

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: A STUDY IN THE FLEET SUPPLY DEPOTS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between management style, working environment, and co-workers' relationships with workplace violence in Fleet Supply Depots (FSD). Data was gathered through questionnaires distributed to 155 respondents who are FSD staff from various departments in FSD. However, only 150 questionnaires (96.77 %) were returned for analysis. The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17.0. The findings showed that there was a non-significant difference in co-workers' relationships between male and female staff in FSD. There was a positive correlation between co-workers' relationship and management style except for working environment. It was seen that co-workers' relationships and working environment influenced the changes in workplace violence. Future studies could be extended to other factors like family violence to see its influence on workplace violence. The primary focus of this study is to provide an empirical basis that can help the management in the formulation of guidelines, and to improve working procedures to overcome any cases of workplace violence happening in FSD.

Key words: workplace violence, co-workers' relationships, working environment, management style

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Violence has its consequences on workers and the organization, and ignoring this issue is a cost to both. Whitmore and Kleiner (1999) described workplace violence as problem surrounding violence at work which comprises physical assault, threatening behavior, and verbal abuse. Workplace violence is an alarming matter in organizations as it can occur anywhere and no one is safe. Workers who are at high risk are employees who deal widely with the public like money changer; deliver passengers, goods, or services; or work alone or in small groups during late night or early morning hours, in high-crime areas, or in community settings and homes.

Workplace violence remains to be a widespread danger for companies. Workplace violence is at times triggered by a jobless employee, an estranged spouse, or a stressed-out worker (Johnson, Lewis, & Gardner, 1995). The outcomes involve lowered productivity, increased employee stress and absenteeism (Corney, 2008), lawsuits, increased insurance premiums, tarnished reputations (Atkinson, 2000), reduced customer satisfaction and costly property damage (Walkup, 1999). Besides the direct costs like medical and legal costs, related costs also include a decline in employees' morale and consequent loss of productivity, increased absenteeism, higher employee turnover, and damage to a company's credibility and reputation (Carll, 1999).

2.0 BACKGROUND OF STUDY AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Workplace violence in Malaysia although exist; has not got through to the disturbing phase yet (Hanisah et al., 2010). As stated by them, Labour Department statistics showed about 4,000 cases of violence from 1990 to 1998 that were filed in the industrial court and most of the cases were on sabotage, fighting at work, threat, assault and harassment. In addition, most of the government organizations are directly involved with the public and incidents of workplace violence existed. The Labour Department keeps information regarding violence occurrence at the workplace reported by local employees and employers. As for the foreign employees, the Immigration Department keeps the information of the workplace violence cases. Police has also been referred to for cases involving criminal acts in the workplace. Due to the scarce workplace violence statistics, types of violence behavior which is most frequently demonstrated in the workplace cannot be identified (Rahman & Shamsudin, 2000). Furthermore, the increase of violence consequently leads to negative influences on the physical and psychological well-being of the workers concerned, not only in our country but also elsewhere in the world. Almost all cases of violence, although they are small, cause long-lasting health impact on the victims. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in the year 2000 had done a study on 21,500 face-to-face interviews with workers throughout the European Union, which indicated that:

- a) 40 % of workers were exposed to physical violence.
- b) 47 % of workers were exposed to bullying in the workplace.
- c) 46 % of workers were exposed to sexual harassment

Reported physical violence is comparable among women and men. Women, especially young women, are more at risk of harassment, bullying and unwanted sexual attention than men (The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions Survey, 2000). The findings are shown in Figure 1.

The incidence of workplace violence is common especially in the public sector as the workers regularly are in contact with the public under demanding situation (McGrath & Goulding, 1996). People may distinguish violent behavior in a different way. What one employee feels as intimidating, another will express it as simply irritating. The causes of violence also differ a great deal from one situation to another (McGrath & Goulding, 1996).

