

Prevalence Of Job Stress, Burnout And Coping Strategies Among The Workers At Colombo Sea Port In Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Background

Job stress and burnout are prevalent among workers in high demand environments, such as the Colombo Sea Port. This study explores the prevalence of job stress, burnout, and coping strategies among sea port workers.

Methods

A cross-sectional study was conducted with 427 workers at the Colombo Sea Port. Data were collected using structured questionnaires focusing on job stress, burnout, and coping strategies. The prevalence of job stress and burnout was assessed, and ANOVA tests were used to identify differences based on demographic and job-related factors. Chi-square tests were employed to explore the relationship between coping strategies and stress levels.

Results

The study found that 66.7% of workers reported low levels of job stress, while 9.6% reported severe stress. Burnout, particularly occupational exhaustion, was high among workers, with 30% experiencing a high degree of burnout. Problem focused coping strategies were used by 84.5% of workers, while 70.3% used emotion focused strategies. Statistically significant differences in job stress and burnout were found across education, income, job category, and service experience while the coping strategies were significantly associated with job stress and burnout levels.

Conclusions

The findings highlight a high prevalence of job stress and burnout among sea port workers, with coping strategies playing a critical role in managing stress. Interventions targeting job stress, burnout prevention, and promoting effective coping mechanisms are essential for improving workers' mental health.

Keywords: Job stress, Coping strategies, job insecurity, job performance, Job Satisfaction, Psychological Well-Being.

1. Introduction

The occupation of an individual is a vital aspect of their life as it occupies the majority their life journey. When a person fulfills his or her requirements, expectations and desires, he or she can get a feeling of pleasure. Several studies showed that the level of health status of the employees was directly associated with their occupation. Therefore, governments in many developed countries have already established or are in the process of drafting legislation regarding work practices that affect the health of their employees [1].

The meaning of stress can be different under different conditions and in different people. According to Hans selye the stress is defined as “nonspecific response of the body to any demand” [2]. He has also argued that stress is not only related to emotional status and nervous tension, but that it can also occur in plant and bacterial species that lack a nervous system [3]. The World Health Organization has termed stress the health epidemic of the 21st Century [4]. Job stress is a harmful physical and emotional response that has been shown to have a negative influence on the health and wellbeing of the workers, as well as a negative impact on the workplace productivity by reducing the profit of the company. In every work sector, workplace stress is becoming an integral part of the job as competition among companies is growing day by day. Therefore, it leads to improving the stressful conditions for workers everywhere. The main determinant for the stress could be “inability to meet the demands of the job, mismatch with job profile, job insecurity, relationship with colleagues and other organizational structural factors” [1]. Occupational stress has become and major source of stress in America during the past few decades [4]. Therefore, the human resource department in an organization or an institute needs to have a proper stress management system by listening to the employees and giving them confidence and mentoring [5].

The burnout is a condition of “A psychological condition of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment occurring in people persistently exposed to emotional and interpersonal stressors at work” [6]. Excessive and prolonged stress leads to the condition of burnout, which is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion. It reduces workplace productivity and leads to increased feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. This response has three main dimensions like overwhelming tiredness, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the task, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment [1]. Proper management of burnout leads to increasing the employee’s commitment. Therefore, to maintain a high level of commitment of human resources in an organization, frequent monitoring and control of the burnout status of employees is most necessary [7].

Furthermore, the high work engagement was positively associated with life satisfaction and negatively associated with depressive symptoms and burnout [8]. The burnout is directly associated with the workload and working environment as well as working experience. The less the working experiences the grater the burnout among them [9]. According to a study was done in Sri Lanka, there is no relationship between employees’ performance with workload, working environment and working culture & structure [10].

Coping is the process of “ongoing efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands appraised as taxing or overwhelming”. There are several ways of describing a coping process. The two basic approaches are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping [9]. As Colombo seaport is the largest and busiest seaport in Sri Lanka, it is vital to understand the coping strategies among seaport workers to implement intervention for them.

