430	0.155	-1.8 (-4.3, 0.7)	0.08
	>\$500	109	29.3	7.5				
DP	<\$500	58	12.3	3.7	0.707	0.480	0.5 (-0.9, 1.8)	0.04
	>\$500	113	11.8	4.4				
PA	<\$500	58	27.3	5.0	-0.010	0.992	-0.00 (-1.8, 1.8)	0.00
	>\$500	110	27.3	5.8				

Cohen's d (effect size): Trivial <0.20, Small 0.20-0.49, Medium 0.50-0.79, Large ≥0.80

The ANOVA output Table 4 shows no significant differences in Emotional Exhaustion due to age, experience and marital status. The only significant difference was due to employer type (F=4.210, p=0.017). Scheffe test output shows that Emotional Exhaustion is higher among social workers employed in sectors neither governmental nor UNRWA.

**Table 4: Differences in MBI-EE due to age, experience, employee type and marital status**

MBI-EE		N	Mean	SD	F (df)	P	η <sup>2</sup>
Age	<30	52	29.8	6.5	1.895 (3, 161)	0.133	<b>0.034</b>
	31-40	81	29.0	8.3			
	41-50	24	26.9	8.2			
	51-60	8	23.8	6.5			
Experience	1-5	96	29.5	7.7	1.668 (3, 161)	0.176	<b>0.030</b>
	6-10	47	28.4	7.8			
	11-15	12	25.3	7.4			

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	> 15	10	25.6	8.0			
<b>Employer type</b>	UNRWA	85	28.5	7.4	4.210 (2, 162)	<b>0.017</b>	<b>0.049</b>
	Government	52	26.9	7.6			
	Others	39	31.7	8.2			
<b>Marital status</b>	Single	28	27.9	6.7	0.294 (2, 162)	0.746	<b>0.004</b>
	Married	128	28.9	8.1			
	Others	9	27.6	6.0			

Eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ) effect size: Trivial < 0.01, Small 0.01-0.05 Medium, 0.06-0.13, Large  $\geq 0.14$

The ANOVA output Table 5 shows significant differences ( $F=8.684$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) Depersonalisation due to age (large effect size: 0.135). Scheffe test output shows that burnout is higher among younger social workers. It shows significant differences ( $F=4.087$ ,  $p=0.008$ ) in DP due to experience (medium effect size: 0.068). Scheffe test output shows that burnout is higher among social workers with less experience. Also, it shows significant differences in DP ( $F=4.071$ ,  $p=0.019$ ) due to marital status (small effect size: 0.046). Scheffe test output shows that Depersonalisation is higher among single social workers. No significant difference in DP was found due to employer type.

**Table 5: Differences in MBI-DP due to age, experience, employee type and marital status**

<b>MBI-DP</b>		<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>F (df)</b>	<b>P</b>	<b><math>\eta^2</math></b>
<b>Age</b>	<30	54	12.7	3.8	8.684 (3, 167)	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.135</b>
	31-40	82	12.7	4.3			
	41-50	27	9.9	2.9			
	51-60	8	6.8	3.5			
<b>Experience</b>	1-5	98	12.5	2.1	4.087 (3, 167)	<b>0.008</b>	<b>0.068</b>
	6-10	49	12.2	4.1			
	11-15	14	9.0	4.1			
	> 15	10	9.7	4.5			
<b>Employer type</b>	Government	80	11.2	4.3	2.953 (2, 168)	0.055	<b>0.034</b>
	UNRWA	52	12.8	4.3			

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	Others	39	12.5	3.4			
<b>Marital status</b>	Single	28	13.9	3.9	4.071 (2, 168)	<b>0.019</b>	<b>0.046</b>
	Married	132	11.7	4.3			
	Others	11	10.5	2.8			

Eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ) effect size: Trivial < 0.01, Small 0.01-0.05 Medium, 0.06-0.13, Large  $\geq 0.14$

The ANOVA output Table 6 shows no significant differences in Reduced Personal Accomplishment due to experience, employer type and marital status. It shows significant differences ( $F=9.563$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) due to age (large effect size: 0.149). Scheffe test output shows that Reduced Personal Accomplishment is higher among younger social workers.

