Descriptive Study of Social Relations in the Working Environment of Compagnie Ivoirienne de Coton (COIC): The Case of COIC Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire)

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to understand the impact of the relational environment on employees' professional experiences, with a focus on social interactions in the workplace. It is about showing the social relations in the work environment of the Ivorian Cotton Company in the locality of Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire). The study is part of a qualitative approach. The research instrument implemented is the interview guide, which was carried out with thirty (30) people, namely twenty-eight (28) women workers in the COIC cotton company, one (01) business manager, and one (01) team leader. This led to the results according to which the relational environment is characterized by relations with the entourage reflecting professional interactions. Indeed, social relations in the work environment play a crucial role in the productivity, well-being, and satisfaction of employees. A good social relationship can generate a climate of trust, collaboration, and mutual support between colleagues. Management policies can also contribute to strengthening social relations in the workplace.

Keywords: Social Relations, COIC, Stress, Women, Korhogo

Introduction

In the broadest sense, social relations refer to the links that exist between people who have recurring interactions that are perceived by the

participants as having personal significance. The effectiveness of social relations in business is essential to the overall success of an organisation. These interactions, which are often complex and multidimensional, involve various key players, each with unique objectives and motivations. Understanding these players and what they are looking for is crucial to navigating the modern industrial relations landscape. Indeed, social relations within the work environment are a fundamental aspect of organisational dynamics and directly influence employee performance and well-being. As the sociologist Emile Durkheim points out, interactions and social norms within work groups play a crucial role in the cohesion and effectiveness of teams (E. Durkheim, 1893).

According to G. Gallup (2023), around 21% of employees worldwide say they are engaged in their work, while 33% are actively disengaged. These figures illustrate that, although improvements have been made, there are still significant challenges in terms of employee engagement and satisfaction on a global scale.

In Africa, the challenges in terms of corporate culture and interpersonal relations are significant, with an increasing focus on improving the working climate, but specific data on the exact percentage may vary by country and sector. The report shows that employee engagement in Africa is generally lower than the global average, with engagement rates around 15% to 20% (G. Gallup, 2023). This highlights the need for companies in Africa to strengthen their organisational culture and improve working relationships to increase employee engagement and satisfaction. In addition, work environments in Africa often face problems of organisational culture and employee support (K. Lewin, 1947).

In Côte d'Ivoire, there are several cities, including Korhogo. Korhogo is no exception when it comes to social relations in the working environment. Social relations in the workplace are a growing concern, particularly for employees. This presentation examines the specific case of the COIC cotton company, exploring the conditions that employees may face and the implications for their health. One of the social categories most exposed to stress is women.

This is why the present research focuses on women working at the COIC company, as they are subject to a double burden: professional and domestic. Numerous studies (N. Karen, 2009; S.J. Lupien, 2010) have shown that although women tend to be less reactive to acute stress, they are more vulnerable to chronic stress.

They are often required to juggle factory work, family responsibilities, and mental load, which increases their exposure to psychosocial risks. It is important to emphasise that social relationships in the workplace can be both a source of support and a contributing factor to stress. When these

relationships are built on trust, cooperation, and solidarity, they foster a healthy organisational climate, reduce tensions, and improve employee well-being. Conversely, conflictual relationships, lack of recognition, or professional isolation can intensify psychological pressure and lead to chronic stress.

At the COIC company in Korhogo, women primarily occupy positions in production, notably sorting, ginning, packaging, and cleaning of equipment. These are physical, repetitive, and demanding tasks, often carried out under difficult climatic conditions, with strict schedules and little flexibility. On top of this, they must fulfil significant family responsibilities as soon as they return home. This double burden heightens both mental and physical strain, placing women in a state of structural stress linked to both the organisation of work and their traditional social role.

It is within this context that the present study examines workplace social relations as a factor that may either alleviate or exacerbate stress, particularly among female employees.

The present study seeks to answer the following research question: How do social relationships in the workplace environment of COIC in Korhogo influence stress levels among employees, particularly women?