Job stress and burnout negatively impact job performance, health, and organizational efficiency [1,6]. Due to limited research studies on port workers in Sri Lanka, this study assesses their prevalence and coping mechanisms. Identifying these factors will aid in policy formulation and interventions to enhance occupational well-being and productivity, ultimately fostering a sustainable workforce and improving job satisfaction [11]. Addressing these occupational health concerns is crucial for maintaining both individual well-being and overall organizational efficiency [10].

Job stress and burnout negatively impact job performance, work life balance, and organizational efficiency [12]. Given the limited research on port workers in Sri Lanka, this study assesses their prevalence and coping mechanisms. Identifying these factors will

aid in policy formulation and interventions to enhance occupational well-being and productivity, ultimately fostering a sustainable workforce and improving job satisfaction.

Job stress and burnout can lead to decreased job performance, health complications, and reduced organizational efficiency [12], and this study aims to assess the prevalence of these issues and the coping mechanisms employed by Colombo Sea Port workers. Identifying these factors will facilitate policy formulation and intervention strategies to improve occupational well-being and productivity. Given the limited research on port workers in Sri Lanka, this study aims to determine the prevalence of job stress, burnout, and coping strategies among workers at Colombo Sea Port. Specifically, it seeks to measure job stress in relation to workload, job demands, and organizational factors, assess burnout levels based on emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement, and explore the coping mechanisms used by workers, including both problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches. Furthermore, addressing the occupational health concerns will contribute to a more sustainable workforce, enhancing both individual job satisfaction and overall organizational performance.

2. Material and methods

The study was a descriptive cross-sectional design aimed at assessing the prevalence of job stress, burnout, and coping strategies among workers at Colombo Sea Port. The research was conducted between 01/10/2021 and 31/09/2022, with data collection occurring from 01/02/2022 to 30/04/2022. The study population included workers from various job categories at the port, such as dockworkers, port operators, administrative, security, and technical personnel, who had been employed for at least six months. Workers with a psychiatric illness, those incapable of providing informed consent, or those on medical or disability leave during the data collection period were excluded. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select participants from distinct subgroups based on job categories. Data was gathered using a validated, pre-tested self-administered questionnaire, developed after a literature review and expert consultations. The questionnaire covered socio-demographic information, job stress (using the American Institute of Stress Workplace Stress Scale), burnout (using the Maslach Burnout Inventory), and coping strategies (using the Brief COPE Questionnaire), all of which were locally validated. The questionnaire was available in English, Sinhala, and Tamil. Data collection took place in a private, isolated setting to ensure confidentiality, with all participants providing informed written consent. The response sheets remained anonymous to protect the participants' privacy.

In the data analysis phase, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic and job-related characteristics of the workers at Colombo Sea Port. ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) tests were conducted to examine the differences in job stress and burnout levels across various demographic and job-related factors, including education, income, job category, and service experience. The Chi-square test was used to assess the association between the coping strategies (problem focused and emotion focused) and the levels of job stress and burnout. This analysis allowed for a deeper understanding of the relationships between demographic factors, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being among Colombo Sea port workers, providing a basis for future targeted interventions to manage job stress and burnout.

3. Results

The socio-demographic characteristics of the study population reveal basic insights into the participants (Table 1). The majority of participants were in the age group of 41-50 years (29.5%) and above 50 years (30.0%). In terms of gender, a significantly higher proportion of participants were female (71.7%) compared to male (28.3%). Ethnically, the majority were Sinhalese (87.4%) with Tamils and Muslims comprising smaller proportions.

Regarding education, a large portion had completed up to A/L (39.6%), followed by O/L passed (23.9%) and diploma/graduate or higher qualifications (13.6%). The majority of participants had a monthly household income between Rs. 50,001-100,000 (50.6%), with a smaller proportion earning less than Rs. 10,000 (4.7%). In terms of marital status, most were married (84.1%), with a smaller proportion being unmarried (15.5%) or divorced (0.5%).

