



INVESTIGATING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE REPORTING BEHAVIOUR: STATE OF AFFAIRS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Kennedy Ochien'g Gendo¹,

Ezekiel Mbitha Mwenzwa²,

Teresa Waithera³ⁱ

¹Student,

Masters of Science,

Forensics and Security Management (Corporate Forensics),

Dedan Kimathi University of Technology,

Nyeri, Kenya

²Faculty member, Dr.,

Department of Social Sciences,

Karatina University, Kenya

³Head of the Counseling Department, Dr.

Dedan Kimathi University of Technology,

Nyeri, Kenya

Abstract:

Workplace violence is a global concern, with 20% of workers worldwide experiencing one type in their working life. While many organizations have regulations regarding interpersonal relationships between employees, the script and practice do not align, resulting in an unsafe workplace. This implies staff and generally stakeholder demotivation and demoralization that work against performance and productivity. This paper is the result of a 2024 field study undertaken at Tom Mboya University in Kenya to understand the determinants of workplace violence reporting behaviour among staff. It sought to establish how bureaucracy, organizational culture and personal traits interacted with workplace violence reporting behaviour among staff at the university. The study did a census and combined quantitative and qualitative methods of social investigation, including a survey, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and observation covering the entire university population of 93 members of staff. The findings show that workplace violence at the university is multifaceted, with verbal abuse, threats, intimidation and psychological harassment being the most reported forms. Hence, bureaucracy, organizational culture and personal traits affected staff motivation to report workplace, lending credence to the assertion that the reported cases were just a tip of the iceberg. Consequently, it was concluded that addressing workplace violence in the university required cultural transformation in addition to existing

ⁱ Correspondence: email kengendojc@gmail.com, emwenzwa@karu.ac.ke, teresa.waithera@dkut.ac.ke

policies. Going forward, recommendations are made to make the workplace not only safer, but also productivity-enhancing.

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1. Introduction

Workplace violence is a worldwide issue because it undermines staff morale and their performance, and hence organizational performance. It involves but is not limited to intentional physical attack, murder, bullying, intimidation, or harassment or other disruptive acts that serve to marginalize workers and risk underperformance relative to their capacities (Hutchinson & Jackson, 2015). Workplace violence is a prevalent phenomenon in the world, with over 1 in every 5 (22.8) workers being exposed to violence in the course of their work life (ILO, 2022). Nevertheless, only half of the survivors inform official agencies about the cases (Ibid, 2022). It is the most widespread in the USA (34.3%), followed by Africa (25.7%), Europe and Central Asia (25.5%), Asia and the Pacific (19.2 %), and the Arab States (13.6%) (Boskamp, 2023). It also influences the capacity of workers to report to authorities, depending on the intensity and the typology.

Workplace violence happens in different fields such as healthcare, education and agriculture (Mayhew, 2013; Boskamp, 2023). Violence against university staff has long been underreported in the education sector and discussed in the study of violence against students (Alexander, 2020). Workplace in the university in Denmark and the Netherlands is not uncommonly reported because of systematic aspects like hierarchies and competition with each other (Naezer *et al.*, 2019; Utoft, 2021). On the same note, in Australia, the barriers to its reporting are perpetrator type and organizational response (Thomas *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it is quite evident that the violence in the workplace may not only be widespread but also confusing and complex, making its efficient reporting to the authorities difficult.

In Africa, reported workplace violence prevalence varies by jurisdiction, with Ethiopia at 26.7%, Ghana at 52.7%, Gambia at 62.1%, and South Africa at 85% (Isanya & Juma, 2020; Kibunja *et al.*, 2021). In Kenya, it is very prevalent among nurses but largely underreported due to fear of reprisals such as job loss and judgment from colleagues (Kibunja *et al.*, 2021; Kuira, 2022). Legal frameworks in Kenya, such as the Constitution and the Employment Act (Republic of Kenya, 2007; 2010), aim to protect workers, but reporting remains low (Nyaga, 2020). The foregoing underreporting therefore stands in the way of effective response to workplace violence, which calls for better strategies in its reporting and especially improving on anonymity.

