

## The Impact of Microaggressions on Exit Intention: The Mediating Role of Burnout and Career Confidence among employee in legal profession in the Greater Malé Region of Maldives

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this conceptual analysis is to examine the impact of microaggression on exit intention, burnout and career confidence. Several research papers were reviewed in order to examine the impact of microaggression on organizational outcomes. The past literature review revealed that exposure to gendered microaggressions is positively associated with burnout, negatively associated with career confidence and positively associated with exit intention. Furthermore, past literature reviews showed that experiencing burnout is positively associated with an increase in exit intention, negatively associated with a decrease in career confidence, and positive mediating effect on the relationship between microaggressions and exit intention. In addition to this, past literature review indicated that decreased career confidence is negatively associated with an increase in exit intention, negative mediating effect on the relationship between microaggressions and exit intention and burnout significantly mediates the relationship between microaggressions and exit intention by negatively influencing career confidence. The overall conclusion is that microaggression increase in the workplaces could causes to increase the exit intention, burnout and loss of career confidence. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Microaggression, Burnout, Career Confidence, Exit intention.

### INTRODUCTION

Pursuit of gender equity within professions and institutions has garnered recent attention and urgency (International Labour Organisation, 2022; OECD, 2017). Among such spheres, the legal profession has been increasingly scrutinised for its structural inequities, as it stands as a symbol of justice and simultaneously, a site of persistent exclusion (Abel *et al.*, 2022; Surve, 2024). While overt discrimination has evolved into more subtle forms, biases such as gendered microaggressions remain deeply ingrained and continue to shape workplace dynamics and dictate professional trajectories, particularly in small island nations like the Maldives (Desai *et al.*, 2023; Newman *et al.*, 2025). Though seemingly “minor”, these everyday slights, which are often normalised and overlooked, carry a profound cumulative impact, as they erode the individual well-being of lawyers, while also affecting institutional legitimacy. This study scrutinises this issue by examining the impact of microaggressions on the career trajectories of lawyers and their effect on lawyers’ mental well-being and career confidence.

#### Background

Workplaces in the Maldives are shaped by hierarchical and patriarchal traditions, despite legal reforms and local and global commitments to gender equity (Asian Development Bank, 2014; Laidey & Imthinan, 2024). Similarly, the legal sector is characterised by gendered dynamics that privilege men, marginalise women, and reinforce

exclusionary practices, as covert discrimination continues to permeate workspaces and impact access to opportunity, recognition and influence.

Gendered microaggressions, recognised as a subtle form of sexism, comprising everyday slights, dismissals and undermining behaviours, are frequently dismissed as harmless or incidental, despite carrying cumulative harm (Sue, 2010). Characterising these aggressions as mere interpersonal irritants is unjust, as they do not exist in isolation, but rather intersect and contribute to other occupational stressors endemic within the legal profession, including burnout and decreased career confidence, which ultimately increases exit intention as a strategy to cope in response to persistent hurdles (Adiguna & Suwandana, 2023; Ahmad *et al.*, 2022a; Attell *et al.*, 2017; Junça-Silva & Ferreira, 2025; Young-Jin Kim *et al.*, 2018). The absence of restorative feedback mechanisms, trauma-informed leadership, and inadequate accountability structures compounds the normalisation of such behaviour.

The need to address this issue is particularly urgent as the country stands at a crossroads of social and economic transformation, which puts pressure on the legal profession to evolve and reflect the country’s democratic aspirations and development goals. Despite this urgency, there is a notable absence of empirical evidence examining the gendered and sexist cultures that persist in

Maldivian workplaces, because of which reforms aimed at resolving this issue risk being rhetorical rather than structural.

### Research objectives and questions

This study seeks to investigate the impact of gendered microaggressions on exit intention among lawyers in the Greater Male' Region, recognising burnout and career confidence as mediating variables. In achieving this, this research aims to address the following objectives:

- Assess the impact of gendered microaggressions on exit intention.
- Examine the relationship between gendered microaggressions and burnout.
- Examine the relationship between gendered microaggressions and career confidence.
- Assess the influence of burnout and career confidence on exit intention.
- Evaluate the impact of burnout on career confidence.
- Investigate the mediating roles of burnout and career confidence in the relationship between microaggressions and exit intention.

These objectives provide the foundation for deeper inquiry into workplace biases, as well as the psychological, social and professional consequences of gendered microaggressions within the legal sector. By mapping the relationship between these variables, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts to provide evidence grounded in theory derived from an empirically tested framework. Hence, this leads to the broader conceptualisation of the study's purpose and significance within the global and local contexts.

