How to prevent incivility from women employees?

The role of psychological contract violation, aggressive reciprocal attitude, and conscientiousness

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Abstract

Purpose: The present work investigates the micro-mechanisms underlying the link between Psychological Contract Violation (PCV) and incivility in women employees. Building on social exchange theory (SET) and the norm of reciprocity, we utilized a multi-dimensional variable, labeled "Aggressive Reciprocal Attitude" (ARA), composed of three sub-constructs, namely anger, hostility, and negative reciprocity, to explain negative women's uncivil behaviors. Further, the effect of conscientiousness is hypothesized to restrain the mechanism of ARA.

Design/methodology/approach: Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) were used on a sample of 194 women from four different organizations to empirically validate the proposed conceptual model and test the hypothesized relationships.

Findings: Women's ARA is shown as a partial mediator of the relationship between PCV and incivility. Conscientiousness significantly moderates the link between ARA and incivility.

Practical implication: Managers should avoid stereotyping women as more compliant and submissive. Based on women's tendency to reciprocate negatively, our findings suggest that reducing the negative reciprocity attitude is advisable by demonstrating that negative responses are an unsuccessful strategy and encouraging other forms of reaction.

Originality/value: By introducing the negative reciprocity attitude in the construction of the variable ARA, we overcome the contradiction between the social role theory, according to

which women avoid unsociable behaviors, and studies demonstrating a remarkable presence of conflicts among women.

Introduction

Counterproductive Workplace Behaviors (CWBs) are the employees' voluntary acts that harm the organization and its members or violate their legitimate interests (Marcus *et al.*, 2016). This definition covers a broad range of phenomena that go from single acts, like sabotage or absenteeism, to more complex constructs, e.g., incivility or workplace deviance (Marcus *et al.*, 2016). Because of the detrimental impact that CWBs have on both organizations and their members, scholars and managers showed an increasing interest in this topic (Bowling *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, CWBs cause loss of productivity, property damage, increased turnover, insurance costs, and dissatisfaction (Mackey *et al.*, 2021). Among CWBs, there is a rising interest in incivility due to the pervasiveness of such a phenomenon within organizations (Cortina *et al.*, 2017; Gabriel *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, about 98% of workers have experienced uncivil behaviors in their workplace (Porath, 2016), and nearly everybody who experienced workplace incivility responded negatively, decrementing creativity, effort, and quality of work (McKinsey Report, 2019).

The role of individual differences in how employees perceive and cope with incivility has garnered growing attention (Cortina *et al.*, 2017); however, gender differences seem to be worth investigating (Ng *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, despite women are more likely to experience everyday little forms of disrespect than men (73% of women employees against 59% of men), only 32% of women, against 50% of men, believe that their organization quickly and

effectively addresses disrespectful behaviors (McKinsey Report, 2019). Because empirical data showed that women experience more negative organizational phenomena than men, it becomes crucial to analyze what happens from the female perspective and why they are more involved in detrimental chains of negative actions compared to their male colleagues.

The literature about women and CWBs, particularly incivility, appears quite puzzling. On the one hand, the relationship between gender and CWBs is analyzed under the social role theory (Eagly, 1997), according to which societal differences are due to men and women's different social roles. By adopting this perspective, scholars argue that women are less likely to perform CWBs because they engage in benevolent and helping behaviors (Geddes *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, some studies showed that women report more experiences of incivility and same-sex conflicts than men (Gabriel *et al.*, 2018). These two research streams appear quite contrasting and not always devoid of gender stereotypes.

By recognizing the importance of individual differences in predicting negative workplace behaviors (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021), we believe that gender differences matter in incivility analysis. Moreover, because women's negative behaviors in the workplace have received scant attention, we propose investigating the micro-mechanisms that underlie women's incivility escalation process. In detail, we try to understand how the perception of psychological contract violation (PCV), namely the adverse emotional state arising from the breach inside the employee-organization mutual obligations mechanism (Rousseau, 1989), may provoke the women's involvement in the incivility phenomenon.

Given the contradictory findings in the literature, we assert that analyzing negative organizational phenomena and their micro-mechanisms from women's perspective could have significant practical implications for organizations. Indeed, investigating women's individual perceptions and attitudes may be crucial for raising awareness in the best-intentioned managers that would adopt customized solutions to prevent unsafe dynamics.