In view of the physically demanding nature of the work at COIC, the lack of autonomy, the pressure of production targets, and the absence of individual recognition, it is reasonable to assume that this environment contributes to the emergence of occupational stress. Furthermore, internal social relationships, depending on their quality, may either alleviate or exacerbate this stress. It is within this context that we propose the following hypothesis:

Occupational stress experienced by women at COIC is largely due to the combination of intensive, repetitive, and high-pressure manual work, along with low levels of social and organisational recognition.

Methodology

This study was conducted within the Ivorian Cotton Company (Compagnie Ivoirienne de Coton – COIC), located in Korhogo, the capital of the Savanes district, 635 km from Abidjan. It took place over a six-month period and involved thirty (30) participants: twenty-eight (28) female employees of the company, one (1) company manager, and one (1) team leader. The selection of these participants aimed to gather precise and relevant information on social relationships in the workplace, in order to obtain reliable and actionable results.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Variables	Categories	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Female	28	93.3%
	Male (supervisor, team leader)	2	6.7%
Age	Under 30 years	6	20.0%
	30 to 40 years	12	40.0%
	Over 40 years	12	40.0%
Marital status	Married	18	60.0%
	Single	7	23.3%
	Widowed/Divorced	5	16.7%
Number of children	None	4	13.3%
	1 to 3 children	13	43.3%
	4 or more children	13	43.3%
Seniority at COIC	Less than 5 years	10	33.3%
	5 to 10 years	12	40.0%
	More than 10 years	8	26.7%
Work site	COIC Korhogo 1 (city centre)	11	36.7%
	COIC Korhogo 2 (north exit)	9	30.0%
	COIC Korhogo 3 (north exit)	10	33.3%

Source: our survey, 2023

The methodological approach adopted was qualitative, relying on two data collection techniques: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide organized around themes related to occupational stress, interpersonal relationships, and work organization.

A non-probability sampling method was used, combining two complementary techniques:

- Voluntary sampling, where participants were selected based on their free and informed consent, given the sensitive nature of the topic;
- Snowball sampling, in which a key informant helped identify other female workers with varied profiles (e.g., seniority, family status).

Data Processing and Analysis

The data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2011; Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014), following an inductive approach. This qualitative method makes it possible to identify, code, and group units of meaning derived from participants' discourse, based on the frequency, intensity, or recurrence of expressed themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

The analytical process was structured around four stages: an exploratory reading of the interview transcripts to identify salient ideas; manual coding using semantic indicators (keywords, expressions, emotions); grouping of these codes into thematic categories (stress, overload, hierarchy, gender, recognition); and finally, cross-interpretation drawing on theoretical

frameworks such as Karasek's demand-control model (1979), Goffman's interactionist sociology (1969), and Husserl's phenomenological analysis (1900), in order to grasp the complexity of women's lived experiences with work-related stress.

This analytical rigor enabled the development of a typology of social relationships within COIC, notably distinguishing dynamics of solidarity, hierarchical tension, isolation, and recognition. It thus contributes to shedding light on the differentiated forms of stress experienced by women in an African industrial context.

Results of the Study

The relational environment is characterised by the relationships with those around us that reflect professional interactions. Social relations in the work environment play a crucial role in employee productivity, well-being, and satisfaction. A good social relationship can foster a climate of trust, collaboration, and mutual support between colleagues. Management policies can also contribute to strengthening social relations in the workplace.

Working Hours

In this section, we highlight the different aspects of working hours. In general, working hours are often around eight (08) hours a day, or forty (40) hours a week. The time management policy in this company is eight (08) hours. With this in mind, one respondent said: « *we work 8 hours a day, i.e. from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. and from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.»* (Single woman aged 29, living with her family and 3 children).These comments show that the hours policy in this company is the same for each department.

The working day is divided into two distinct sessions, which suggests a moderate pace of work with a significant break between the two periods. Dividing the day into two blocks can influence interactions between colleagues. It is important for employees to manage their time and tasks well to avoid work overload or periods of low productivity.

Manifestation of Work-related Stress

This section shows the different manifestations of work-related stress as expressed by the employees surveyed in the company that was the subject of our study. A divergence of opinion in the work environment emerges. For example, this respondent, a woman aged 43, living with her partner and two (02) children, said:

> « *for me, stress manifests itself as inner fear. Sometimes my heart beats fast and my body heats up* ». Another added: « For me, at least, it's when the work is huge that I feel the stress ». (Woman aged 28, single, no children, living with her family).