The service period indicated that a significant number of workers (73.1%) had been employed for less than 2 years, while 26.9% had more than 2 years of service. A notable percentage of participants had children (75.6%), and the majority of them had 2 or

fewer children (57.6%). Smoking and alcohol use were reported by 17.1% and 43.3% of participants, respectively. Additionally, 52.5% of the participants reported having chronic diseases, highlighting a significant proportion with health concerns.

Table 1: Socio Demography Characteristic (n=427)

Variable	Number	Percentage (%)
Age		
20-30 years	74	17.3%
31-40 years	99	23.2%
41-50 years	126	29.5%
Above 50 years	128	30.0%
Sex		
Female	306	71.7%
Male	121	28.3%
Ethnicity		
Sinhalese	373	87.4%
Tamil	35	8.2%
Muslim	19	4.4%
Level of education		
Grade 6-10	3	0.7%
Up to O/L	16	3.7%
O/L passed	102	23.9%
Up to A/L	79	18.5%
A/L passed	169	39.6%
Diploma/graduate or higher	58	13.6%
Monthly Household Income (Rs.)		
<10,000	20	4.7%

10001-25000	26	6.1%
25001-50000	66	15.5%
50001-100000	216	50.6%
>100000	99	23.2%

Marital Status

Married	359	84.1%
Unmarried	66	15.5%
Divorced	2	0.5%

Service period

Less than 1 year	194	45.4%
1-2 years	227	53.2%
More than 3 years	6	1.4%

Having children

Yes	323	75.6%
No	43	10.1%
Not applicable	61	14.3%

No of children

2 or less	246	57.6%
More than 2	181	42.4%

Smoking

Yes	73	17.1%
No	354	82.9%

Alcohol use

Yes	185	43.3%
No	242	56.7%
Chronic diseases		
Yes	224	52.5%
No	203	47.5%

Table 2 presents the prevalence of job stress levels among the workers at Colombo Sea Port. The majority of workers (66.7%) reported low levels of job stress, followed by 20.8% experiencing moderate job stress. A smaller proportion reported severe job stress (9.6%), and 2.8% of the workers were found to be at potentially dangerous levels of job stress.

Table 2: Prevalence of Job stress among workers at Colombo Sea Port (n=427)

Job Stress level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
low level of job stress	285	66.7
moderate level of job stress	89	20.8
severe level of job stress	41	9.6
potentially dangerous level of job stress	12	2.8

The prevalence of burnout among workers, focusing on three key components: Occupational Exhaustion, Depersonalization/Loss of Empathy, and Personal Accomplishment. For Occupational Exhaustion, 41.9% of the workers reported low levels, 28.1% experienced moderate levels, and 30.0% faced high levels of exhaustion. Regarding Depersonalization/Loss of Empathy, 39.6% had low degrees, 28.1% had moderate degrees, and 32.3% had high degrees. Finally, for Personal Accomplishment, the majority of workers (53.2%) reported low degrees of burnout, 13.6% had moderate degrees, and 33.3% experienced high degrees of burnout (Table 2). These results indicate significant levels of burnout, particularly in terms of personal accomplishment and occupational exhaustion.

Table 3: prevalence of burnout among workers at Colombo Sea Port (n=427)

Burnout level	Burnout level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Burnout-Occupational Exhaustion	Low degree	179	41.9%
	Moderate degree	120	28.1%
	High degree	128	30.0%
Burnout-depersonalization/ loss of empathy	Low degree	169	39.6%
	Moderate degree	120	28.1%
	High degree	138	32.3%
Burnout- personal accomplishment	Low degree	227	53.2%
	Moderate degree	58	13.6%
	High degree	142	33.3%