For this purpose, based on Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964) and the personal norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), we hypothesized and empirically tested a conceptual model that unpacks the micro-mechanisms in the escalating process by analyzing negatively toned constructs, such as anger, hostility, and negative reciprocity, as well as positive traits as conscientiousness. In this way, we highlighted the importance of the simultaneous consideration of these personal characteristics by considering, for the first time, *anger*, *hostility*, and *negative reciprocity* as parts of a multi-dimensional variable that might be labeled as "Aggressive Reciprocal Attitude" (ARA). All three constructs have already been analyzed as antecedents of workplace incivility (Cortina *et al.*, 2017); however, as we will discuss, it is particularly useful to consider them simultaneously.

In doing so, we aim to provide the following contribution to existing literature. First, we analyze negative organizational phenomena through the female perspective, which received scant attention in the literature, although women's employment conditions report needing more care. Next, we advance SET and the norm of reciprocity framework within the human resource management (HRM) domain by exploring women's tendency to reciprocate negatively. Moreover, we enrich the current literature on women and CWBs by making a step forward in contradictory findings on women at work. Finally, by answering the call for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that might produce incivility, we detect underlying mechanisms and possible solutions to the emergence of such behaviors in female employees.

Theoretical background

Psychological contract violation and incivility from women's perspective

According to Rousseau (1989), the psychological contract is the set of beliefs an individual has about the mutual obligations established between a worker and his/her organization. A perceived lack of reciprocity in the mutual obligation mechanism may provoke the perception

of a breach in this contract; the deriving intense negative emotional state leads to PCV, namely the adverse emotional response enacted toward the organization and its members (Rousseau *et al.*, 2018). Because PCV is likely to occur in high uncertainty and ambiguity situations (Ma *et al.*, 2019), it is not surprising that these phenomena could be more experienced by minorities like women (Kakarika *et al.*, 2017). Men and women react differently to the psychological contract unfulfillment (Restubog *et al.*, 2008). Often, motivations that underlie such gender differences concern the different working life between the two genders: men experience better treatment at work, thus perceiving fewer psychological contract breaches and subsequent violations (Tufan and Wendt, 2020). Therefore, women notice more workplace mistreatments and are more sensitive to them immediately blaming the organization for failing their protection (Kakarika *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, since women are more socially oriented, they are more sensitive to social cues in determining their behavior, thus holding stronger attitudes about the psychological contract's mutual obligations and replying more intensely (Croson and Gneezy, 2009).

The perception of the psychological contract unfulfillment is a clear example of a shift in equity conditions between the employee and his/her organization; thus, this perception could be a driver of an escalating process where the negative emotional state provokes the rise of adverse behaviors like incivility (Cortina *et al.*, 2017). Incivility differs from other negative behaviors in the lower intensity of the detrimental actions and the ambiguous intent to harm; examples of uncivil behaviors can include talking down to others or not paying attention to somebody's requests (Cortina *et al.*, 2017).

The literature tried to analyze the involvement of women in the mechanism of incivility, either received or instigated, reaching contradictory findings (Han *et al.*, 2021). Starting from experienced incivility, a vast body of research demonstrated that women report a higher level of uncivil behaviors, often becoming the target of what has been called "selective incivility"

(Cortina *et al.*, 2017). In other words, as members of the less socially dominant group, women are more likely to experience incivility than men. However, the results are quite contradictory. Indeed, although some studies found that women-targeted incivility spreads in male-dominant workplaces (Cortina *et al.*, 2017), further researchers highlighted how women experience more incivility from other women than men (Gabriel *et al.*, 2018). Recent studies, on the contrary, found that gender is not significantly related to incivility, contradicting the theorizing model that women are more exposed (Han *et al.*, 2021).

Results are also quite contradictory for studies on instigated incivility. Few studies found that women are less likely to instigate incivility (Park *et al.*, 2021), while others found no relationship (Lata and Chaudhary, 2020). Such contradictions are due to the literature underestimating the micro-mechanisms that could bring women involved in the incivility mechanisms becoming both targets and instigators.

Women's ARA and conscientiousness

Several studies analyzed negative workplace behaviors through the lens of employees' anger (Geddes *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, PCV may provoke employees' anger, thus leading the negative emotional state to negative behaviors (Coyle-Shapiro *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, researchers suggested that anger is strictly related to hostility (Douglas *et al.*, 2008). More precisely, while anger is the psychological arousal for negative behavior and its emotional component, hostility represents the cognitive component of negative behavior, consisting of a feeling of injustice (Silton and Ferris, 2020). Moreover, literature on women and negative organizational phenomena underestimates the importance of the personal norm of negative reciprocity as an element that can trigger incivility. Findings on negative emotional states and consequent negative reactions appear quite contradictory (Penney *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, organizational scholars found that women avoid expressing anger and aggressiveness,