On the other hand, some data state that the pressure of wanting to do well and not miss the job causes stress in us. This is justified by the words of this respondent:

> « *we experience stress at work and this manifests itself in the weak conviction of wanting to achieve the objective we have set ourselves, we want to do everything to the best of our ability* » (Woman aged 38, married with 4 children, living in Nouveau Quartier District).

Excessive workloads and excessive demands are a major source of stress, leading to fatigue, burnout and reduced performance. Another respondent put it this way: « a*ny job is stressful, especially when the boss is there to supervise the work* ».

It is clear from these comments that the majority of employees experience stress through work pressure.

Exchanging Tasks at Work

Task sharing can take place for a variety of reasons, such as optimising skills, managing workload or problem solving. When individuals do not receive adequate support from their colleague or management to manage the workload, this can increase their stress levels. For example, one interviewee said: « *we don't really exchange tasks, it's a group job, everyone wants to do their bit to get the job done* » (Woman aged 34, married, mother of five, living in Koko District). Relationships with work colleagues seem to have an effect on the exchange of tasks at work, as everyone wants to get the job done. Another woman added to this:

> « *well, for example, if I'm on a call, I ask one of my colleagues to stand in for me so as not to attract the boss's attention. It's a good thing, in any case, because it balances out the workload* » (Married woman, aged 50, with 6 children, lives with her in-laws in Tiékelezo District).

Many responsibilities lead some employees focus solely on their task, as in the case of this respondent, who said:

> « *for me, I don't exchange work with anyone, if I've finished for myself, I rest, myself for me is a lot yourself you have to see if I have to come and do for someone again, I'm going to die, well if the person is ill, I can make an effort otherwise true true, I don't see myself* » (Single woman aged 29, living with her family and 3 children).

In general, social relations at work determine the organisational climate of the company. However, it is essential to clearly define roles and responsibilities, communicate clearly and provide adequate support.

Mealtimes

Our study shows that mealtimes are not fixed or uniform for all employees. Mealtimes vary according to department or team. This is justified by what this respondent said:

> « of course, you have to eat to work properly. If we start at 8 a.m., we have a lunch break and we start again at 2 p.m. » (Married woman, aged 39, living in Koko district, mother of 3 children).

A structured timetable with a sufficient break can help to reduce stress and improve employees' general well-being. A balance between work and rest is essential for maintaining good mental and physical health, which can offer benefits in terms of productivity and strengthening social relations within the team.

Another respondent said:

> « *we all work 8 hours a day, when I go up at 8, I come down at 4, because there's another group that goes up after us, so we don't have a meal break as such, often we can have a 20-minute break and then get back to work* » (34 years old, married, mother of five, lives in Koko District).

In this company, each team has its own meal policy, some teams have privileges while others don't, given the hours, even though they all have 8 hours of working time. This time can be crucial for the development of social relations. It can provide a space for more relaxed discussion, enabling employees to get to know each other better and create a more collaborative and harmonious working environment.

Treatment of Employees by Gender

In this section, the same information emerges: all employees feel that they are treated in the same way, without discrimination; everyone is respected and treated fairly. This is justified by what this employee said:

> « *we are treated in the same way without distinction, because we do the same tasks, there are no special tasks for men or women or saying that you have a higher salary than the others, whatever your qualifications, we all have the same salary, no discrimination* » (Single, aged 27, no children, resident of Tegueré District).

It is imperative that companies treat all their employees fairly, without discrimination based on gender. The statement indicates that, on an informal level, this could mean that salaries, promotion opportunities and working conditions are uniform and non-discriminatory; although the survey may indicate that employees are treated equally on the basis of gender, it is essential to consider both formal policies and the actual experiences of employees to get the full picture of equal treatment.

Employer-Employee Relationship

The work environment is a place where people spend most of their time. This environment must foster a climate of peace to guarantee the company's development and reduce pressure and stress in the workplace.

« *we have a good relationship with our boss, we talk to each other, we're on good terms even though the pressure is often too much* » (Married, aged 30, father of 3).

In the same vein, another woman said:

« *we get on when we have worries, we approach them, same with colleagues, even if we usually have misunderstandings* » (Woman aged 30, married, mother of 2, living with in-laws).

