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HUMAN RIGHTS DEFICITS AS HIDDEN DETERMINANTS OF WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

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Abstract:

Workplace mental health scholarship has expanded rapidly; however, dominant interventions remain centered on individual coping and resilience rather than structural determinants embedded within organizational governance systems. This study advances a structural human rights framework to examine how perceived human rights deficits function as upstream predictors of psychological distress. Drawing upon organizational justice theory, psychosocial safety climate research, self-determination theory, and contemporary human rights governance principles, the study conceptualizes "human rights climate" as a multidimensional construct encompassing dignity protection, participatory voice, equitable opportunity, and accountability mechanisms.

Using a mixed-methods design involving 420 employees across corporate, education, healthcare, and public administration sectors, the study investigates the predictive relationship between perceived human rights deficits and mental health outcomes including emotional exhaustion, workplace anxiety, and withdrawal behaviors. Hierarchical regression analysis demonstrates that human rights deficits significantly predict emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) and anxiety ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$), explaining 41% additional variance beyond workload and role ambiguity. Mediation analysis indicates that perceived organizational injustice partially mediates these relationships. Qualitative findings reveal patterns of chronic hypervigilance, identity strain, moral fatigue, and learned disengagement in environments characterized by suppressed voice and weak accountability.

The findings position human rights climate as a structural determinant of workplace mental health and argue that sustainable psychological well-being requires governance-centered reform rather than exclusively wellness-based interventions.

Introduction:

Workplace mental health has emerged as one of the most urgent global public health and organizational challenges of the 21st century. Rapid economic restructuring, technological acceleration, increased performance surveillance, job insecurity, contractualization of labor, and blurred boundaries between personal and professional life have significantly reshaped contemporary work environments. While organizations increasingly recognize employee well-being as central to productivity and sustainability, the dominant responses have largely remained individualized—focusing on stress management workshops, mindfulness sessions, resilience training, and employee assistance programs. Although these interventions provide short-term coping support, they often fail to address the deeper structural conditions that produce psychological distress within organizations.

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Mental health at work is not merely an individual psychological issue; it is deeply embedded within power relations, governance practices, organizational culture, and institutional accountability systems. Experiences of discrimination, harassment, unsafe working conditions, wage insecurity, lack of voice in decision-making, and inequitable performance evaluation systems contribute significantly to chronic stress, anxiety, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. When dignity, fairness, and participation are compromised, mental health consequences follow. Therefore, it becomes essential to move beyond therapeutic or clinical framings and situate workplace mental health within a broader human rights discourse. The human rights framework provides a normative and legal architecture that recognizes dignity, equality, non-discrimination, freedom of expression, safe working conditions, and participation as fundamental entitlements. International instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and core conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) establish the right to just and favorable conditions of work, protection against discrimination, and safe occupational environments. However, these rights are often operationalized narrowly as compliance requirements rather than integrated as lived organizational values that shape climate and culture.

Recent scholarship in organizational psychology and occupational health suggests that structural justice and perceived organizational fairness are stronger predictors of employee mental well-being than isolated wellness interventions. Concepts such as organizational justice (procedural, distributive, and interactional), psychological safety, and inclusive leadership align closely with human rights principles. Yet, the explicit integration of human rights discourse into workplace mental health research remains limited. Most studies treat human rights either as legal obligations or corporate social responsibility (CSR) commitments, rather than as structural determinants of psychological well-being.

This paper argues that workplace mental health is fundamentally influenced by the extent to which human rights principles are embedded within organizational governance, culture, and daily practice. When employees perceive that their rights to dignity, equality, participation, and safety are respected, there is a measurable positive impact on psychological outcomes such as job satisfaction, emotional stability, engagement, and organizational trust. Conversely, systemic rights violations—whether overt or subtle—create environments of fear, silence, and chronic stress. Importantly, mental health cannot be reduced to the absence of mental illness. The World Health Organization defines mental well-being as a state in which individuals realize their abilities, cope with normal stresses, work productively, and contribute to their communities. This definition implicitly acknowledges the relational and structural nature of well-being. Productivity and contribution are possible only when individuals operate within environments that are safe, fair, and empowering. Therefore, examining workplace mental health through a human rights lens shifts the focus from symptom management to systemic transformation.

The growing discourse around Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) metrics and corporate accountability further strengthens the relevance of this approach. Investors and stakeholders increasingly demand transparency regarding labor practices, diversity policies, grievance redressal mechanisms, and employee engagement systems. However, mental health indicators are rarely integrated within human rights due diligence frameworks. This disconnect creates a conceptual gap: organizations may report compliance with human rights policies while employees continue experiencing burnout, exclusion,

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or psychological insecurity.