### Research purpose and significance

By examining how gendered microaggressions influence exit intention, mediated by burnout and career confidence, this study aims to uncover the psychological costs of subtle exclusion and its consequent impact on professional engagement and employee retention. The significance of the research lies in its centrality to women's lived experiences within the Maldivian legal system, which has been historically shaped by patriarchal norms. Bringing organisational psychology and gender equity together offers empirical evidence that contributes to trauma-informed institutional reform, supporting career development in small island legal contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A close examination of the key variables which shape professional disengagement due to exposure to microaggressions is assistive in conceptualising the psychological and structural dimensions of workplace exclusion. As such, this literature review provides insight into the evolution and application of the identified variables (microaggressions, burnout, career confidence and exit intention), grounding the study in established theoretical frameworks adapted to the Maldivian legal context.

### Key concepts

#### Microaggressions

The term "microaggressions" was initially coined by Chester Pierce (1970), and later popularised by Sue et al. (2007, p. 271), where the term was defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group". Building on this, Basford et al. (2014) described gender microaggressions as "a form of sexism", highlighting its sinister nature as it is difficult to trace and often does not have any serious disciplinary actions. Nadal (2015) contributed to this by stressing their subtle nature, defining the term as a "subtle form of discrimination, often unintentional and unconscious".

Recently, Kim and Meister (2023) expanded the definition by including five recurring types of gender microaggressions commonly observed in male-dominated fields, comprising: assumptions of incompetence, exclusion from leadership, tokenism, interruption and dismissal, stressing how these experiences significantly impacted and eroded career confidence, contributing to victims' intention to leave, particularly when support or allyship was not available. Feitosa et al. (2025) emphasised that such behaviour is indicative of structural exclusion, which shapes workplace cultures and contributes to burnout.

Based on these definitions, this study conceptualises gender microaggressions in the workplace as subtle, often normalised verbal, behavioural or environmental slights, which promote or contribute to devaluation, exclusion or stereotypical assumptions based on gender.

### **Burnout**

The concept of “burnout” was initially introduced by Freudenberger in reference to the exhaustion experienced by employees (Hillert *et al.*, 2020). Since then, despite extensive scholarship, the definition of the term has not been harmonised, and a unified clinical or psychiatric standard for burnout has not been established, as experts continue to debate whether burnout can be classified as a syndrome, disorder, process or simply as a “risk status” (Maslach, 2017). Most contemporary research relies on the conceptualisation of burnout as outlined in the framework, “The Maslach Burnout Inventory [MBI],” developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). This framework operationalises burnout as a combination of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation/cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment/efficacy. The resulting framework underpins the measurement of burnout in most studies.

Later on, Maslach et al. (Maslach *et al.*, 1997) provided a more concise definition, as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job”. Alongside these scholars, Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) emphasised the process of psychological resource depletion in terms of burnout, while Leiter and Maslach (2016) linked burnout and mismatches between individuals in terms of six key domains across the workplace, including workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values, later on.

Drawing from these definitions, this study defines burnout as a multidimensional psychological condition characterised by detachment, emotional exhaustion and diminished efficacy, reflecting both individual strain and structural failure.

### **Career confidence**

“Career confidence”, grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, explores the belief in one’s ability to perform tasks and achieve goals in terms of “self-efficacy”, as proposed by Bandura (1977). The concept garnered accelerated scholarly attention, especially in relation to gender, psychological well-being, and workplace bias. The Career Adaptability model, introduced by Savickas (2005), identifies confidence as a psychological resource for navigating career transitions, marking the first formal use of “confidence” as a career-specific trait.

While some scholars have used the term synonymously with self-efficacy (Paulsen & Betz,

2004; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), others consider it a distinction, defining career confidence as multidimensional, integrating self-trust, esteem, compassion, and general certainty in career direction and decision-making (Murasing *et al.*, 2025; Zhou & Shirazi, 2025). Savickas and Porfeli (2012, p. 664) further described career confidence in terms of resilience and adaptability, as the certitude in ones’ ability to solve problems and overcome obstacles. In contrast, Hirschi (2011) linked career confidence to vocational identity and goal orientation, whereas Nauta (2010) and Cheung and Arnold (2010) emphasized its relationship to identity and belonging, influenced by support systems, workplace climate, and systematic bias.

Based on these perspectives, this study defines career confidence as a multidimensional belief system encompassing self-efficacy, resilience, and perceived professional legitimacy, which enables workers to pursue, persist and adapt to career goals. It is considered dependent on personal identity, workplace environment and is vulnerable to being impacted by gendered microaggressions and systematic exclusion.