Table 4 presents the ANOVA results for the burnout total score by various demographic and job-related factors, including education, income, job category, and service experience. For education, the ANOVA results show a significant difference between groups ($F = 4.344$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that education level has a significant impact on burnout scores. Similarly, for income, the analysis revealed a significant difference between income groups ($F = 8.242$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that income level is a significant factor in burnout levels among workers. Regarding job category, the ANOVA indicates a significant effect ($F = 2.265$, $p = 0.002$), with differences in burnout scores across various job categories. Finally, for service experience, the results show a significant difference ($F = 11.918$, $p = 0.000$), meaning that the length of service also plays a significant role in burnout levels among workers. These results suggest that education, income, job category, and service experience all significantly influence burnout among the workers at Colombo Sea Port.

Table 04: ANOVA Summary Table for Burnout Total Score by Demographic and Job-Related Factors

Variable		Sum of Squares	Degrees of freedom (df)	Mean square	F value	P value
Education	Between groups	9695.497	5	1939.099	4.344	.001
	Within groups	187924.962	421	446.378		
	Total	197620.459	426			
Income	Between groups	14319.772	4	3579.943	8.242	.000

	Within groups	183300.687	422	434.362		
	Total	197620.459	426			
	Between groups	17955.442	18	997.525	2.265	.002
Job category	Within groups	179665.017	408	440.355		
	Total	197620.459	426			
	Between groups	10517.990	2	5258.995	11.918	.000
Service experience	Within groups	187102.469	424	441.279		
	Total	197620.459	426			

ANOVA results for job stress total score by various demographic and job-related factors, including education, income, job category, and service experience has described in table 5. For education, the ANOVA results indicate a significant difference between education groups ($F = 3.041$, $p = 0.010$), suggesting that education level has a notable impact on job stress levels among workers. Similarly, for income, there is a significant effect ($F = 4.061$, $p = 0.003$), meaning that income level is an important factor influencing job stress. And the job category, the analysis reveals a significant difference across job categories ($F = 3.452$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that job category significantly affects job stress levels. However, for service experience, the results show a marginally significant effect ($F = 2.956$, $p = 0.053$), suggesting that while service experience may influence job stress, the effect is not as strong or conclusive as for the other factors. Therefore, in summary, education, income, and job category are significant factors influencing job stress levels, while service experience appears to have a lesser impact.

Table 05: ANOVA Summary Table for job stress Total Score by Demographic and Job-Related Factors

Variable		Sum of Squares	Degrees of freedom (df)	Mean square	F value	P value
Education	Between groups	405.852	5	81.170	3.041	.010
	Within groups	11235.684	421	26.688		
	Total	11641.536	426			
Income	Between groups	431.523	4	107.881	4.061	.003
	Within groups	11210.014	422	26.564		
	Total	11641.536	426			
Job category	Between groups	1538.443	18	85.469	3.452	.000
	Within groups	10103.093	408	24.762		
	Total	11641.536	426			

Service	Between groups	160.104	2	80.052	2.956	.053
experience	Within groups	11481.433	424	27.079		
	Total	11641.536	426			

Table 6 presents the coping strategies employed by workers at Colombo Sea Port, categorized into problem-focused and emotion-focused coping mechanisms. For problem focused coping strategies, the majority of workers (84.5%) reported using high levels of this coping strategy, while 15.5% indicated low usage. This suggests that most workers prefer to address and solve the problems causing stress rather than focusing on emotional responses. For emotion focused coping strategies, 70.3% of workers reported using high levels of this strategy, while 29.7% used it at a low level. This indicates that a substantial portion of workers also rely on emotion-focused coping mechanisms, such as managing their emotional responses to stress, though to a lesser extent than problem focused strategies. Therefore, workers at Colombo Sea Port predominantly employ problem focused coping strategies, with a significant number also utilizing emotion focused coping strategies.

Table 6: Coping strategies employed by workers at Colombo Sea Port considering both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping mechanisms.