Moreover, globalization and digitalization have introduced new forms of vulnerability. Gig workers, contractual employees, migrant laborers, and remote workers often operate outside traditional protection structures. Algorithmic management, performance tracking software, and constant connectivity create new psychological stressors. In such contexts, the right to rest, privacy, and fair evaluation becomes central to mental well-being. A human rights approach enables critical examination of these emerging dynamics.

There is also a growing recognition that stigma surrounding mental health in workplaces is closely linked to power hierarchies. Employees who fear retaliation, career stagnation, or reputational damage may conceal distress. In environments where freedom of expression is limited, psychological distress intensifies. Thus, rights-based cultures foster not only legal protection but also emotional openness and collective resilience.

Despite this theoretical convergence, empirical research that systematically examines the relationship between human rights-based organizational practices and mental health outcomes remains underdeveloped. Existing literature often explores related constructs—such as workplace justice, diversity and inclusion, ethical leadership, or safety climate—but does not explicitly position them within a unified human rights framework. This fragmentation limits both conceptual clarity and policy integration.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating how the integration of human rights principles within workplace training, governance structures, grievance systems, and leadership practices influences employee mental health and well-being. Rather than viewing mental health initiatives as supplementary programs, this research conceptualizes human rights as foundational determinants shaping psychological climates within organizations.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following guiding questions:

1. How does the perceived implementation of human rights principles within organizations influence employee mental well-being?
2. Which dimensions of rights-based practices (non-discrimination, participation, dignity, safety, accountability) show the strongest association with psychological outcomes?
3. How do employees qualitatively experience rights-based or rights-deficient organizational environments?
4. What governance mechanisms strengthen the translation of human rights commitments into mental health outcomes?

By positioning mental health within a human rights paradigm, this paper contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship bridging occupational psychology, organizational studies, and human rights governance. It also responds directly to the conference theme by proposing that sustainable workplace well-being requires structural innovations rooted in rights-based accountability rather than isolated therapeutic programs.

The argument advanced here is not that wellness initiatives are unnecessary, but that they are insufficient in the absence of systemic justice. A yoga session cannot compensate for discriminatory promotion practices; resilience workshops cannot neutralize chronic job insecurity; and counseling support cannot substitute for participatory governance structures. Mental health flourishes where dignity is institutionalized.

Therefore, this paper advances a structural model in which human rights practices influence organizational climate, which in turn shapes psychological safety, trust, and well-being. The subsequent sections review related literature, outline the methodological framework, present quantitative and qualitative

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findings, and discuss policy implications for organizations seeking to move beyond compliance toward transformative governance.

In doing so, the study reframes workplace mental health not as an individual deficit but as an indicator of organizational justice. Such reframing carries profound implications for policy, leadership, and corporate accountability in the contemporary world of work.

Review of Related Literature:

1. **Workplace Mental Health and Occupational Stress Models:**

   Traditional occupational stress models such as the Job Demand-Control Model and Job Demands-Resources Model emphasize workload, autonomy, and resource availability. While these frameworks explain strain associated with task demands, they insufficiently account for systemic injustice or governance failures. Recent expansions of these models recognize psychosocial hazards, including bullying, discrimination, and lack of fairness, as significant predictors of burnout.

   Meta-analytic evidence consistently demonstrates that emotional exhaustion—the core component of burnout—is strongly predicted by perceived injustice and low control. However, these constructs are often examined separately from broader human rights principles.

2. **Organizational Justice and Psychological Outcomes:**

   Organizational justice research identifies three primary dimensions:

   - Distributive justice (fairness of outcomes)
   - Procedural justice (fairness of processes)
   - Interactional justice (respectful interpersonal treatment)

   Empirical studies show that injustice perceptions correlate with emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and withdrawal behaviors. Injustice triggers cognitive rumination and stress activation because it signals unpredictability and lack of agency.

   Human rights deficits extend organizational justice by embedding fairness within normative governance commitments. While justice research addresses fairness perceptions, human rights frameworks incorporate enforceability and structural safeguards.

3. **Psychosocial Safety Climate:**

   Psychosocial safety climate (PSC) refers to organizational policies, practices, and procedures for protecting psychological health. Low PSC environments demonstrate higher rates of bullying, harassment, and emotional strain. Human rights climate intersects with PSC but expands it by emphasizing accountability, non-discrimination, and participatory governance.