Gender-based violence and workplace violence prevention policies have been established in numerous Kenyan universities, yet the emphasis is frequently made on sexual violence; other types are poorly managed (SEKU, 2014; Kenyatta University, 2014;

Maasai Mara University, 2018; University of Nairobi, 2022). Moreover, most of the research conducted on workplace violence in Kenyan universities has concentrated on violence against the students as opposed to the employees, and therefore, there is a huge knowledge gap in research studies conducted to understand the peculiar challenges that the employees in universities encounter. This paper thus investigated the impact of the bureaucratic structure, the organization culture and the individual attribute on the report or non-report cases of workplace violence among the university employees at Tom Mboya University.

It is a well-known fact that workplace violence is common in Kenyan universities (SEKU, 2014; Kenyatta University, 2014; Maasai Mara University, 2018; University of Nairobi, 2022), nonetheless, some of the acts remain unreported notwithstanding the protection offered by the Constitution of Kenya, Employment Act and Sexual Offence Act (Republic of Kenya, 2006; 2007; 2010). Although the current gender-based violence policies at Kenyan universities are consistent with the National Policy on Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence (Republic of Kenya, 2014) they do not have instructions on how non-sexual violence could be reported. Such ambiguity can be used to increase the stress and anxieties of university workers and affect them adversely in terms of motivation, morale and quality service provision.

It has been noted that most research on workplace violence in Kenyan universities is based on the aspect of violence inflicted on students but not on the employees, and therefore, there has been a massive lack of information addressing the particular needs of employees in the Kenyan universities. Accordingly, the particular catalysts of workplace violence reporting among employees are only slightly researched, thus being a grey area. Being a young and vibrant institution, and determined to promote the atmosphere of excellence, inclusivity, and social responsibility, Tom Mboya University offers a rather specific setting to conduct this study. This paper aimed at discussing the roles of bureaucratic processes, organizational culture, and individual traits on workplace violence reporting by employees at Tom Mboya University. The findings are expected to significantly contribute to policy development and broader societal change, ensuring a safer and more supportive work environment for all university employees. It is against such background knowledge that a field study was undertaken at Tom Mboya University in order to understand workplace violence reporting behaviour among staff.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was carried out at Tom Mboya University in Homa Bay County, Kenya, approximately 200km South of Kisumu City and 450km west of Nairobi. The university is accessible via the Nairobi–Narok–Kisii–Homa Bay Road (Tom Mboya University, n.d.). It sits near the eastern shores of Lake Victoria and is approximately 1 km from Homa Bay Town Central Business District. It was later, on August 2 2022, granted a charter by the Government of the Republic of Kenya, as a constituent college of Maseno University in April 2016 through Legal Notice No. 55. By 2024, the university was endowed with a staff

population of 93 staff, whereas the student population was around 3,000. In order to achieve the study aim of understanding workplace reporting behaviour, the study employed mixed methods in data collection as follows.

The desk research was the initial and foundational step in this study that involved a review of literature on policies, legal frameworks and previous studies related to workplace violence, reporting mechanisms, bureaucratic structures, and organizational culture, with a particular emphasis on academic institutions. The purpose of carrying out a desk research was 3-fold. To begin with, conducting an analysis in order to determine the knowledge gaps concerning workplace violence reporting among the staff in Kenyan universities, since the existing available studies focus mainly on students. Second, to develop a strong theoretical and conceptual framework to base the research on, it is important to include frameworks such as the Social Strain, the Human Relations and the Social Systems theories. Third, in order to inform the development of major data collection tools through the identification of key themes, pertinent variables, and approaches that were used in earlier studies.