Social cohesion and close relations between employers and employees are essential determinants for the smooth running of the business. The implementation of this climate of work and collaboration is the fruit of good governance by the head of the company. It is in this context that the head of the company expresses himself in these words:

« *i have a good relationship with my employees, they're respectful, they're determined in their work and because we're always together, we've become like a family* » (Married man, aged 54, living with his wife and 5 children).

The team leader follows the same pattern as his line manager. He says, and I quote: « *there's a good family atmosphere, we've been working together respectfully for a long time* » (42 years old, married, living in Koko district). This analysis clearly shows how employees get on with their superiors, fostering mutual respect and communication through a family atmosphere.

Salary Treatment

The purpose of doing a job is to support oneself, and some employees give their all in order to be financially satisfied, even if this means constant anxiety, stress and fatigue. One respondent said:

« o*ur salary doesn't meet our needs, but since it's our only income, we try to adapt to it, otherwise the man is never satisfied* » (34 years old, married, mother of five children, resident of Koko).

Despite the effort made by employees, they feel they do not have enough resources to contribute to their well-being. As this respondent put it

« *My salary is not enough for me, I have too many responsibilities, feeding the family, not forgetting my relative whom I have to help, but I don't have any other income-generating activity, so it's difficult, especially when I have a sick child or myself* » (aged 45 with 6 children and is married).

Employers' economic status is crucial in assessing their financial well-being, professional stability and quality of life. Women's burdens do not stop at the workplace, however, as they appear to face family and domestic obligations that extend beyond working hours. Most of them combine professional and personal responsibilities. Another respondent felt that :

« *i'm married, mother of five children all at primary school, I look after them all, my husband works in another town, he only comes at weekends, I'm part of a big family and when I'm in the kitchen, I have to get up early to work knowing that I have to go to work afterwards there's too much pressure on me, I'm stressed, it makes me sick, it's too many burdens* » (married woman aged 45, mother of 5 children living with her in-laws in Tegueré neighbourhood).

Given that women are still the heads of families, the task of reconciling work and family falls to them.

Professional Duty

A job always has demands that sometimes drive employees to distress, through the conditions, skills and tasks that employers expect employees to perform effectively. As one respondent put it:

« *if the key to the shop is left with someone, that person has to be the first to arrive at work to get the tools out, which is very stressful* » (Married woman aged 45, mother of 5 living with her in-laws in Tegueré district).

Companies expect their employees to possess specific skills and maintain a high level of expertise in their respective fields. This includes punctuality, professionalism, collaboration with colleagues and compliance with company

standards, while maintaining a productive and professional working environment.

Another interviewee, who cleans the factory yard, said:

> « i*t is compulsory to wear protective equipment and to work safely* » (woman living with her husband and 3 children).

Reconciling Private Life and Working Time

The presence of women on the labour market now raises the question of how to manage family life. As this respondent said:

> *« I do my chores before I go to work, even if it tires me out, I have to »* (aged 45 with 6 children and her husband).

The challenges in family and working life are constantly increasing. Reconciling private life and working time is a challenge for many individuals, and one that is often addressed in work-life balance surveys. This indicates that they are experiencing significant difficulties in balancing their work responsibilities with their personal tasks. This can manifest itself in increased stress, reduced quality of personal life, and strain on family relationships.
Another respondent added:

> « g*iven that I work from Monday to Saturday, I work a three-day week, so that I have time to work, because at work everyone has to do their own thing, even if you work in a group and with your bosses present, you have to have stamina, because that's what you're paid for* » (Married woman, aged 39 with her 4 children and husband).

In their efforts to reconcile work and family life, women find themselves confronted with a number of situations that plunge them into absolute stress. Common challenges include inflexible working hours, a lack of support for flexible working, and high work demands that encroach on family time. As a result, individuals can experience overload, excessive fatigue, and feelings of guilt in trying to meet all their obligations.

The analysis of the results highlights a series of social dynamics at play within the working environment of COIC, which directly influence how female employees experience occupational stress. The approach taken goes beyond mere description; it reveals how interpersonal relationships, working conditions, and sociocultural factors interact to produce differentiated forms of stress.