Coping skill strategies		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Problem-focused coping strategies	Low	66	15.5%
	High	361	84.5%
Emotion-focused coping strategies	Low	127	29.7%
	High	300	70.3%

Table 7 examines the relationship between coping strategies and levels of job stress and burnout among workers at Colombo Sea Port. It reveals that workers experiencing higher levels of job stress, especially medium and severe stress, tend to use more emotion-focused coping strategies, with a significant association observed ($P = 0.013$). For burnout, a strong relationship is found between problem-focused coping and occupational exhaustion ($P < 0.001$), while emotion-focused coping is significantly linked to depersonalization/loss of empathy burnout ($P < 0.001$). Additionally, both coping strategies are associated with lower personal accomplishment burnout, with problem-focused coping showing a stronger connection. This suggests that workers with higher burnout levels use more emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies accordingly.

Table 7: Coping strategies employed by workers at Colombo Sea Port to manage job stress and burnout(n=472)

		Problem- focused coping strategies		Pearson- Chi value	P value	Emotion- focused coping strategies		Pearso n- Chi value	P value
		Low	High			Low	High		
Job Stress	Low	39	246	3.09	0.378	98	187	10.72	0.013
	Medium	18	71			21	68		
	Severe	6	35			5	36		
	Potential dangerous	3	9			3	9		
Burnout- Occupational exhaustion	Low	36	143	24.37	<0.001	53	126	0.79	0.373
	Moderate	27	93			39	81		
	High	3	120			35	93		
Burnout- Depersonaliz ation/ loss of empathy	Low	25	18	1.97	0.38	63	106	27.47	<0.001
	Moderate	23	120			46	74		
	High	18	138			18	120		
Burnout- Personal accomplishm ent	Low	52	175	20.75	<0.001	59	168	8.51	0.014
	Moderate	5	53			13	45		
	High	9	133			55	87		

4. Discussion

The findings of the current study on job stress, burnout, and coping strategies among workers at Colombo Sea Port provide valuable picture of the psychological well-being of employees similar to the maritime industry, as highlighted in several studies [5, 11]. The prevalence of job stress and burnout among workers in the port industry reflects critical concerns that need immediate attention for improving worker productivity and well-being.

The study revealed that a significant proportion of the workers (66.7%) reported low levels of job stress, while 20.8% experienced moderate levels, and 12.4% were affected by severe or potentially dangerous job stress levels. These findings are consistent with research conducted by [10] and [13], who highlighted the significant impact of job stress on performance, particularly in high pressure environments similar to this study setting. This could be attributed to the nature of the job, including long working hours, irregular shifts, and exposure to high workloads, all of which are stress inducing factors [3,4]. Such stressors are also known to contribute to health issues, as job stress is closely linked to both psychological distress and physical ailments [14].

Burnout, as measured by occupational exhaustion, depersonalization/loss of empathy, and personal accomplishment, was also prevalent among workers at Colombo Sea Port. The findings revealed that a substantial portion of the participants experienced moderate to high levels of burnout, particularly in the domain of depersonalization/loss of empathy, which is consistent with the results observed by [9] and [6]. The high levels of burnout in these dimensions are concerning as they can lead to reduced worker engagement, emotional exhaustion, and a negative impact on organizational performance [6]. This finding underscores the importance of addressing burnout to keep the mental and physical health of employees. This can ultimately contribute to improved productivity and job satisfaction [1].

Furthermore, the study showed that workers predominantly employed problem focused coping strategies, with 84.5% of participants using high levels of such strategies. These findings align with those of [8], who reported that employees in high-demand environments often adopt problem focused strategies to manage stress effectively. This approach, which involves actively addressing the source of stress, has been shown to improve coping effectiveness and prevent the long-term negative consequences of stress [4]. However, a notable portion of the workers also used emotion focused coping strategies (70.3% reported high levels), which are primarily aimed at managing emotional responses to stress. Emotion-focused coping strategies are often employed when individuals feel they have little control over the stressor, and they may include strategies such as emotional regulation, avoidance, or seeking social support [6]. While emotion focused strategies may provide short term relief, research suggests that depends heavily on these strategies could lead to maladaptive outcomes, such as increased emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction [9].