tolerating more mistreatments (Domagalski and Steelman, 2007). Using the social role theory (Eagly, 1997), studies demonstrated that men and women experience different socialization paths that make them learn gender-appropriate behaviors (Martin and Phillips, 2017). Thus, women are generally educated to respect men's power and authority and to refrain from expressing aggressiveness and antisocial behaviors (Karakowsky *et al.*, 2004). In line with this perspective, organizational studies on CWBs found that, although women are likely to be the target of mistreatment as incivility, they are less likely to be the instigators (Zurbrügg and Miner, 2016). However, regardless of the likelihood that women become instigators, the literature lacks explaining how personal characteristics could influence the escalating process that negatively affects women's perspectives. Anger and hostility are insufficient to explain negative behaviors in the workplace (Geddes *et al.*, 2020). For this reason, we suggest considering the personal norm of negative reciprocity to explain the process that drives women from PCV to incivility by introducing the multi-dimensional variable "ARA".

Since both phenomena (i.e., PCV and incivility) are frameable as constructs of negative, non-balanced, and generalized reciprocity (Gervasi *et al.*, 2021), SET and reciprocity play a primary role in the explanation of their mechanisms. Indeed, the conceptualization of exchange in SET explains why employees feel pressure to reciprocate, given that interactions are experienced as pleasurable to the extent they gratify interpersonal needs and are experienced as painful to the extent they fail to gratify such needs (Bui *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, some specific aspects of individual differences in reciprocity can lead to behaviors congruent with the reciprocator perspective. Indeed, while positive reciprocators react positively toward pleasant behaviors, negative reciprocators are sensitive to the return of mistreatments (Perugini *et al.*, 2003).

Therefore, for the construction of ARA, we analyzed the definition of anger, hostility, and negative reciprocity in the literature. Despite discrepant pragmatic aims, organizational scholars defined these three constructs by adopting key terms that allow a family resemblance,

demonstrating how these three constructs are interrelated to each other. Indeed, by analyzing the definitions in Table I, it is possible to discover three shared patterns, namely undisclosed points of intersection and relationships between interpretative schemes.

Insert Table I here

First, expressions like "negatively tone emotion" (Novaco, 2020), "negative belief about […] others" (Geddes *et al.*, 2020, p. 11), and "negative norm" (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2004, p. 2), highlight the pattern of *negativity* shared by all constructs. Such negativity refers to the corrosion of social relationships, which represents the second shared pattern. Indeed, *anger* can "signal a breach in interpersonal relations" (Aquino *et al.*, 2004, p.153); hostility refers to the "critical perspective" (Silton and Ferris, 2020) on "others' behavior" (Brees *et al.*, 2016, p.5), while negative reciprocity "structures social systems and exchanges between people" (Greco *et al.*, 2019, p.1118).

The third shared pattern that underlies all three constructs regards *revenge*. Actually, Brees *et al.* (2016) highlighted that hostility "will likely be activated when [employees, *edit*] receive a negative performance review" (p.5), anger affects workplace functioning by escalating conflicts (Aquino *et al.*, 2004, p.153), organizational retaliatory behaviors, or revenge (Fitness, 2000, p.148), while negative reciprocity is defined as a "sentiment of retaliation where the emphasis is placed not on the return of benefits but on the return of injuries" (Gouldner, 1960, p.172).

Further, the definitions of the three constructs recall each other. The definition of anger, for instance, is often linked to hostility (Brees *et al.*, 2016, p.5) and revenge (Fitness, 2000, p.148). In turn, hostility is a multi-dimensional construct activated by negative actions perceived by employees (Brees *et al.*, 2016, p.5) that involves affective components like anger (Silton and

Ferris, 2020), and, at the same time, negative reciprocity is perpetrated by "individuals with a propensity toward anger" (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2004, p.2).

Based on these shared patterns' resemblance, we utilized a multi-dimensional variable, labeled ARA, composed of these three sub-constructs. Therefore, ARA signals the simultaneous presence of anger, hostility, and negative reciprocity. In addition, other personal traits could affect the escalating process toward incivility by slaking the chain that brings adverse behaviors. Specifically, conscientiousness could restrain the mechanism of ARA. Because conscientiousness incorporates hardworking, perseverance, and achievement orientation, it can be a valid predictor for all occupational groups and job-related dimensions (Wilmot and Ones, 2019). Although discrepancies between men and women in conscientiousness have rarely been examined, studies found a slightly higher score for women than men (Costa *et al.*, 2001).