The desk review revealed some of the problems, such as underreporting caused by power imbalances and fear of punishment; lack of institutional structures to facilitate confidential reporting and the culture of normalizing harassment and low-key violence in the workplace. Such insights proved incredibly important in the design and improvement of research tools. This ensured that the primary data collection instruments were both thematically aligned with existing scholarship and responsive to the study's purpose. This enhanced the relevance of primary data tools while partly bridging the gap between theoretical and empirical findings of the study.

In order to buttress the theoretical findings, the study employed both Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) among staff. In this case, seven key informants were selected purposively and interviewed in order to provide in-depth insights due to their roles and positions of influence in the university.

These included:

- 1) Human Resource Manager,
- 2) Registrar (Administration),
- 3) Dean, School of Business and Economics,
- 4) Gender Officer,
- 5) Chief Security Officer,
- 6) Representative of the Universities Academic Staff Union (UASU),
- 7) Representative from the Kenya Universities Staff Union (KUSU).

KIIs assisted in discovering institutional knowledge, individual understanding, policy implementation issues, and covert obstacles, a comprehensive understanding of which cannot be gained with the help of FGDs. In addition, a total of six (6) FGDs were carried out aimed at exploring staff attitudes, shared experiences and workplace norms regarding the reporting of workplace violence. Participants in FGDs were selected purposively to ensure diverse representation across gender, role, rank, age and experience.

The FGD inclusion criteria included a minimum of two years of continuous service at the university, representation from both academic and administrative cadres, willingness to express views in a group setting and a balanced representation by gender, department and job scale. This composition allowed for rich, varied discussions that reflected the complexity of staff experiences and perceptions across the university. Additionally, probationary and temporary staff were not included, as they were considered to have limited experience or insufficient integration into the institution's operational environment. The focus groups were constituted as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Constitution of Focus Group Discussions

Groups	Group Constitution		
	Males	Females	Total
Group 1	4	3	7
Group 2	3	4	7
Group 3	5	3	8
Group 4	3	4	7
Group 5	4	3	7
Group 6	3	5	8
Total	22	22	44

Source: Field data, 2024.

As shown in Table 1 and as mentioned earlier, there were six FGDs that on average were constituted of between seven and eight members of staff. It is important to mention that there was an exclusion criterion applied in the constitution of the focus groups, especially to ensure openness and relevance of discussions. For example, to ensure free discussion, staff in senior management, such as Deans, Registrars, and Directors, were excluded to avoid inhibiting information by junior staff. Hence, focus groups were purposely constituted to ensure more homogeneity within each group, based on job category and salary scale. This ensured relaxed and free discussions in each group, and hence enhanced the objectivity and validity of the information provided. In addition, academic and administrative staff were grouped separately to ward off discomfort that is associated with role differentiation.

Moreover, a questionnaire was prepared bearing in mind the study's purpose to collect quantitative data from respondents at the university. Since the population size ($N = 93$) was relatively small, the research applied a census methodology, meaning that it was conducted on the entire academic and administrative staff of the university. Structured questionnaires were used; research assistants conducted each of the questionnaires face-to-face in order to accurately understand the questions and provide honest answers, and minimise the possibility of non-response. This method enabled the study to assess the prevalence and forms of workplace violence, understand staff experiences regarding reporting procedures, evaluate the institutional environment through the lens of bureaucracy and organizational culture and examine how individual personality traits influenced reporting behaviour. The study of the entire population

enhanced the credibility, reliability and validity of the data collected. Respondents were categorized by staff cadre (academic or administrative) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Cadre of Staff of Respondents

Cadre of staff	Frequency	Percentage
Academic staff	36	38.7
Administrative staff	57	61.3
Total	93	100

Source: Field data, 2024.

The following representation in Table 2 indicates how the workforce is comprised in reality at Tom Mboya University. Most of them were administrative members, as indicated by institutional human resource records. The analysis of the entire population provided a balanced investigation as to the experiences of workplace violence with respect to various positions, divisions and levels. The distinction between academic and administrative roles was essential for understanding departmental exposure to workplace violence, understanding how reporting pathways differ by staff cadre and interpreting variations in organizational culture experienced by different staff categories.