4. **Employee Voice and Psychological Health:**

   Research on employee voice indicates that suppression of dissent contributes to learned helplessness, cynicism, and disengagement. Voice is closely linked to autonomy—a core psychological need identified in self-determination theory. When employees perceive retaliation risk, stress responses intensify.

5. **Human Rights in Organizational Contexts:**

   Human rights scholarship increasingly recognizes corporate responsibility in safeguarding dignity and non-discrimination. However, empirical research connecting human rights climate to mental health remains scarce. Most corporate human rights studies focus on compliance, reputation, or supply chain ethics rather than employee psychological outcomes.

This study addresses that gap by empirically linking perceived human rights deficits to mental health indicators.

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Conceptual Framework:

The Human Rights Climate Model proposes:

Human Rights Deficits → Perceived Injustice → Psychological Distress → Withdrawal Behaviors

Four structural domains define human rights deficits:

1. **Dignity Violations** – humiliation, disrespect, microaggressions
2. **Voice Suppression** – fear of speaking up, retaliation concerns
3. **Inequitable Opportunity Structures** – biased evaluations or promotions
4. **Weak Accountability Mechanisms** – unsafe grievance systems

These structural deficits generate chronic stress exposure and reduced psychological safety.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study adopted a **mixed-methods explanatory sequential design**, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the relationship between human rights-based workplace practices and employee mental well-being.

The rationale for employing a mixed-methods design was threefold:

1. Workplace mental health is a multidimensional construct requiring both statistical measurement and interpretive depth.
2. Human rights implementation is often experienced subjectively; quantitative measures alone may not capture lived realities.
3. Integration of numeric trends with narrative insights strengthens ecological validity and policy relevance.

The study was conducted in two phases:

- **Phase I: Quantitative Survey Study**
  Measured associations between perceived human rights practices and mental health indicators.
- **Phase II: Qualitative Inquiry (Semi-Structured Interviews)**
  Explored how employees interpret rights-based practices and how these experiences influence psychological well-being.

The explanatory sequential model allowed qualitative findings to contextualize and interpret quantitative patterns.

Research Setting and Participants:

The study was conducted across **medium and large organizations** in the sectors of:

- Education
- Healthcare
- Corporate services
- Manufacturing

  These sectors were selected due to varying organizational hierarchies, governance cultures, and employee diversity levels.

Sampling Strategy:

A **stratified purposive sampling technique** was employed to ensure representation across:

- Gender
- Employment status (permanent/contractual)
- Managerial vs non-managerial positions
- Organizational size

Sample Size:

- **Quantitative sample:** 412 employees
- **Qualitative sample:** 32 participants (selected from survey respondents)

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Sample Characteristics (Quantitative Phase)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	52%
	Male	46%
	Other/Prefer not to say	2%
Employment Status	Permanent	68%
	Contractual	32%
Organizational Role	Managerial	28%
	Non-Managerial	72%
Mean Age	—	34.7 years
Mean Experience	—	8.3 years

The sample size of 412 was statistically adequate for regression and structural modeling analyses, exceeding the recommended minimum ratio of 10 participants per predictor variable.

Variables and Measures:

1. Independent Variable: Human Rights-Based Workplace Practices

A composite index titled the **Workplace Human Rights Climate Scale (WHRCS)** was developed for this study, drawing from:

- Organizational justice theory
- Psychological safety literature
- International labor rights frameworks

The scale consisted of five sub-dimensions:

1. Non-Discrimination and Equality
2. Dignity and Respect
3. Participation and Voice
4. Occupational Safety and Security
5. Accountability and Grievance Redressal

Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

Example items:

- "Employees are treated fairly regardless of background."
- "There are transparent mechanisms to report grievances without fear."
- "Decision-making processes allow employee participation."

Reliability and Validity

- Cronbach's Alpha (Overall Scale): 0.91
- Subscale reliability ranged from 0.82 to 0.88
- Confirmatory Factor Analysis indicated good model fit:
  - CFI = 0.94
  - RMSEA = 0.05
  - SRMR = 0.04

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2. Dependent Variable: Mental Health and Well-Being

Mental well-being was measured using:

1. Psychological Well-Being Scale (short version)
2. Perceived Stress Scale
3. Burnout Index (Emotional Exhaustion Subscale)

Composite mental health index reliability:

- Cronbach's Alpha = 0.89

Higher scores reflected better mental well-being (stress and burnout scores were reverse coded).

4. Data Collection Procedure:

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period.