### **Exit intention**

The concept of “exit intention” (also referred to as “intention to leave”) is often understood as a cognitive and emotional precursor to an individual’s actual departure from their job or profession. Mobley et al. (1979) first described it as a multi-stage process stemming from dissatisfaction, contemplation, search behaviour and eventual departure. The Theory of Planned Behaviour, developed by Ajzen (1991), offered a behavioural lens, recognising the role of perceived social norms and perceived behavioural control on exit intention. Tett and Meyer (1993) defined it as “the conscious and deliberate willfulness of the employee to leave the organisation”, while Kim et al. (1996) added that it is the degree to which employees contemplate leaving their current employer, highlighting its contribution to actual employee turnover.

Later on, Halawi (2014) distinguished between the intention to leave the organisation and the intention to leave the profession. This nuance is critical in discussing legal professionals, whose dissatisfaction and subsequent decision may be based on systematic issues rather than grievances with employers. In professions such as law, exit intention is triggered by microaggressions, burnout

and diminished career confidence (Lent *et al.*, 2000).

Drawing from this literature, this study defines exit intention as a cognitively mediated, context-dependent indicator which reflects the probability of an employee’s departure, shaped by the culmination of experiences that put emotional strain and diminish their career confidence. It signals systematic dysfunction, institutional exclusion and the long-term impact of gendered microaggressions.

**Critical underlying theory**

This study adopts Sue’s taxonomy of microaggressions, developed by Sue et al. (2007), as the foundational model to examine the cumulative impact of gendered microaggressions on lawyers’ burnout, career confidence, and exit intention. The framework was developed to pinpoint and stress the subtle, often unconscious discrimination faced by marginalised groups, and offers a robust typology for categorising and analysing indignities in professional settings.

The taxonomy categorised microaggressions into three categories as detailed in the table below.

**Table 1:**Sue’s taxonomy

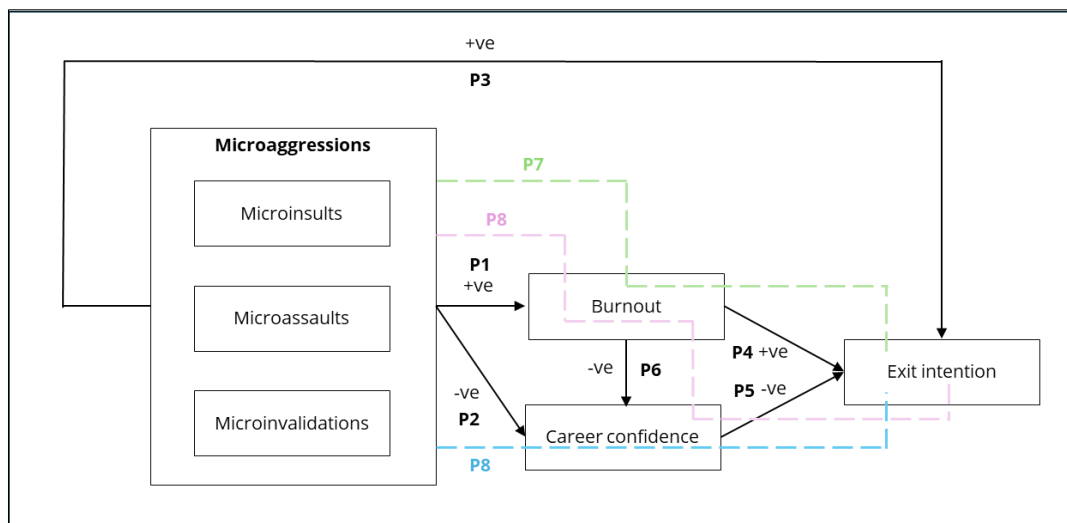
| Category of microaggression | Description   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Microassaults               | Overt, intentional discriminatory acts, such as sexist jokes or exclusionary behaviour  |
| Microinsults                | Subtle communications that demean a person’s identity or competence, often disguised as compliments or neutral observations                           |
| Microinvalidations          | Statements of behaviours that negate or dismiss the experiential realities of marginalised individuals, such as denying the existence of gender bias. |

This framework has been widely cited and empirically tested across disciplines (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022b; Kaskan & Ho, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2023; Vossoughi *et al.*, 2025). Its popularity is owed to its clarity in categorising microaggressions, which captures the overlapping yet distinct dimensions of exclusion. The taxonomy has been applied to multiple studies that explored psychological distress, workplace exclusion, and professional disengagement, making it well-suited to examine burnout, career confidence, and exit intention as it provides insight by centring lived experiences and cumulative harm. As such, it is well-suited to study the legal environment of the Maldives,

where bias is similarly covert, escapes formal scrutiny, and has a profound impact on career trajectories.