Above all, the study employed observation to supplement and validate the primary data collection. The observation allowed the witnessing of the institutional environment firsthand and captured elements that may not be fully articulated in self-reported responses, FGDs and KIIs. The observation exercise was designed to assess the visibility of workplace violence policies and support systems, identify behavioural cues and office setups relevant to the reporting culture. It was also aimed at checking the presence or otherwise of reporting infrastructure such as suggestion boxes, awareness posters and private reporting spaces. Observations were conducted in various administrative and academic departments across the university. These included Human Resource Office, Registry and Administrative Blocks, Library, Information and Communication Technology Department, Faculty Offices and Security and Reception Desks. A structured observation checklist was used to guide the observation process in order to capture information in line with the purpose of the study.

3. Findings

This study aimed to investigate the drivers of workplace violence reporting behaviour in Kenyan universities, with Tom Mboya University as a case study. The study identified the key drivers that influence the reporting of workplace violence at Tom Mboya University. An in-depth understanding of these drivers helped in making recommendations that, if implemented to the letter, are expected to go a long way in revitalizing workplace violence reporting. This is expected to make Tom Mboya University not only a safe working environment, but also a workplace for effective service

delivery. Besides, this research design and methodology made the research very strong and have added so much to the body of knowledge.

It was noted that reporting workplace violence was a property of various factors such as organizational culture, including values, norms and practices at the university. These played an important role in which a positive culture encouraged reporting, while a toxic one acted as a deterrent. In addition, bureaucratic structures and processes also significantly impacted workplace violence reporting behaviour, in which case some employees expressed reluctance to report their seniors for fear of reprisals or that the seniors may not decisively act on their reports. The findings of the study are in the form of the following.

First, with regard to the prevalence of workplace violence at Tom Mboya University, data show that there is a high prevalence of workplace violence of various forms. The most common types were verbal abuse, intimidation and psychological/emotional harm. In addition, a significant portion of staff reported other forms of violence, including excessive workload, financial exploitation and social exclusion. These forms were the most prevalent, implying the dynamic nature of workplace violence. This points to the urgent need to broadly redefine workplace violence in university policies to include these other forms, and at the same time reflects its dynamic nature. Short of the foregoing, staff in the university will continue to suffer, which eventually affects their productivity and organizational service delivery.

Second, regarding the relationship between bureaucracy and workplace violence reporting behaviour, the study found out that bureaucratic inefficiencies such as complex reporting procedures, perceived lack of anonymity by victims, slow institutional responses and juniors' fear of retaliation by their seniors were major barriers to reporting. Many staff found the existing reporting framework intimidating and inaccessible, especially when the perpetrator was senior to the victim. Perceived lack of confidentiality and the fear of career-related repercussions further suppressed formal reporting to a great extent.

Further, field data showed that women and junior staff were more intimidated by the bureaucratic structure of the university to report workplace violence. This apparently emboldened violators, while making many victims and witnesses suffer silently. The foregoing, in turn, made it difficult for university management to take action, especially in cases where violations were not formally reported. The implication of the foregoing is that the university management may keep a blind eye on matters that have not been officially reported, and this is a recipe for below potential performance of staff, courtesy of demotivation and demoralization. In this case, Mwenzwa (2011) cautions that if an issue is not addressed effectively, it subsides temporarily but continues in a sort of social relationships. Hence, the future repercussions to the university are expected to be dire in the absence of effective solutions to workplace violence.

Third, as far as the relationship between organizational culture and workplace reporting behaviour was concerned, data revealed that the latter significantly influenced staff willingness and resolve to report workplace violence. Nonetheless, this was not

always the case in all departments and units in the university. For example, while some departments were described as supportive and inclusive, others were seen as rigid, hierarchical and hostile to violence reporting. In extreme cases, organizational culture was described as toxic to thinking, especially by academic members of staff. This implies a fragmented culture with perhaps staff pulling in different directions that bordered on self-interest at the expense of organizational goals. Hence, this fragmented culture led to differential experiences in which reporting varied by department and section, depending on leadership and associated norms.