The relationship between demographic factors (such as education, income, job category, and service experience) with burnout and job stress highlighted further emphasizes the importance of understanding the influence of these variables on workers' mental health. Workers with lower education levels, lower income, or shorter service experience tended to experience higher levels of burnout and job stress, as found in this study and supported by previous research [15, 16]. This suggests that socioeconomic and professional factors play a critical role in shaping the experiences of job stress and burnout. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions, such as training programs, stress management workshops, and financial support mechanisms, to mitigate these stressors and promote a healthier work environment.

The analysis of coping strategies with job stress and burnout levels revealed significant associations between emotion focused coping and job stress levels, as well as between both problem focused and emotion focused coping strategies and burnout dimensions. Specifically, higher levels of problem focused coping were associated with lower levels of burnout, particularly in the domain of occupational exhaustion, while emotion focused coping was linked with higher levels of burnout in the depersonalization and personal accomplishment domains. These findings are consistent with the literature suggesting that problem focused coping mechanisms are more effective in managing job stress and preventing burnout [4, 6]. While emotion focused coping strategies helpful in providing emotional relief, may not be as effective in managing job stress or preventing burnout in the long term [3].

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study highlights the significant prevalence of job stress and burnout among workers at Colombo Sea Port, with the majority of employees experiencing moderate to severe levels of stress and burnout. The findings suggest that the workers predominantly employ problem focused coping strategies, which are generally considered more effective for managing stress. However, emotion-focused coping strategies, though less prevalent, are also employed by a considerable number of workers. The demographic and job-related factors, including education, income, job category, and service experience, were found to significantly influence the levels of job stress and burnout, suggesting that these factors play a crucial role in determining how workers cope with the demands of their jobs.

The study also revealed important associations between coping strategies and the levels of job stress and burnout, indicating that the types of coping strategies adopted by workers can have a significant impact on their psychological well-being. These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive interventions aimed at reducing stress and burnout. It is recommended that the management at Colombo Sea Port introduce targeted interventions, such as training programs that focus on enhancing problem focused coping strategies, which could be more effective in managing the stress. In addition, stress reduction workshops and workplace wellness programs could help employees better manage the emotional and physical demands of their jobs. Moreover, fostering social support networks within the workplace and providing access to mental health resources, such as counselling services, could also be valuable in mitigating the psychological impact of job stress and burnout.

Furthermore, organizations should consider addressing job-related factors that contribute to stress, such as excessive workloads and insufficient job control, which were identified as key determinants of burnout in previous studies [11, 14]. By creating a more supportive and balanced work environment, employers can not only enhance worker's mental health but also improve overall job satisfaction and productivity. Given the significant impact of burnout on worker performance, it is also essential for future research to further explore the effectiveness of different coping strategies and interventions, with a focus on tailoring these strategies to the unique needs of workers at high stress workplaces like Colombo Sea Port. Finally, a multisectoral approach that combines organizational support, individual coping skills development, and mental health resources can help reduce the negative effects of stress and burnout, fostering a healthier, more productive workforce.

The initial point of contact and the recruitment process must be professional and polite. We were adhered to the Colombo Sea Port administration's guidelines and protocols as well as any applicable legal and ethical regulations. Before disseminating the information sheet, the eligible participant was provided an overview of the study's purpose, objectives, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. They were also explained that participation is voluntary and that participants have the right to withdraw at any time without facing any negative consequences. Informed written consent was taken from each participant at the Colombo Sea Port. They were explained that they can refuse participation in the study at any time, despite giving consent to participate. The identifiable details weren't collected and kept the filled questionnaire under locked and the electronic data protection was done by using password. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of National Hospital of the Sri Lanka.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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