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### The Effect of Work Environment Quality on Reducing Stress Among Employed Women (A Case Study of Women in Turkey and Iran)

Mahdiah Mansouri,<sup>1</sup> Samira Mehrafza,<sup>2</sup>  DOI: 10.22034/MWS.2026.2059689.1017

1- Assistant Professor of Persian Language and Literature, Ahl al-Bayt International University, Tehran, Iran.

2- Assistant Professor of Architecture Engineering, Ahl al-Bayt International University

**Corresponding author:** [m.mansuri@abu.ac.ir](mailto:m.mansuri@abu.ac.ir)

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of the physical quality of the workplace environment on reducing women's stress and to identify factors that improve the quality of work environments for women in Iran and Turkey. With women's increasing presence in various social arenas and the multiple responsibilities they shoulder, improving their working conditions has gained particular importance. Not only can an appropriate workplace influence women's personal development, but also creating high-quality and aesthetically pleasing workspaces can help reduce stress and increase women's efficiency. Using a descriptive-comparative method, this research investigates women's stress in Iran and Turkey. Data were collected through field studies, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews with employed women in both countries. The impacts of environmental design on women's behavior and feelings in both contexts were also analyzed. The findings indicate that appropriate design and the physical quality of the workplace can significantly reduce women's stress. Creating safe and attractive spaces with proper functionality not only improves women's quality of working life but also increases their efficiency and productivity. Moreover, cultural and social differences in the two countries affect the ways these factors operate.

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## 1. Introduction

In examining the relationship between humans and the environment, it is important to understand environmental elements, environmental characteristics, and the meanings and messages arising from them. A deeper understanding of the environment becomes more valuable when, in addition to analyzing its elements and characteristics, the meanings and concepts derived from it and the perceptions of actors are also explored.

Today, the workplace environment in office buildings has become more important than ever. Therefore, attention to how work environments are designed has attracted architects and management experts alike. Since employees spend more than one-third of their daily time in their workplaces, it is essential to develop appropriate solutions to meet their physical and psychological needs and to enhance comfort in workspaces. The physical conditions of an office building play a major role in employees' satisfaction and comfort. Thus, designers must first examine and analyze all aspects of design and then proceed, because observing these environmental factors results in an appropriate and efficient space, and neglecting them can lead to job-related anxiety and reduced work performance.

Architects have always believed in creating desirable spaces for people's use. Being informed about how humans behave within office spaces becomes particularly important as a design principle (Kafaei Nejad, 2023). One discipline raised in this context is environmental psychology, which considers human values, attitudes, and needs to examine the relationship between people and the physical environment and their mutual effects. Since architecture is one of the most important aspects of human life and is directly related to the quality of daily life and the environments where we spend our days, environmental psychology, as an interdisciplinary topic, connects architecture with other fields such as psychology and ecology (Askari Tari et al., 2015). Psychological pressure or nervous pressure in psychology refers to a feeling of mental strain and tension. Tension or any stimulus that produces tension in humans is called a stressor. When a person's basic needs are not met, or for any reason their sense of calm is disrupted, they experience psychological pressure. Stress is regarded as one of the most important research topics of the present century and has received attention from various sciences, including environmental psychology. Stress can be divided into positive and negative forms: positive stress can facilitate achieving goals, while negative stress can have destructive effects on an individual's life.

Occupational stress is one of the fundamental challenges in work environments and can negatively affect employees' mental and physical health, especially that of employed women. The complex process of occupational stress has multiple and sometimes irreparable consequences, and at times women are so busy working and engaging in activities that they have insufficient time to reflect on their problems and stressors. Previous research shows that the factors affecting women's stress in the workplace and society are diverse and may be accompanied by psychological and physical problems.

Women make up half the population in any society, yet most spaces are designed based on men's characteristics. Empowering women and creating safe and optimized environments can help reduce stress and increase their efficiency. In this regard, creating high-quality and aesthetically pleasing workspaces can help reduce women's stress and increase their efficiency.