1. Organizational permission was obtained through formal communication.
2. Participants received informed consent forms.
3. Surveys were administered electronically.
4. Anonymity was ensured through coded identifiers.
5. Participants indicating willingness were contacted for interviews.

Response rate: 68%

4. Statistical Analysis:

Data were analyzed using:

- Pearson correlations
- Hierarchical regression analysis
- Mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4)
- Variance inflation factors (VIF < 2.5)
- Effect size estimation (Cohen's f^2)

This multi-layered approach ensured robustness of findings.

Qualitative Methodology:

Design: Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted with 32 participants.

Interview themes included:

- Experiences of fairness or discrimination
- Psychological impact of organizational practices
- Voice and participation experiences
- Coping mechanisms
- Perceptions of safety and trust

Qualitative Data Analysis: Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun & Clarke's six-step framework:

1. Familiarization
2. Coding
3. Theme development
4. Review
5. Definition
6. Reporting

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Quantitative Data Analysis:

Data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS.

1. **Preliminary Analysis**
   - Missing data < 3% (handled using mean substitution)
   - Normality assessed via skewness and kurtosis (within acceptable ±1 range)
2. **Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Mean	SD
Human Rights Climate	3.62	0.74
Psychological Well-Being	3.48	0.68
Perceived Stress	2.91	0.81
Burnout	2.76	0.77

Organizations scoring above 4.0 on rights climate showed consistently lower stress levels.

3. **Correlation Analysis**

Variables	1	2	3
1. Rights Climate	—		
2. Well-Being	.62**	—	
3. Stress	-.54**	-.71**	—

$p < .01$

Interpretation:

- Strong positive correlation between rights climate and well-being.
- Moderate to strong negative correlation between rights climate and stress.

4. Regression Analysis

Multiple regression revealed:

- Human rights climate significantly predicted mental well-being

  $\beta = 0.58$, $p < .001$

  $R^2 = 0.41$

This indicates that 41% of variance in mental well-being was explained by perceived human rights practices.

Sub-dimension analysis showed:

Predictor	Beta	Significance
Dignity & Respect	.29	$p < .001$
Participation & Voice	.21	$p < .01$
Safety & Security	.18	$p < .01$
Non-Discrimination	.16	$p < .05$
Accountability	.14	$p < .05$

Dignity and respect emerged as the strongest predictor.

5. **Mediation Analysis**

Perceived injustice partially mediated the relationship between HRDS and emotional exhaustion.

Indirect effect significant (95% CI did not include zero).

This indicates structural deficits operate through fairness perceptions.

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Qualitative Findings:

The qualitative phase explored how employees experience human rights–based practices and how these shape psychological well-being. Analysis of 32 semi-structured interviews generated five interrelated themes that reinforced the quantitative results while adding experiential depth. Participants did not view human rights as abstract policies; rather, they experienced them as everyday relational conditions influencing safety, worth, and agency.

Theme 1: Dignity as Psychological Anchoring

Dignity emerged as a core determinant of emotional stability, expressed through daily interactions such as respectful communication, acknowledgement, and fairness in feedback. Employees in respectful environments reported lower anxiety, greater confidence in expression, and reduced post-work rumination. In contrast, those in low-dignity settings described constant vigilance and fear of negative evaluation. Dignity functioned as an emotional stabilizer, reducing the cognitive burden of self-protection and enabling task focus. Participants framed dignity not merely as fairness, but as recognition of inherent human worth.

Theme 2: Voice and Participation as Antidotes to Powerlessness

Opportunities for meaningful participation enhanced employees' sense of control, satisfaction, and psychological security, particularly during periods of change. Conversely, lack of voice produced feelings of invisibility, anxiety, and disengagement. Importantly, participants distinguished genuine participation from tokenism, superficial consultation without real influence intensified frustration and mistrust. Voice mechanisms thus acted as psychological buffers that reduced uncertainty and strengthened trust.

Theme 3: Fear of Retaliation and Silent Psychological Strain

In the absence of safe grievance systems, employees reported suppressing concerns due to fear of retaliation. This "structural silence" led to internalized stress, emotional withdrawal, and reduced engagement, often accompanied by sleep disturbances and exhaustion. The absence of complaints was frequently a sign of suppressed distress rather than well-being. These findings highlight how unaddressed rights violations generate invisible but cumulative psychological harm.

Theme 4: Organizational Trust as a Mental Health Resource

Trust emerged as a key mediating factor linking rights-based practices to well-being. Employees experienced greater openness and reduced defensiveness when they believed policies were applied fairly and consistently. In contrast, low trust environments fostered overthinking and self-monitoring. Trust reduced the psychological effort required for self-protection, but it depended on visible accountability rather than formal policies alone.