**Conceptual framework**

Based on this, the conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates how gendered microaggressions, as defined in Sue’s taxonomy, impact burnout, career confidence, and exit intention among lawyers. It outlines both direct and mediated pathways, showing how emotional strain and diminished confidence contribute to professional disengagement.



**Figure 1:**Conceptual framework

This study formulates a series of propositions based on the conceptual framework to test the relationship between the identified variables empirically. These propositions reflect the study's objectives and provide a basis for examining the direct and mediated effects, as well as the moderating influences.

## THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

### Direct effects

Meta-analytic and cross-sectional studies in law, medicine, and academia have revealed that daily exposure to microaggressions, such as being overlooked, interrupted, or subjected to gendered "jokes", directly contributes to emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Desai *et al.*, 2023). The stress-process model posits that these "daily hassles" are potent contributors to burnout (Attell *et al.*, 2017; Fattoracci & King, 2023; Young-Jin Kim *et al.*, 2018). A growing body of literature confirmed a robust positive relationship between experiencing microaggressions and occupational burnout (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022a; Boyle *et al.*, 2022; Cancela *et al.*, 2024; Desai *et al.*, 2023; Junça-Silva & Ferreira, 2025; Lyubarova *et al.*, 2023; Macintosh *et al.*, 2022; Newman *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, the following theoretical proposition is formulated.

P1 Exposure to gendered microaggressions is positively associated with burnout among legal professionals.

Kim and Meister (2023) explained that repeatedly questioning a person's competency and belonging erodes self-efficacy and confidence, especially in environments which are historically dominated by men, such as the legal field, where even high performers experience impostor syndrome (Jacob *et al.*, 2024). These phenomena are well-documented across STEM sectors (Jacob *et al.*, 2024; J. Y. Kim & Meister, 2023; Moss, 2024; Nadal *et al.*, 2015; Washington, 2023). Empirical evidence also suggests that individuals who report experiencing microaggressions tend to score lower on validated measures of career confidence and occupational self-efficacy (Algner & Lorenz, 2022; Ayari, 2023). Based on these findings, the following theoretical proposition is proposed.

P2 Exposure to gendered microaggressions is negatively associated with career confidence among legal professionals.

Exit intention has been strongly linked to hostile workplace climates (Hao & Wang, 2022; Jasiński & Derbis, 2022; Namin *et al.*, 2021).

Microaggressions are a key driver in eroding job satisfaction and in contributing to long-term disengagement (Doering *et al.*, 2023; Jacob *et al.*, 2024; Shaukat & Khurshid, 2021). While women's responses to covert microaggressions and discrimination may influence how workers and managers address gender-based discrimination (Withey & Cooper, 1989), studies indicate that women are less likely to speak out or exit in response to ambiguous discrimination (Aicher, 2007; Parker, 1993). However, this passive response allows resentment to build over time (J. Y. Kim & Meister, 2023), leading to the proliferation of stress and ultimately impacting long-term career aspirations and the mental well-being of workers (Anker & Krill, 2021; Azmat *et al.*, 2020). These findings inform the development of the following theoretical proposition.

P3 Exposure to gendered microaggressions is positively associated with exit intention among legal professionals.

The association between burnout and exit intention, particularly the contribution of increased burnout to an increase in, or development of, exit intention, has been well-established by literature on occupational and organisational psychology. Once developed, burnout negatively impacts job satisfaction, resulting in decreased organisational commitment, ultimately leading to contemplation of departure or resignation (Ahmad Saufi *et al.*, 2023; Asri, 2022; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2022). The findings of studies which adopted the Conservation of Resources theory, such as Chen *et al.* (2024) and Zhang *et al.* (2025), highlighted that workers are more likely to disengage from their employment or career as a protective mechanism when they perceive a persistent depletion of energy and lack the required coping resources. In light of these findings, the following theoretical proposition is offered.

P4 Experiencing burnout is positively associated with an increase in exit intention.

Career confidence functions as a psychological buffer, increasing the resiliency of workers against occupational stress and preventing disengagement (Herbert, 2011; Tosun & Güner Kibaroglu, 2023). When career confidence declines, workers may begin to question their long-term fit in their profession, including their ability to climb the hierarchy, while debating whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages of continuing to invest in a biased system. Bandura (1977) and Cao *et al.*

(2025) found that career insecurity and low self-efficacy are significant predictors of turnover, especially within high-pressure sectors. Kim and Stoner (2008) further highlighted that workers' likelihood of exiting is higher where their work environments have poor gender equity climates. Based on this, the following proposition is suggested.