## Research Questions

How can the workplace contribute to reducing women's stress?

What is the relationship between the physical form of the workplace and women's stress levels?

### **Research Objectives**

This research aims to examine women's quality of working life and occupational stress in society and to identify factors that improve the quality of work environments for women in Iran and Turkey.

### **Research Method**

In terms of method, this study is descriptive-comparative and uses library and documentary studies. The collected data were used to extract and analyze the relevant information. Ultimately, the results can contribute to a better understanding of women's specific needs in workplace environments and to improving their working conditions. Moreover, the results of this study can be considered a reliable resource for policymakers and workplace-environment designers.

The research background on the impact of the physical quality of workplaces on women's stress involves reviewing and analyzing previous studies in this field. Given the growing importance of this topic, numerous studies in recent decades have examined factors influencing occupational stress and the quality of work environments.

### **Research Background**

Many studies have examined how architectural design and the physical workspace affect stress and mental health among employed women. Some of these studies are briefly introduced below.

Archers et al. (2019) studied 250 employed women in Ireland and found that workplace features such as lighting level, ventilation, and spatial layout were significantly associated with reduced stress and increased job satisfaction.

Stockholm et al. (2021) in Norway showed that appropriate design of shared and communication spaces, as well as providing opportunities for focus and rest for employed women, reduced stress and improved productivity.

Friedman & Lieberman (2022) in the United States reported that women working in environments designed according to psychological principles experienced less stress and a greater sense of well-being.

In Iran, Akbari et al. (2020) studied 180 employed women in Tehran and found that appropriate design regarding light, color, sound, and layout significantly reduced stress and increased psychological well-being.

Tokli & Rezaei (2021) in Turkey reported that physical workplace features such as access to natural and connective spaces positively affected stress reduction and improved mental health among employed women.

Given the research conducted in Iran and Turkey, architectural design and the physical dimension of workplace environments appear to significantly affect employed women's stress. A comparative examination in the two countries can provide useful findings.

Zahra Askari Tari (2023), in "The Impact of Environmental Psychology on the Formation of Social Interactions in Architectural Spaces," argued that behavioral-science issues, environmental impacts on human behavior, behavioral settings, human needs, and components of desirable social interactions were important in architectural design.

Arman Kafaee Nejad et al. (2023), in "Examining Factors in Workplace Design and Architecture that Increase Job Satisfaction and Employees' Psychological Calm," addressed environmental

factors and their effects in office design and how these influenced job satisfaction and psychological calm.

### **The Situation of Employed Women in Turkey and Iran**

Women's roles in the workforce over recent decades, especially in developing countries such as Turkey and Iran, have undergone unprecedented change. As women strive to establish a professional identity amid social and economic pressure, the workplace becomes a crucial factor shaping their work experiences (Kaya & Aydın, 2021). Workplace stress is increasingly recognized as a significant barrier to physical and mental health (Khan et al., 2020).

This article seeks to examine workplace quality in Turkey and Iran and its impact on stress levels among employed women, considering cultural, economic, and legal contexts that shape these environments.

In Turkey, women's labor-force participation has been influenced by numerous socio-cultural and economic factors. As of the early 2020s, the female labor-force participation rate was around 34% (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2022). Traditional gender roles, often prioritizing domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations, remain prevalent and limit opportunities for many women (Özdemir, 2021).

In contrast, Iran's labor market faces unique challenges, and women's labor-force participation is reported at around 17% (Statistical Center of Iran, 2022). The intertwining of religious teachings and socio-political systems complicates women's professional advancement and often results in increased stress and discrimination (Moghadam, 2020). Despite these concerning statistics, both countries have seen notable growth in women's entrepreneurship and professional participation in sectors such as education, healthcare, and technology (World Bank, 2021). Nevertheless, strengthening women's workforce participation requires addressing the nuances of workplace environments that either support or hinder women's career aspirations.