Finally, with regard to the relationship between personality traits and workplace reporting behaviour, data from this study show that the former determined a great deal of the latter among staff in the university. Traits such as conscientiousness, compassion and emotional sensitivity impacted staff members' violence reporting decisions. Compassionate individuals were found to be more likely to report violence experienced by others, while emotionally sensitive individuals were the least likely to report, citing anxiety and fear of retaliation. In addition, women and junior staff were found to be less likely to report workplace violations, despite being the most predisposed to them.

The results were also supported by observational measurements received through fieldwork that reflected institutional and environmental deficits that may impede reporting on violence at the place of work. These were not limited to:

- 1) Poor awareness documents: Lack of posters, leaflets, or notices that touch on the aspects of preventing workplace violence or the rights of the employees is, in itself, a case of lack of institutions creating awareness documents in the offices that were visited.
- 2) Inadequate awareness materials: In most offices visited, there were no visible posters, leaflets, or notices addressing workplace violence prevention or staff rights, which is tantamount to gaps in institutional awareness creation.
- 3) Absence of suggestion boxes or anonymous channels: There was no suggestion box in sight in any of the staff blocks, which is contrary to the required infrastructure for confidential reporting.
- 4) Unconducive office layouts for anonymous reporting: Several departments had open-plan offices without partitioned private spaces. This has been especially in support departments such as security and finance, and confidential consultations with staff can be hard.
- 5) Behavior of staff: In particular departments, more especially Registry and Finance, there was visible tension between junior staff and supervisors. Employees averted their gazes or showed signs of indecisiveness when senior employees came to them; these are some of the indicators of the presence of hierarchy tension amongst workers and juniors at the same time, such as signals for implanted fear resulting from an unhealthy relationship between juniors and seniors.
- 6) No display of anti-violence messages. Despite ILO Convention 190 requiring member states and their institutions to promote anti-violence policies, no signage or declaration of zero-tolerance to violence was displayed in the observed areas.

4. Conclusions

Based on the findings and in line with the purpose of the study, there are various observations that have led to the following conclusions. First, workplace violence at Tom Mboya University is widespread and multifaceted, ranging from verbal threats to subtle forms of institutional neglect and psychological abuse. While many of these often go unreported and unnoticed in official reports, they have significant impacts on employee well-being, motivation, morale, satisfaction and sense of belonging. Indeed, it can also be concluded that the crosspollination of various factors, including fear of reprisals, rigid and bureaucratic reporting systems and perceived lack of confidentiality of the process, among other factors, the reported cases of workplace violence remain largely a tip of the iceberg.

Second, various bottlenecks were found to stand in the way of effective reporting of workplace violence. These included the bureaucratic structure of the university, which hindered rather than facilitated reporting of workplace violence. For example, while staff were required to report through a certain chain of command, in most cases, the perpetrator of the violence was part of the chain. This made it difficult for members of staff to report violence meted out on them by their seniors, who were, in many cases, immediate supervisors. In addition, the lack of confidentiality, lengthy procedures and hierarchical bottlenecks deterred victims and witnesses alike from reporting workplace violations.

Third, data revealed that organizational culture played a pivotal role in shaping employee workplace reporting behaviour. It was noted that organizational culture at Tom Mboya University varied with leadership. While in some departments and sections the culture was supportive and had an open-door policy, in others, this was a contrast in the sense that leadership was unsupportive and hostile. In supportive and inclusive departments, the study found high levels of workplace violence reporting as opposed to those departments in which leadership was hostile. In this latter case, violations largely went unreported as the environment was seen by staff as unresponsive, and thus, there was fear and silence. In such a department, it was observed that even posters to communicate against workplace violence were absent.