A study conducted by Ruth, Samsiah, Hamidah, and Santhna (2009) on workplace violence experienced by nurses in Malaysian Medical Centre revealed that workplace violence among the nursing staff was 3.7% with an average of 1.2% being abused per month and one nurse being abused every other day. The study also revealed that staff nurses were the most common victims and the responsible person were mainly the patients (40.6%) and the patients' relatives (37.5%). The most frequent types of violence were verbal abuse (31.9%) and verbal threats (23.7%). In addition, 44.4% of the victims experienced physical violence. Hence, these findings indicated that workplace violence is a crucial problem that should be dealt with to ensure that employees are in a safe environment.

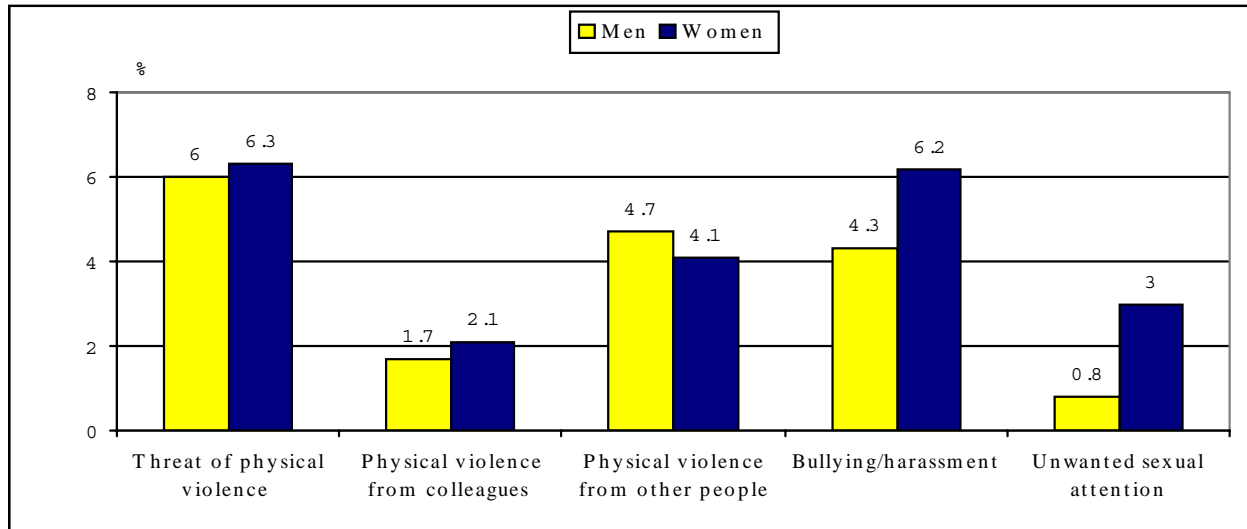


Figure 1: Physical violence, bullying/harassment and unwanted sexual attention by gender
Source: Violence at work in the European Union (2000)

Thus, based on the above scenario, this study's objectives are:

- a) To explore the differences in co-workers' relationships among male and female workers;
- b) To examine the relationships between working environment, management style and co-workers' relationships with workplace violence;
- c) To investigate the influence of co-worker relationships, working environment and management style towards workplace violence.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Workplace Violence

National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 1996, p. 4) defined workplace violence as "violent acts, including physical assaults and threat to assault, directed towards persons at work or on duty." In Malaysia, "The Guidance of Prevention of Stress and Violence at Workplace", published by the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) in 2001 identified violence as "incidents where employees are abused, threatened, assaulted, or subject to other offensive behavior in circumstances related to their work" (Di Martino & Mohtar Musri, 2001, p 7).

Many researchers defined workplace violence as a purposeful or reactive behavior that produces damaging or hurtful effects, physically or emotionally, on people (Gill, Fisher, & Bowie, 2002). Whitmore and Kleiner (1999) stated that workplace violence consists of physical assault, threatening behavior, and verbal abuse. Violence may occur from outside or has its source in an organization. External violence is initiated by people outside the organization which is directed at certain individual worker or the organization itself. Internal violence happens due to aggression culture in a company (Bulatao & VandenBos, 1996).

Erkol, Gokdogan, Erkol, and Boz (2007) study among emergency department staffs in Turkey reported that 15.5% of the respondents had experienced physical violence incidence and 50.7% had experienced verbal abused. Furthermore, Gates, Ross and McQueen (2006) in their study of violence at emergency department in Midwestern City, Ohio revealed that verbal harassment by patients among paramedics were 100%, nurses (98%) and physicians (96%).