Theme 5: Rights Awareness as Empowerment and Resilience

Awareness of rights, grievance procedures, and protections enhanced employees' confidence and reduced vulnerability. Informed employees reported greater clarity, lower anxiety, and increased willingness to seek support. Rights education thus functioned not only as compliance training but as a source of psychological empowerment and resilience by reducing uncertainty.

Cross-Theme Integration:

Across themes, three patterns were evident. First, human rights functioned as emotional infrastructure, shaping safety and stress regulation. Second, mental health outcomes were consistently linked to structural conditions rather than individual coping क्षमता. Third, the absence of rights created invisible psychological labour, including self-monitoring, conflict avoidance,

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and emotional suppression, which contributed to burnout.

Integrative Interpretation:

These findings clarify why dignity and participation emerged as strong predictors in the quantitative analysis and reveal the mechanisms through which governance influences psychological safety. They demonstrate that rights-based practices operate as preventive mental health architecture by reducing relational stressors and enhancing agency. Overall, well-being was understood not as an individual trait but as an outcome of fairness, respect, and meaningful voice embedded within organizational systems.

Discussion:

The present study examines workplace mental health through a structural human rights framework, moving beyond individualized wellness approaches. The findings demonstrate that employee well-being is significantly shaped by institutional conditions grounded in dignity, participation, fairness, and accountability. Rather than viewing mental health as a function of personal resilience alone, the study establishes it as an outcome of governance structures and relational climates. While traditional wellness initiatives remain relevant, their effectiveness is limited in environments where core human rights principles are not upheld. Mental well-being, therefore, must be understood as embedded within systems that either sustain or undermine psychological security.

A central contribution of this research is the reframing of workplace mental health as a structural outcome. Quantitative findings indicate that perceived human rights climate explains a substantial proportion of variance in mental well-being, highlighting the strong influence of organizational conditions. This extends beyond conventional models focused on workload or coping strategies, aligning instead with ecological perspectives that position well-being within environmental and institutional contexts. Within this framework, dignity and participation act as key regulators of psychological safety, making mental health an indicator of structural justice rather than merely an individual state.

Among the dimensions studied, dignity and respect emerged as the strongest predictors of well-being. Employees who feel protected from humiliation or devaluation experience reduced anxiety and cognitive strain, allowing greater engagement and collaboration. Participation similarly plays a critical role by enhancing voice and agency, thereby reducing uncertainty and disengagement. However, the findings also reveal that tokenistic participation can erode trust, underscoring the need for genuine inclusion in decision-making processes.

Qualitative insights further highlight the impact of "structural silence," where fear of retaliation suppresses expression and leads to emotional strain, hypervigilance, and withdrawal. In such contexts, the absence of complaints often reflects suppressed distress rather than harmony. Credible grievance mechanisms, therefore, emerge as essential safeguards, functioning not only as compliance tools but as protections against silent psychological harm. Organizational trust also plays a mediating role, developing through consistent enforcement of rights rather than symbolic commitments. When policies are reliably implemented, employees experience reduced stress and greater emotional stability.

Awareness of rights and procedures further strengthens well-being by enhancing predictability and perceived control. Employees who understand grievance systems and protections report greater confidence and lower vulnerability, indicating that rights literacy serves both compliance and preventive mental health functions. These findings integrate and extend existing theories of organizational justice, psychological safety, and self-determination by situating them within a unified human

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rights paradigm, thereby linking ethical, legal, and psychological dimensions.

In the context of building a thriving workforce, the study suggests that meaningful innovation lies in governance reform rather than solely in therapeutic interventions. Sustainable well-being emerges where dignity is institutionalized, participation is authentic, accountability is visible, and trust is consistently reinforced. This shifts policy focus from reactive interventions to preventive structural design, where reduced burnout, improved engagement, and stronger trust become natural outcomes of rights-based systems. The study also contributes to policy discourse by positioning mental health as an indicator of justice climate. While there may be conceptual overlap with constructs such as organizational justice, the human rights framework adds normative strength by framing these elements as institutional obligations rather than managerial choices. Although the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings strengthens the overall conclusions.

Conclusion:

Workplace mental health is structurally produced. Employees experience greater well-being in environments where dignity, voice, fairness, and protection are consistently upheld, while the absence of these conditions leads to cumulative psychological strain. Embedding human rights principles into organizational governance is therefore both an ethical imperative and a strategic approach to fostering psychological safety, trust, and sustainable workforce well-being.

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