Fourth, it was found out that personality traits significantly affected an individual's violence reporting behaviour among staff at Tom Mboya University. The effect was, however, varied, with conscientious and compassionate members of staff having been found to be more proactive in reporting and sounding concerns when and if violations occurred. On their part, emotionally sensitive staff largely avoided reporting violations partly due to self-doubt and fear of reprisals. It would seem that the latter personality characteristics were partly a result of the failure by the university management to sensitize staff on their rights and the available workplace violence reporting mechanisms. This worked against workplace reporting, with the result that members of staff, particularly women and those in lower cadres, continued to suffer in the workplace silently.

Fifth, the foregoing conclusions imply that enhancing workplace safety at Tom Mboya University requires not policy revision, but a cultural and structural shift that supports open communication and emotional security. It can therefore be concluded that many members of staff at the university faced institutional rigidities in reporting workplace violations against the systemic nature of the organization in which staff are expected to receive the necessary support to enhance their performance. Given the foregoing, it can also be concluded that staff performance at the university remains below expectations.

4.1 Going Forward

Drawing from the study findings and conclusions as guided by the study purpose and objectives, two-fold recommendations are made: for policy development and reform and those for further research. These are made in order to not only strengthen workplace violence reporting, but also effectively prevent and manage it going forward. As far as policy development and reform are concerned, the following recommendations are made.

First, based on the dynamic nature of workplace violence, there is a need to broaden its definition in university statutes and policies. Hence, university policies should incorporate subtle forms of violence such as workload exploitation, exclusion and emotional neglect as valid categories of violence for reporting and intervention. This is because these forms of violence continue to affect the workforce fabric with possible consequences of staff demotivation and turnover, which are not healthy for the university.

Second, given that workplace reporting procedures and mechanisms were seen by members of staff to be convoluted and extremely bureaucratic, there is an urgent need for their reform in tandem with the changing nature of workplace violence. Hence, it is recommended that the violence reporting procedures need not only to be simple, but also offer members of staff the necessary anonymity while reporting. This way, it is expected that members of staff will have confidence in the reporting systems. Hence, the university needs to introduce an online and anonymous reporting system that bypasses hierarchical channels, especially where the perpetrator is senior to the victim.

Third, there is an apparent culture of fear, not respect, especially among junior staff with regard to their seniors that deters the former from reporting violations. As such, there is a need for the university to institutionalize and promote a positive organizational culture that values all members of staff. This can be achieved through effective induction into the public service workplace, regular training for senior management and sensitisation of staff on their rights as workers. There is also a need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of university policies, particularly those dealing with staff welfare and collegiality. In particular, the university senior management should lead by example through adopting an open-door policy that includes a duty of care for staff.

Fourth, middle-level managers such as heads of departments and sections ought to be equipped with basic leadership and management skills, particularly on personnel

management, workplace conflict resolution and emotional intelligence. These are expected to ward off retaliatory behavior by supervisors against members of staff in their purview. This is expected to institutionalize a culture of mutual respect and ethical behavior among staff, which in turn motivates staff to go the extra mile in their performance and hence productivity.

Fifth, it was found that while some members of staff reported workplace violations, others were apparently complacent to violations and hence never raised a finger, partly due to personal characteristics. In addition, others did not trust the reporting system with regard to the anonymity of workplace violence reports. As such, it is important for the university to design multiple reporting avenues that cater for different personality types. These would include, but not be limited to, peer reporting and counseling, especially for emotionally sensitive members of staff. Moreover, the university is advised to engage external counselors for violators and victims alike, given that both need assistance.

Sixth, an important finding and observation from this study is that many members of staff have little confidence in the workplace violence reporting system. Part of the reason is that they report to colleagues who often double as their seniors and perpetrators. More importantly, there were no reports available of the actions taken against violators in the past. For the university to build confidence in staff on the system, it needs to publish anonymous reports of action taken in past cases. This will reassure staff that reporting is not only taken seriously by management, but also that decisive action is taken. In addition, this will also work to deter would-be perpetrators of workplace violence.