More over, Privitera et al. (2005) identified four categories of violence:

- a) Intrusive violence is a violence that occurs in the workplace by an outsider who has no legitimate relationship to the workplace. It involves terrorist acts, criminal intent by strangers, and protesting in a violent way against the organization's policies and practices.
- b) Consumer-related violence is a type of violence that is known and recognized. It involves violent practices and acts by consumers and clients against staff, workers, or employees who are displaying signs of traumatization as a result of dealing with violent clients.
- c) Relationship violence is a type of violence that involves bullying and harassment from the staff themselves on other staff. This can also involve any aggressive acts from employees in the organization.
- d) Organizational violence can occur in many ways; including organizational violence against employees. Dismissal of employees with no good reason can initiate violence to take place. Workers may feel stressful when a rapid and heartless change is being implemented and that may cause violence. Workers, who are stressful and not properly trained can be ideal targets for the external attacker to retrieve any information to exploit a company's security.

3.2 Management style

Robert and Warren (1958) stated that management styles are means of making decisions concerning employees. The style of leadership is dependent upon the prevailing circumstance; therefore, leaders should exercise a range of management styles and should deploy them as appropriate towards the situation in their organization.

Quan (2001) disclosed that management style and proper treatment of employees are major factors in avoiding workplace violence. Employees who believe they are treated unfairly or whose problems are unaddressed in the workplace are more likely to take matters into their own hands, turning to violence to resolve the grievance. Open communications and taking a sincere interest in quality-of-life issues such as job satisfaction, employee-development opportunities, and facilities are important factors in reducing job stress and the potential for violence. She also stated that organizations' role in workplace violence include organizational structure, management styles such as authoritarian or autocratic, polarization between employees and managers, the lack of a forum to address grievances, threats of violence, and creativity and new ideas being discouraged. Empowered employees who have the decision-making power can be a factor of workplace violence.

Research done by the Institute for Trade Union and Social Research (2003) in the Bulgarian health sector found that the workplace itself has a considerable potential for violence based on its style of

management. 39.7% reported that no proper procedures and the management style have been cited as the primary factor for psychological violence. This will show the way to unhealthy relationships that lead to conflicts at the workplace. Ng et al. (2009) found that waiting time, communication issues and understaffing were the key factors contributing to workplace violence toward the staff in Hong Kong public hospitals.

3.3 Co – workers relationship

Co-workers are people who work together in a workplace. Working together almost every day will develop interesting relationships which will become very complex (Smith, 2010). Co-workers often work together for long hours and develop friendships that can be carried on outside the workplace. Co-workers may have similar or comparable jobs, and have related levels of power and authority in an organization.

Violence occurs at work because the abusers can find the targeted victims without difficulty and this makes the workplace a hazardous place for those victims (Johnson & Gardner, 1999). A study by the New York Victims Service agency discovered that 74 percent of abusers make intimidating calls or visits to their victim's workplace, which trigger the employee to be drawn into potentially critical conditions (Popham, 1998).

Personality styles, conflicts, ethnic, racial or gender biases, along with differences in personal work habits, may combine to cause annoyance among co-workers. People who operate from a need to control relationships, or those who suffer from self-esteem problems, often tend to develop dysfunctional views of working relationships (Ford & Linney, 1995). Di Martino (2003) stated that women on the whole are highly exposed to the risk of violence. Certain category of violence like sexual harassment is even higher, where the victims are mostly women especially those having insecure, low-paid, low-status jobs.

Unwelcome interpersonal relationships or attractions can enhance the emotional context of work relationships and can be negative in nature. Romantic obsessions with other employees have been cited as significant motives for violence in the workplace (Barnett & Martinez, 1995). Workers who make threats in their working place have a high tendency to use violence to solve problems and to intimidate when they feel threatened (Clay, 2000).

Chappell and Di Martino (2006) found that rising numbers of workers on short-term contracts or day-hired workers are exposed to workplace violence because of their insignificant status. Table 1 presents the findings of five large-scale studies on the distribution of occupational violence across some groups of short-term workers in Australia (Mayhew & Quinland, 1999).