**Table 6: Differences in MBI-PA due to age, experience, employer type & marital status**

MBI-PA		N	Mean	SD	F (df)	P	$\eta^2$
<b>Age</b>	<30	51	28.6	4.8	9.563 (3, 164)	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.149</b>
	31-40	84	27.8	4.8			
	41-50	25	25.9	4.7			
	51-60	8	18.6	10.3			
<b>Experience</b>	1-5	96	28.0	4.7	2.198 (3, 164)	<b>0.090</b>	<b>0.039</b>
	6-10	49	27.1	5.0			
	11-15	13	25.9	11.1			
	> 15	10	23.8	3.0			
<b>Employer type</b>	UNRWA	80	26.5	6.0	1.660 (2, 165)	<b>0.193</b>	<b>0.020</b>
	Government	52	28.2	4.5			
	Others	36	27.9	5.6			
<b>Marital status</b>	Single	27	27.7	5.2	1.237 (2, 165)	<b>0.293</b>	<b>0.015</b>
	Married	132	27.4	5.5			
	Others	9	24.6	6.5			

Eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ) effect size: Trivial < 0.01, Small 0.01-0.05 Medium, 0.06-0.13, Large  $\geq 0.14$

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Pearson Correlations Table 7 shows significant negative correlations were found between the three burnout subscales (Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalisation and Reduced Personal Accomplishment) and Self-esteem Scale. This means that the higher burnout social workers have the lower self esteem they get.

**Table 7: Pearson Correlations between burnout dimensions and self-esteem measure**

Measure	EE	DP	PA	SE
EE	1			
DP	0.421**	1		
PA	0.315**	.0380**	1	
SE	-0.320**	-0.238**	0.348**	1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Discussion**

The results of this study showed that 56.2, 67.0 and 85.8 percent of the respondents experienced high burnout in the aspects of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalisation and Reduced Personal Accomplishment respectively. The results of the present study may be regarded as significant indicators of the prevalence of burnout among Palestinian social workers in Gaza Strip. The findings indicate that 56.2% of these social workers felt that they could no longer dedicate themselves to the work they intended to do. Moreover, 85.8% of them lacked the sense of personal accomplishment in their professional careers and 67.0% had negative feelings towards their clients.

When compared with other studies, the present findings suggest that social workers in Gaza experience higher levels of burnout than those in the West Bank-Palestine who had 20% high EE, 46.7% DP and 53% RPA (Abdallah, 2009). Siebert (2005) concluded that about three-fourths of 751 social workers reported having had trouble with burnout during their careers. Poulin & Walter (1993) estimated that 60% of 1,196 gerontological social workers experienced moderate to high levels of emotional exhaustion. Anderson (2000) found that

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about 62% of 151 frontline child protective services (CPS) workers were experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion.

Self-esteem was found to be negatively correlated with burnout. This shows the importance of paying more attention to social workers' self-esteem and to make additional efforts to promote social workers' sense of self-worth. It is the time to support social workers by their administrators and supervisors especially when they work in such difficult situations in Gaza with client populations who are themselves highly stressed. This result was in line with Abdallah (2009) and Golembiewski & Kim (1989).

The results show that younger and less experienced social workers tended to experience higher levels of burnout than did older and more experienced social workers. The literature suggests that younger social workers may have less stability and experience and tend to be more idealistic, while older social workers tend to have more realistic expectations. Also, older social workers are likely to be more mature and less over-identified with their clients than younger social workers. This was similar to the findings of Abdallah (2009) and Guterman & Baragal (1996).

Results indicated that single people are more vulnerable because of less familial support. This was similar to the findings of Courage & Williams (1987). Results found that female social workers were more burnout than males. This could be because women are more likely to be emotionally involved and dedicated. This is similar to Abdallah (2009) and Himle et al (1987).

Social workers employed in institutions neither governmental nor UNRWA experienced higher burnout. This could be because of the structure of some organisations which is not clear to the researchers at the moment. This result was supported by Mor Barak et al (2001).

### **Recommendations**

Based on the study findings, the researchers suggest specific plans of action in order to provide a quality work environment for social workers. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Provide information on social workers level of burnout to each head of department. This may influence them in improving better

work environment.

2. Prepare detailed documentation on the findings of the study as baseline information for the next studies.
3. For further understanding of burnout, more studies are needed to explore its prevalence in different occupations and social groups.
4. The unique political, social and cultural attributes of Gaza-Palestine should be considered when planning any burnout reduction program or stress management strategy.
5. Provide social workers strong support facilities for counselling and recreational activities.

### **Conclusion**

This study has provided useful information on Gaza social worker levels of their burnout by using the MBI inventory. The study identified high level of burnout in all MBI subscales. In the next future, a focus group discussion should be performed as a follow-up to explore further the actual causes of burnout. The recommendations arising from this study include the need for a supportive environment and implementing interventions to deal with stress and burnout among social workers in Gaza.

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