In order to significantly contribute to scholarship and add to existing knowledge, a raft of recommendations has been made for future research. First, to enhance the generalizability of findings, future research should expand the scope to include more universities, both public and private, for purposes of data comparison. Future research should also include other bureaucratic institutions in the country. This would allow for comparative analysis and a deeper understanding of systemic drivers influencing workplace violence reporting in diverse institutional environments.

Second, it is noted that staff-staff violence is not the only violence meted out on staff. As a result, future studies should go beyond violence meted out on staff by colleagues to include violence meted out on staff by students and other university stakeholders, including parents and suppliers. Staff such as those in academic departments are known to go through numerous violations of their spaces by both students and parents alike. This is a scope that has not been covered by this study, and hence future studies need to expand their reach to include such. Otherwise, we may end up alleviating violence among staff, but ignore that meted out on staff by other university stakeholders at the risk of demoralizing and demotivating staff.

Third, the scope of workplace violence, which is the scope of this study, is limited, given that it has not covered the whole spectrum of violence experienced by staff in their working spaces. For example, the study has not covered digital violence, including sexual

harassment by both students and staff. This is also another grey area that researchers need to invest their skills in going forward. It is expected that the scope of workplace violence research will continue to expand to keep pace with the dynamic nature of the phenomenon.

Fourth, it is widely acknowledged that staff performance is partly a function of their state of mental health, which is translated into organizational productivity. In a situation where there is violence in the workplace, it is expected that the mental health of staff would be effectively taken care of and thus not affect their performance. As a result, it is recommended that future research on workplace violence expand its scope to include its impact on worker mental health. This is important given that while the aim of any organization is the satisfaction of its customers, this would be impossible if staff mental health is adverse and therefore remote to organizational goals.

Fifth, it is acknowledged that workplace violence affects men and women differently, with varied physical, psychological, mental and productivity outcomes for both. In addition, many times workplace violence is gender specific and therefore intervention measures need to mainstream gender. Based on this observation, it is recommended that future research should be carried out while putting on a gender lens. This is because the current study was largely gender-blind and therefore largely produced gender neutral data. A study from a gender perspective is expected to produce gender disaggregated data that would be important for purposes of comparison.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study. This research was conducted solely for academic purposes and does not entail any personal, financial, or institutional benefit to the authors.

About the Author(s)

Kennedy Ochien'g Gendo holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminology and Security Management from Dedan Kimathi University of Technology, Nyeri, Kenya, with a specialization in Digital and Cyber Forensics Technology. He is the Head of the Department of Safety and Security at Maseno University, Kenya, where he has held positions of significant responsibility. His professional interests include corporate security, cyber forensics, forensic investigations, and institutional safety and governance. He is currently pursuing a Master of Science in Forensics and Security Management (Corporate Forensics) at Dedan Kimathi University of Technology, Kenya.

Dr. Ezekiel Mbitha Mwenzwa hold a BA (Social Work, 1999) and an MA (Sociology, 2005) from the University of Nairobi and a Doctor of Philosophy (Environmental Studies-Human Ecology, 2019) from the University of Eldoret, Kenya. He is a faculty member at the Department of Social Sciences, Karatina University, Kenya, where he teaches Sociology and Community Development. His area of specialisation is gender and dryland development, on which he has widely published. His most recent publication is, Gender and Restorative In/Justice in the Context of Crime and Punishment among the

Akamba Ethnic Group of Kenya, a book chapter in Gudhlanga, E. S., C. Chirimuuta, & G. Makaudze (2024). *Re-Thinking Indegenous Knowledge Systems in the Contemporary Global Discourse: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach*, published by the Zimbabwe Open University in 2024.

Dr. Teresa Waithira, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist and academic specializing in mental health and psychological support services in higher education contexts. She holds a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the United States International University–Africa (USIU-A) and currently serves as the Head of the Counseling Department at Dedan Kimathi University of Technology, Kenya. Her expertise lies in trauma-informed care, psychosocial interventions, and student mental wellness.

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