Table 1: Occupational violence incidents experienced by workers in five occupational groups in Australia from 1992 – 1998

Industry	Total interviewed	Violence incident experienced (%)			
		Verbal abuse	Threats	Physical attack	Hold up or snatch
Fast food	304	48.4	7.6	1.0	2.3
Garments	200	49.0	23.0	7.0	1.5
Construction	331	35.7	7.1	7.1	-
Small (Newspaper agents)	248	62.9	11.4	1.4	-
Public service (childcare)	225	50.0	13.0	11.0	-

Source: Mayhew & Quinland (1999)

3.4 Working environment

A work environment is any location in which people perform work and earn money. Di Martino (2003) stated that the physical design of a workplace can be a factor in either resolving or initiating violence. Poor ventilation, bad lighting, uncomfortable temperatures, and dirty and noisy premises can produce stress and experience higher rates of violence than well-designed workplaces. A study done on health-care workers in Canada found higher correlation between work-related violence generated by safety hazards in visited homes and neighborhoods (Denton, 2000). It has been suggested that good lighting, high visibility of work areas, room to maneuver around patients and equipment, inaccessible storage for drugs and money and reduced hiding places for perpetrators, should all be adopted as basic measures to reduce the risks of violence to workers in the health sector.

Di Martino (2003) also highlighted the interaction between the external environment and the working environment in foreseeing possible violence and aggression; especially premises open to the public. The design of workplaces requires special attention and involves the following additional factors: comfortable seating, which is crucial especially where waiting is involved; comfort and size of waiting rooms; toilet facilities; supervised entrances; alarms; security guards; protective barriers; surveillance cameras and systems to alert other employees when urgent help is needed.

In a national survey conducted by the American Nursing Association (2001), about 88 percent of working nurses reported that health and safety concerns influence their decisions to continue working in the field of nursing as well as the kind of nursing work they choose to perform. Less than 20 percent of the nurses felt very safe from work-related injury and illness in their current work environment, and 40 percent had been injured on the job in the past year. Over 76 percent indicated that unsafe working conditions interfered with their ability to deliver quality care.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

Figure 2 shows the framework of this study. Researchers such as Altman (1993), Bower (1992), Gill, Fisher and Bowie. (2002) have found that there are relationships between working environment,

management style and co-workers towards workplace violence. Ford and Linney (1995), in their research, found that gender biases also caused aggravation behaviors among co-workers.