P5 Decreased career confidence is negatively associated with an increase in exit intention.

Burnout affects the emotional well-being of workers, which in turn undermines career confidence by increasing detachment, emotional exhaustion, and diminished efficacy resulting from sustained exposure to stressors. This prevents workers from advancing in their careers, maintaining their competence, and sustaining long-term professional engagement. Consequently, this decreases the necessary psychological resources for career resiliency, as evidenced by the findings of Maslach and Leiter (2016), which showed that burned-out individuals perceived themselves as less capable, impactful, and less valued within their roles and organisations, (Kim & Stoner, 2008; Sharmilee, Basit, & Hassan, 2017). Therefore, the following proposition is presented, with its foundation firmly established in the findings of the studies discussed.

P6 Experiencing burnout is negatively associated with a decrease in career confidence.

### Mediated effects

Literature suggests that microaggressions are a key contributor to chronic workplace stress, which subsequently depletes workers' resources, ultimately leading to burnout (Peng & Yao, 2024). Even where microaggressions do not directly trigger intention to exit, burnout mediates or exacerbates the workers' exit intention (Adiguna & Suwandana, 2023; Ren & Kim, 2023; Zanabazar & Bira, 2023). Mediation models developed and tested by researchers such as Lee et al. (2023), Young-Jin Kim et al. (2018), Desai et al. (2023), and Nadal et al. (2015) have established the causal sequence between these three variables, while highlighting the indirect route through which subtle bias undermines employee retention. The following proposition is grounded in the empirical evidence in the studies discussed.

P7 Burnout has a significantly positive mediating effect on the relationship between microaggressions and exit intention.

Microaggressions erode workers' self-belief and professional capabilities, resulting in diminished confidence, reduced motivation, and an increased likelihood of exit (Algner & Lorenz, 2022; Mardani & Stupnisky, 2023; Marks *et al.*, 2022). Meta-analyses indicate that even after accounting for traditional variables such as workload and compensation, microaggressions continue to predict employee turnover (Macintosh *et al.*, 2022; Marks *et al.*, 2022; Newman *et al.*, 2025; Salari *et al.*, 2024). The exposure to such indignities was described as "death by a thousand cuts" (Memon *et al.*, 2022), ultimately leading to resignation (Nadal *et al.*, 2015; Soni & Kumar, 2022). In response, institutions have begun measures to mitigate employee turnover (*Eliminating Bias*, 2022; O'Neill, 2022). Drawing from these findings, this study advances the following proposition.

P8 Career confidence has a significantly negative mediating effect on the relationship between microaggressions and exit intention.

Based on the literature detailed above, and scrutiny into the nuanced expansion of sequential factors proposed that microaggressions first elevate burnout (Adiguna & Suwandana, 2023; Desai *et al.*, 2023; MacIntosh *et al.*, 2022), which subsequently diminishes career confidence (Algner & Lorenz, 2022; J. Y. Kim & Meister, 2023; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), and this ultimately results in the manifestation or increase in exit intention (Doering *et al.*, 2023; Jacob *et al.*, 2024; Tett & Meyer, 1993), thus highlighting the compounding effect of psychological erosion resulting from hostile workplace environments. The observed relationship between these factors gives rise to the following proposition.

P9 Burnout significantly mediates the relationship between microaggressions and exit intention by negatively influencing career confidence.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### Conclusion

This study explores the impact of gendered microaggression on exit intention among lawyers in the Greater Male' Region, recognising burnout and career confidence as mediating variables. By grounding the study in Sue's taxonomy, the findings illustrate how subtle, normalised bias and exclusion contribute to emotional exhaustion, diminished confidence and professional disengagement. In assessing this, the conceptual framework and propositions were formulated

based on literature to understand workplace bias, particularly in gendered hierarchical professions such as law.

### Practical and theoretical implications

This study marks the first empirical application of Sue et al. (2007)'s taxonomy of microaggressions within the context of South Asia, by mapping the sequential erosion stemming from microaggressions to burnout, decreased career confidence and an increase in intention to exit. Thus, this contributes to the literature on how covert discrimination shapes professional experiences.

On a practical level, the findings of this study aim to provide insight into mediation processes, contribute to evidence-based policy development, enhance trauma-informed interventions, and offer guidance for legal sector educators and advocates on addressing and combating gendered professional challenges. Furthermore, this research makes a social contribution to promoting gender equity and professional well-being, serving as a model for similar studies within similar contexts, and contributing to the cross-cultural validation of frameworks on workplace bias. These insights are intended to contribute to designing support systems which centre on psychological safety and career resiliency.

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