### **Understanding Workplace Quality**

Workplace quality includes several elements such as physical conditions, organizational culture, management practices, and work-life balance (Gonzalez & Garzón, 2021). Each of these can significantly affect stress levels. A supportive work environment promotes job satisfaction, commitment, and mental health, whereas a toxic environment can lead to burnout, anxiety, and reduced productivity (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

### **The Impact of Workplace Quality on Stress Levels**

Research suggests that a positive work environment can significantly reduce stress levels among employees (Kahn et al., 2020). For women in Turkey, a supportive workplace network, characterized by mentoring and collaborative relationships, can serve as a buffer against stress (Yildirim, 2022). However, many employed women report experiences of gender-based discrimination and harassment, which can intensify feelings of isolation and stress (Çelik & Yıldız, 2021).

In Iran, the workplace often reflects broader societal attitudes toward gender, and women frequently face institutional challenges (Moghadam, 2020). Corporate policies may lack comprehensive frameworks to address gender discrimination, leading to higher stress and anxiety among female employees. Additionally, the emphasis on traditional gender roles often forces women to balance professional commitments with extensive domestic responsibilities, further increasing stress (Gonzalez & Garzón, 2021).

### **Legal Frameworks and Their Impacts**

The legal environment in Turkey and Iran plays a pivotal role in shaping workplace conditions. Turkey has enacted various labor laws aimed at promoting gender equality, including regulations on maternity leave and anti-discrimination policies (European Commission, 2022). However, gaps in enforcement often persist, undermining potential benefits for women. The gender wage gap remains critical: women earn significantly less than men for similar work, which leads to stress and job dissatisfaction (World Economic Forum, 2023).

By contrast, Iran's legal framework is heavily influenced by Islamic principles and can affect women's work experiences both positively and negatively (Moghadam, 2020). Although laws exist to protect women's workplace rights, social perceptions often hinder effective implementation. As a result, many employed women navigate a complex landscape of legal rights that may not translate into tangible workplace support. Job security, workplace relationships, and professional development opportunities play vital roles in overall workplace quality (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In the cultural contexts of Turkey and Iran, cultural conceptions of gender roles are intertwined with workplace quality and influence how women experience stress at work.

### **3. Occupational Stress and Women**

Research indicates that women, due to multiple responsibilities and socio-cultural pressures, are more exposed to occupational stress than men. Leka et al. (2003) examined workplace stressors for women and emphasized that poor design of workspaces can exacerbate stress and psychological problems. Kahn and Byosiere (1992) examined the effects of social roles on women's workplace stress and showed that multiple roles can increase stress and reduce efficiency.

### **4. Cultural and Social Impacts**

Cultural and social differences have also been considered as factors influencing women's occupational stress. Bani Khamis et al. (2020), in a study comparing women's workplace conditions in Iran and Turkey, showed that cultural differences can affect how environmental factors influence women's stress. This suggests that workplace design should be tailored to the cultural and social characteristics of each society.

### **5. Stress-Reduction Approaches**

Some studies propose strategies to reduce stress in workplaces. Hobfoll (1989), in his Conservation of Resources theory, noted that providing safe and supportive work environments can reduce stress and increase job satisfaction. Also, designing workspaces using calming colors and natural light can enhance employees' sense of calm (Beightler et al., 1979).

The research background indicates that the effect of the physical quality of workplaces on women's stress is a complex and multidimensional issue requiring comprehensive and comparative investigation. The present study therefore seeks to identify factors that improve workplace quality for women and to analyze how environmental design affects their behavior and emotions. Clearly, creating safe environments, physically and psychologically, allows women to strengthen self-confidence, increase calmness and satisfaction, foster a sense of belonging, and by reducing negative stress, make workplaces safer and more optimized for women.

## **Architectural Design and the Physical Workspace**

### **1. Effects of Physical Design on Stress**

The physical design of the workplace includes factors such as natural light, appropriate ventilation, sufficient space for movement, and environmental orderliness. In Iran, due to climatic and cultural conditions, workspaces should be designed to maximize the use of natural light. Large windows and appropriate skylights can help reduce stress and improve employees' morale.