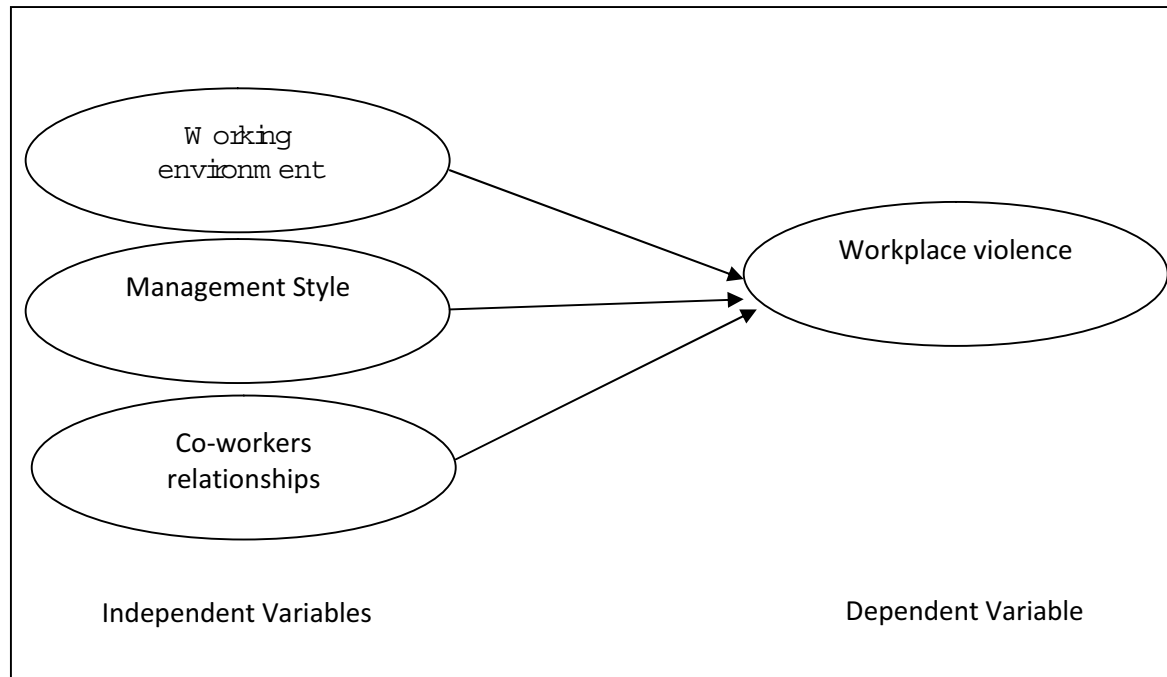


Figure 2: Research framework of the study

Hence, based on the above literature review, the followings are the hypotheses for this study:

- H₁ There is a significant difference among male and female FSD staff on co – worker relationships.
- H₂ There is a significant relationship between management styles, co-worker relationship, working environment, and workplace violence in FSD.
- H₃ If management styles, co-worker relationship and working environment are poor then there is a high significance of workplace violence happening in FSD.

The population of this study includes all Fleet Supply Depot (FSD) employees in the Armed forces. The sample was chosen using random sampling. 150 employees participated in this study and that gave a response rate of 60%.

A survey approach was employed. The questionnaire was adapted and modified from Ahmad (2009) to suit the staff of FSD. Overall, the questionnaire survey sought information on the following two sections: (1) demographic of the personnel; (2) survey regarding the intended dimensions with scale items measured using a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (6) Strongly Agree.

Analysis of the data was done using statistical analysis from the SPSS version seventeen. Descriptive methods were used to simplify and characterize the data. Further analysis includes correlation and multiple regressions. Significance was set at a two-tail with an alpha level of 0.05.

5.0 FINDINGS

5.1 Demographic data

Demographic data shows that majority of the respondents were in the category of junior rates (66.7%) followed by the senior rates (24%), next warrant officers (7.3%), and lastly, from the officers (2.0%). For the tenure service, majority of the respondents were in the category of 11 to 15 years (32%), followed by 6 - 10 years (28.7%), 16 to 20 years (24%), 1 to 5 years of service (12%), and lastly, only 3.3% of the respondents with service of 21 to 25 years. The study indicated that majority of the respondents were male (87.3%). Only 12.7% of the respondents were female.

5.2 Hypotheses Testing

5.2.1 T-test

Based on Table 2, the p value for the co-worker relationship was 0.295, therefore the p value was more than 0.05. Even the mean reflected the non-significance. Thus, the result was not significant. As a conclusion, there was no significant difference in co-worker relationships among male and female staff in FSD.

Table 2: Independent Sample Test

Test Variable	Grouping Variable	Mean (N)		t value	T-Test	
		Male	Female		d.f.	p-value
Co-worker relationship	Gender	3.1901 (131)	3.0670 (19)	1.051	148	0.295

5.2.2 Correlation

A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the IVs (working environment, management style, co-worker relationship) and the DV (workplace violence). The result of the correlation test is shown in Table 3. There was a positive correlation between the two variables, "management style" (MS) and "co-worker relationship" (CWR), where $r = 0.234$ (MS), $p = 0.004$; $r = 0.557$ (CWR), $p = 0.000$; $n = 150$. However looking at the table, "working environment" has a negative correlation where $r = -0.015$, $n = 150$, $p = 0.856$, and this variable was considered a non-significant variable.

Overall, there was only one strong, positive correlation between "co-worker relationships" and "workplace violence" of about 55.7%. The increases of co-worker relationships were correlated with the increase of workplace violence.