The identified typology of social relations (solidarity, competition, hierarchical tension, and isolation) offers a clearer understanding of the ambivalent effects of the work collective. While some employees find informal solidarity to be a space for emotional regulation and relief from

stress, others experience the lack of communication or tense hierarchical relations as additional sources of pressure.

This interpretation is further supported by the application of control model, which helps conceptualise the psychological strain resulting from a combination of high demands (pace, repetitiveness, rigid schedules) and low decision-making autonomy. The lack of recognition emerges as a transversal factor, fuelling a sense of structural injustice - particularly among the most senior or committed employees.

The intersectional analysis of profiles also reveals that stress is cumulative: those most exposed are often women who bear the double burden of professional and domestic responsibilities, especially mothers, heads of households, or those experiencing social isolation. This dimension is central to understanding the specificity of female stress within an African industrial context that remains under-researched.

Finally, the employees' statements vividly illustrate the subjective experience of stress, confirming the relevance of the interpretive approach inspired by Weber. Work experience is not homogeneous; it is shaped by emotions, frustrations, and at times, by acts of resilience or subtle resistance to organisational norms.

Discussion

Although social relations in the work environment are crucial to productivity, employee satisfaction, and general well-being at work, women encounter difficulties. These difficulties can be explained by work overload and sometimes the imbalance between professional and private life, leading to stress. The results can be interpreted through Weber's interpretive sociology, which values the subjective meaning given by employees to their stressful experiences. Likewise, Karasek's job demand–control model explains how high psychological demands combined with low decision-making power generate stress. Bourdieu's concept of social capital helps to explain how a lack of mutual support among workers increases feelings of vulnerability.

In this context, Bourdieu (1980) emphasizes the concept of social capital. He argues that individuals with higher social capital generally have better access to resources and opportunities in the workplace, which can affect their interactions and relationships with colleagues and superiors. In this COIC cotton factory in Korhogo, the female employees consider that they have the same working hours, i.e., eight (08) hours. At this level, working hours do not vary. They are consistent and unanimous from one person to another. Gender has no priority in the interaction and treatment of male and female employees. In this company, most of the women are married and feel that they have difficulty reconciling their professional and private lives, finding both aspects to be enormous burdens. This assertion is similar to that of Kergoat (2010),

when he states that women's professional work is exploited and their domestic work is taken away from them, representing 'overwork'. Women are subjected to domestic tasks that have an impact on their health. This section relates to phenomenological theorists such as E. Husserl. Husserl (1900) argued that phenomena do not merely appear to the actors but are experienced by them. These authors show that social relations in the work environment play a crucial role in employee motivation, satisfaction, and productivity. This assertion is in line with what E. Goffman (1969) said when he emphasized the importance of social relations and communication between leaders and employees in improving performance and job satisfaction.

These authors offer a varied and in-depth perspective on social relations at work, each bringing unique and enriching ideas to this field of study.

Conclusion

Social relationships in the workplace are complex topics that have been explored by many researchers and theorists over the decades. These relationships are essential for organizational cohesion and individual performance. In this context, we explore in depth the roles and aspirations of these key actors. Understanding their motivations and how they interact within the company through the description of social relationships can contribute to improving and strengthening communication within the structural organization of the company and increasing organizational efficiency. The study revealed good social cohesion, understanding between the different actors, sharing, and living together. However, we note a huge difficulty observed among female workers in managing stress, anxiety, but also the combination of family life (home) and professional life (business).

Let's dive into the complex world of workplace dynamics and discover the driving forces behind successful employee relationships in the workplace. Effective management of employee relationships in the workplace is essential to creating a harmonious, motivating, and high-performing work environment. Understanding and applying these principles not only improves employee well-being but also fosters organizational success.

The results highlight the social mechanisms of stress within a professional collective. They demonstrate that workplace stress is not merely an individual or medical phenomenon but rather a social and relational phenomenon, embedded in work organization, gender dynamics, and managerial culture.

The analysis reveals that the stress experienced by female workers at COIC stems from structural factors: work overload, lack of recognition, role ambiguity, and insufficient collective support.

Recommended corrective actions include:
- Training in stress management;
- Adjustment of workstations and schedules;
- Strengthening of internal solidarity networks;
- And gender-sensitive human resource policies.

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