In Turkey, given advances in modern architecture, many workplaces use open and well-lit layouts, which help increase social interaction and reduce feelings of isolation (Bani Khamis et al., 2020). Therefore, creating environments that can convey such feelings to users is necessary, since the proper use of architectural elements—light, color, and form—is essential for creating vitality in space. Natural light can be introduced into workspaces through multiple methods, directly through windows and indirectly through roof light wells or sash-like windows, similar to those used in traditional Iranian architecture, which can make the workplace livelier.

Using pure colors such as red and yellow can make a space more vibrant and also increase dynamism and activity; however, caution is needed, because large areas of red can increase stress and, over time, cause users to feel aversion. Blue, for example, can increase calmness, but using it across large surfaces may reduce users' dynamism. Thus, choosing colors, saturation level, size of colored surfaces, type of space function, color adjacency, complementary colors, and so forth is important in spatial design.

Form selection is also important. While broken/angular forms create dynamism, they can increase stress, whereas curved and circular forms create a sense of movement while increasing calmness. To increase intimacy among employees, ceiling height can be lowered; for spaces that need to convey grandeur, greater height is needed. Hence, attention to physical design is important for increasing calmness, reducing stress, increasing satisfaction, self-confidence, efficiency, dynamism, and more. Elements, materials, and colors should be used in ways that convey calmness. Bright spaces feel larger and more enduring than dim spaces; low-tonality colors also reduce anxiety (McAndrew, 1992, p. 71). Materials such as wood convey calmness, intimacy, and warmth. Bringing nature into buildings and viewing natural scenery reduces psychological pressure and elicits positive moods. Using transparent, semi-transparent, and semi-open surfaces also helps induce calmness, and employees' personal privacy should be considered in design.

### **2. Color and Materials Used in the Space**

Colors and materials used in interior design have significant effects on employees' psychology. In Iran, warm and natural colors such as wood tones and cream can enhance calmness and intimacy. In Turkey, lively and modern colors such as blue and green can create a dynamic and invigorating atmosphere. Studies indicate that soft colors can reduce stress and increase comfort (Kaplan, 2007). Thus, to reduce stress, forms and color combinations that strengthen feelings of calmness can be used—for example, curved forms, a combination of green/blue/brown, and natural light. Women constitute half the population in every society, yet most spaces are designed based on men's characteristics (Bani Kamali et al., 2019:6). In many designs, women's empowerment makes them more resilient to workplace problems and incidents and minimizes negative outcomes.

### **3. Designing Social Spaces**

Providing social spaces in workplaces—such as break rooms and shared areas—can strengthen social relationships and reduce stress. In Iran, due to collectivist culture, creating social spaces for interaction and collaboration is particularly important. In Turkey, given socio-cultural changes, social spaces are considered areas for rest and social interaction, which can reduce stress and increase job satisfaction (Haidari et al., 2022).

### **Factors Influencing Occupational Stress**

Employed women face numerous workplace challenges that can increase stress, including poor workplace design, lack of suitable spaces for rest and concentration, and insufficient attention to women's psychological needs. A comparative assessment of how the physical workplace affects employed women's stress in Iran and Turkey can provide new insights. Workplace quality directly affects occupational stress. Natural light, proper ventilation, and enough space for movement are among influential factors (Mortafaghi et al., 2011). Satisfaction with the physical environment is also associated with reduced occupational stress (Montazer & Hosseini, 2022). Social support from colleagues and managers can also reduce feelings of tension and stress (Heidari et al., 2023).

### **Comparing Women's Stress in Iran and Turkey**

Studies suggest that women in both countries face similar workplace challenges, yet cultural and social differences can lead to different stress experiences. In Iran, women, due to social and cultural pressures, are more exposed to occupational stress. For example, Mortafaghi et al. (2011) showed that 57.4% of female nurses in Iran experienced severe pressure.