Table 3: Correlation between variables

	WE	MS	CWR	WV
working environment (WE)	-			
management style (MS)	.463**	-		
co-worker relationship (CWR)	.312**	.492**	-	
workplace violence (WV)	-.015	.234**	.557**	-

5.2.3 Multiple Regressions

The results of the regression test are shown in Table 4. Multiple regressions analysis was used to evaluate the effects of the independent variables (working environment, management style, co-worker relationships) on the dependent variable (workplace violence). The model indicates that approximately 35 percent ($R^2 = 0.350$) of the variance in workplace violence is jointly explained by the three independent variables (working environment, management style, co-worker relationships). The F value is 26.237 at a p-value of 0.000, suggesting that the three independent variables have significantly explained 35 percent of the variance in workplace violence.

However, it was seen that only “co-worker relationships” and “working environment” had significant relationship on “workplace violence” at a 95 percent confidence level with a standardized beta of 0.607 (co-worker relationship) and -0.222 (working environment), where $p < 0.05$. “Management style” showed a value of $p = 0.649$, which was more than 0.05, thus, it was not significant.

Table 4: Multiple Regressions

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.468	.460		3.191	.002
(working environment)	-.381	.130	-.222	-2.932	.004
management style	.062	.136	.038	.456	.649
co-worker relationship	1.159	.147	.607	7.881	.000

Note:

R square = .350; F = 26.237; Sig. = .000^a

a. Predictors: (Constant), co-worker relationships, working environment, management style

b. Dependent Variable: workplace violence

6.0 DISCUSSION

There are three research questions in this study. The first research question was “Are there any differences between co-worker relationships and workplace violence among male and female workers in FSD?” The results showed that there were no differences in co-worker relationships among male and female staff in Fleet Supply Depot (FSD). This was different with the findings of Ford and Linney (1995) who found that personality styles, conflicts, ethnic, racial or gender biases, along with differences in personal work habits, may combine to cause aggravation among co-workers. Even, Johnson and Gardner (1999) revealed that violence can arise at workplace as the abusers can easily find the targeted victims. The researcher found that the staff in FSD may not have problems working together in a department as they are bind with armed forces code of ethics. In addition, the management in FSD plays its roles by enforcing any staff misconduct by taking action accordingly and no tolerance towards reported cases of violence.

Nevertheless, the problem of co-worker relationships has been addressed by Barnett and Martinez (1995). They revealed that unwelcomed interpersonal relationships or attractions can enhance the emotional context of working relationships and can be negative in nature, and based on the descriptive study, the researcher found that women staff is outnumbered by the male staff at FSD. This can sometimes create a relationship problem whereby romantic obsessions with other employees can take place (Barnett & Martinez, 1995).

The second research question was “Is there any relationship between working environment conditions, management style, and the co-worker relationships towards the extent of workplace violence in FSD?” The findings in the correlation study show a strong, positive correlation between co-worker relationships and workplace violence (55.7%). Correlation between management style and workplace violence was only 23.4%.

The increases in co-worker relationships were correlated with the increase of workplace violence, and this is consistent with other researcher’s findings where violence arises at work because the workplace is where abusers can easily find the targeted victims (Johnson & Gardner, 1999). Popham (1998) study also supported this study and said that majority of abusers make intimidating calls or visits to their victims’ workplace, which triggers workers to be drawn into potentially life-threatening conditions.

Hence, management in FSD should consider enhancing the employee’s work life with job enrichment, such as temporary job rotation among employees in the department. In the new work station set up, new faces, and the new challenges in job rotation will provide FSD employees with a brand new feeling at work. Fresh excitement from the job rotation will make an employee become engaged with his or her organization and be motivated to work. It is a well-known fact that with pleasant working moods, employees will perform better, and reduction in work stress ultimately reduces risks towards workplace violence.

For working environment, this study found that the relationship was not significant with workplace violence. This study’s findings were different with Denton (2000) who found a high correlation between work-related violence and stress generated by safety hazards. The interrelation between the external environment and the working environment also appears significant in terms of predicting violence. Arnetz (1996) study on the work environment and the physical and mental well-being of more than 2,600 Swedish nurses has shown that type of ward or facility was linked to workplace violence.

The differences in this study might be due to present employer policies and procedures on preventing workplace violence which are better improved and followed by all the Fleet Supply Depot staff, and the support systems that are available for the victims of violence. Management in Fleet Supply Depot can improve the current workplace violence prevention policies by introducing internal policies and procedures on workplace violence. At the same time, they should ensure that all staff are educated on the issue of violence and are aware of the policies and procedures in place. Employers should also ensure that aspects of the work do not contribute to a climate of violence. In the event that violence occurs, employers should provide support to victims as well as to other employees who may be affected.

Research question three was on "How do co-worker relationships, working environment and management style influence workplace violence in FSD?" The study's findings disclosed only working environment and co-worker relationships having a significant relationship to workplace violence. This study found that management style had no significant relationship with workplace violence.

The significant relationship is consistent with other researchers' findings. One was addressed by Bennett & Lehman (1999), who found that workplace environment had a great effect on the employee's productivity, performance, and morality, and even their psychological state. According to Stewart and Kleiner (1997), a troubled work environment can lead to incidents of workplace violence. In other words, workplace psycho-social environment has a strong connection with a worker behavior. In a stressful working environment, employees tend to act and behave outside of norms.

In co-worker relationships, NIOSH Survey on Workplace Violence Prevention (2006) reported that approximately 24% of workplace violence in United States is related to personal relationships that involve situations where an individual gains access to a workplace and commits a crime targeting an employee or customer who is a current or former intimate partner. Other common examples of workplace violence in this category involve rape or sexual assault by a supervisor or coworker.

For management style, this study found that the relationship was not significant with workplace violence. This study's findings were dissimilar to Amble's (2007) study on the *Ban Bullying at Work* campaign. He found that poor management skills emerged as the biggest factor contributing to bullying. In addition, Thau et al. (2008) in their research found that positive relationship between abusive supervision and organizational deviance was stronger when authoritarian management style was low.

The dissimilarity in this research might be that the management in Fleet Supply Depot (FSD) has maintained and disseminated detailed policies on workplace behavior by adopting a zero-tolerance policy that clearly states that threats, intimidation, destruction of government property, and violence in any form will not be tolerated and provide for progressive disciplinary action for such conducts. These guidelines made by the management clearly explain violations that may result in discharge or other disciplinary actions so that FSD staffs are aware of behavioral boundaries. Before entering the Armed Forces, the participant applicants have to be screened. Every military application includes a thorough investigation of the applicants' background, including employment history and possible criminal record and qualifications for the job opening. Many experts believe that incidents of workplace violence are more likely to occur when an employee is struggling with his/her responsibilities, so ability to fulfill the responsibilities of the position in question is a particularly relevant consideration.

7.0 CONCLUSION

In summary, there was a significant positive relationship between co-worker relationships and workplace violence. Management style and working environment also influenced workplace violence.

Because workplace violence is a safety issue, it should be a concern since it has been the responsibility of every employer to provide and maintain a safe work environment for every employee. Every employee has the right to a safe work environment, including feeling safe from any incidents of violence in the workplace. No one wants to be assaulted, threatened, hurt, injured or even die while at work. Because safety is an employment issue that can have serious implications to the effectiveness and performance of the organization, it is imperative that it is properly implemented in any organizations. In essence, there is truth in the saying that 'prevention is better than cure'. To prevent incidents of workplace violence from happening, both the employer and the employees have legal responsibilities in ensuring that safety at work is established and practiced.

By taking practical and reasonable measures in improving the working environment, employers will be able to reduce the probability of incidents of workplace violence from happening; this action will reduce the feelings of fear and uncertainty, and thus enhancing a sense of security in the workplace. Having a peace of mind while at work is important for employees to help them deliver the expected work performance in the organization.

Based on the researcher's findings, it seemed to be that a co-worker relationship in FSD between male and female staff isn't a problem which triggers occurrence of workplace violence. Furthermore, the researcher feels that Malaysians are generally gentle and well-mannered, and would not naturally resort to violent acts and behaviors to solve work-related problems, and the military trainees are taught well in working in a group and having high value of cooperation. Such attitudes may be effective in preventing incidents of workplace violence in FSD.

Opportunities for any future studies have emerged as a result of this study. The researcher would like to suggest extending the scope of the study on other factors that could contribute to the workplace violence, for example, family violence as it can affect employees and their workplace efficiency, directly or indirectly.

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