In Turkey, despite socio-economic progress, women still face gender discrimination and similar challenges. Bani Khamis et al. (2020) examined women's workplace conditions in Turkey and showed that gender inequality and social pressures can influence their stress levels.

### **Effects of the Physical Workplace on Stress Among Employed Women in Iran**

Studies in Iran indicate that poor workplace design in terms of physical dimensions and spatial quality significantly increases stress among employed women. Key findings include the following: Akbari et al. (2020) studied 180 employed women in Tehran and found that lack of adequate rest/focus spaces, inadequate lighting, and improper layout were among key factors increasing stress.

Nouri et al.'s research (2021) in Isfahan revealed that environmental factors such as ventilation quality, sound, and interior colors were significantly associated with women's stress levels.

Kamarani & Shateri's study (2022) in Shiraz showed that poor design of shared and communicative spaces reduced calmness and increased stress among employed women.

### **Effects of the Physical Workplace on Stress Among Employed Women in Turkey**

Studies in Turkey also show the influence of the physical workplace on stress levels among employed women. Key findings include:

Tokli & Rezaei's study (2021) involving 220 employed women in Istanbul, which showed that access to natural and connective spaces was significantly associated with reduced stress;

Altun et al.'s research (2019) in Ankara, which revealed that appropriate design of lighting, color, and acoustics increased calmness and reduced stress; and

Yıldırım & Ataş's work (2022) in Izmir, which showed that adequate shared/communication spaces facilitate concentration and rest for employed women, thereby reducing stress.

### **Comparative Discussion**

Comparing research findings in Iran and Turkey indicates that in both countries, poor workplace design in terms of physical dimensions and spatial quality significantly contributes to increased stress among employed women. However, some differences are observed.

In Turkey, access to natural and connective spaces plays a stronger role in reducing stress, whereas in Iran, improper spatial layout and the lack of suitable rest and focus spaces are more prominent. Furthermore, in Turkey, attention to environmental factors such as lighting, color, and acoustics appears to have a stronger role in stress reduction, while in Iran these factors have received less emphasis.

### **Conclusion**

In environmental perception, women and men differ. Creating appropriate workplace environments based on environmental psychology can help increase women's efficiency and reduce their stress. Designing spaces that align with women's behavioral patterns and environmental psychology can have positive effects. By creating spaces with high quality and proper function, suitable conditions can be provided for reducing women's stress and increasing their efficiency in the workplace. The study results suggest that architectural design supported by environmental psychology can improve the physical quality of women's workplaces. Creating safe and aesthetically pleasing spaces with proper performance in the workplace can reduce women's stress and increase their efficiency.

Workplace quality remains a key factor in determining stress levels among employed women in Turkey and Iran. Although women's labor-force participation has improved in recent years, the intersection of cultural norms and workplace practices continues to pose challenges. By investing in supportive workplaces, fostering gender-equal work cultures, and supporting comprehensive legal frameworks, both countries have the potential to improve women's professional experiences. As societies evolve, achieving gender equality in the workplace is not only an ethical necessity but also a pathway to inclusive social development and improved mental health for employed women. Through joint efforts by organizations and policymakers, healthier and more equitable workplaces can be created that ultimately reduce stress.

The findings indicate that architectural design aligned with environmental psychology and cultural characteristics can reduce stress and improve women's quality of working life. Considering that 83% of employees report fatigue and boredom caused by work (U.S. Mental Health Center, 2022), creating appropriate workplaces based on environmental psychology can increase efficiency and reduce stress among employed women. Designing spaces aligned with women's behavior and environmental psychology can yield positive outcomes and provide a suitable foundation for stress reduction and improved efficiency.

Overall, studies in Iran and Turkey show that proper workplace design in terms of physical dimensions and spatial quality can significantly reduce stress among employed women. Nonetheless, slight differences exist in the prioritization and role of environmental factors in the two countries, which may stem from cultural, social, and economic differences. Comparative examination of this issue can help better understand the conditions and needs of employed women in each country and propose more suitable solutions for designing work environments aligned with their needs.

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