Conceptual model and hypotheses development

PCV is related to several employees' adverse emotional reactions, like dissatisfaction or anger, which leads to negative workplace behaviors (Coyle-Shapiro *et al.*, 2019). According to the displaced aggression theory, when an employee is the victim of mistreatment, s/he could retaliate against an individual other than the harm-doer (Allen *et al.*, 2018). Thus, PCV may provoke negative behaviors, like incivility, toward both the organization and its members (Deng *et al.*, 2018). Previous studies have demonstrated a relationship between PCV and phenomena like reducing job satisfaction, organizational commitment, citizenship, and in-role performance (Coyle-Shapiro *et al.*, 2019). However, PCV could cause the reduction of positive organizational behaviors and predict negative phenomena like workplace incivility (Cortina *et al.*, 2017). More in detail, decreasing job satisfaction and unhappiness with job conditions may provoke incivility toward colleagues (Koon and Pun, 2018). This situation is particularly plausible when it is difficult to revenge against the instigator (Allen *et al.*, 2018). As women

are part of the less socially dominant group (Gabriel *et al.*, 2018), a displaced PCV response is likely. Building on this, we formulated the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Women's perception of PCV positively impacts on incivility.

The recognition of a violation of the psychological contract passes through two steps: (i) the perception that promises are not respected and (ii) that this unfulfillment is not reciprocal (Rousseau *et al.*, 2018). An event-based breach of the psychological contract and its subsequent violation trigger negative feelings (Coyle-Shapiro *et al.*, 2019) as indicators of the more global construct labeled ARA.

Usually, anger comes first, and, after its decline, a cognitive residual, namely hostility, may persist (Buss and Perry, 1992). Indeed, when PCV occurs, employees doubt the organization's integrity and become hostile toward the organization's initiatives; such hostility is shifted to another agent when the transgressor is unavailable (Coyle-Shapiro *et al.*, 2019). From a reciprocity perspective, while the psychological contract breach is frameable as a lack of reciprocity, the PCV is strictly related to negative reciprocity (Gervasi *et al.*, 2021). Previous studies analyzed the effect of the PCB on organizational outcomes and the personal belief in reciprocity (Qurantulin *et al.*, 2018); however, it is the negative emotional state of the PCV that provokes the employee's willingness to reciprocate (Rousseau *et al.*, 2018), trying to restore equity in the relationship (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2004). The experienced violation enacts negative actions toward the organization and its members, often without differentiating between them (Deng *et al.*, 2018).

Using ARA, we simultaneously considered all facets that could better explain women's reaction to negative organizational phenomena. Indeed, since women hold stronger attitudes about the psychological contract's mutual obligations than men (Kakarika *et al.*, 2017), it is possible to hypothesize that this phenomenon elicits women's ARA. Thus:

Hypothesis 2: Women's perception of PCV positively impacts on ARA.

The presence of ARA is likely to result in more negative judgments and workplace reactions (Douglas *et al.*, 2008). Although anger and hostility are often defined as individual disorders that cause social disorders, individuals who feel anger and hostility rarely act aggressively and often prefer not to express their feelings (Geddes *et al.*, 2020) unless they are also negative reciprocators. Indeed, while positive reciprocators are sensitive to fairness as achieving equal outcomes, negative reciprocators are primarily sensitive to fairness in terms of interpersonal transactions; in other words, they are interested in getting even (Perugini *et al.*, 2003). Because women are less willing to express anger and hostility (Geddes *et al.*, 2020) but more likely to be negative reciprocators (Chaudhuri and Sbai, 2011), the simultaneous consideration of these three constructs is particularly useful in women's universe. Thus, our third hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 3: Women's ARA positively impacts on incivility.

Based on the emotion-centered model of workplace behaviors (Spector and Fox, 2002), scholars have demonstrated that employees who feel betrayed develop negative emotions, leading to an increased propensity to engage in CWBs (Coyle-Shapiro *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, PCV can provoke the rise of negative emotions and the willingness to retaliate. Scholars have often studied CWBs using the norm of reciprocity under the SET (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Particularly, PCV and workplace incivility can be framed as negative and generalized forms of negative reciprocity (Gervasi *et al.*, 2021); therefore, the component of reciprocity inserted in the ARA could affect the relationship between PCV and incivility. Since women are particularly prone to negatively reciprocate (Croson and Gneezy, 2009), this tendency can influence negative organizational phenomena. In other words, despite women being less aggressive and hostile, their marked tendency to reciprocate may affect the relationship

between the analyzed phenomena. Based on the importance of reciprocity in women's behaviors (Chaudhuri and Sbai, 2011), we hypothesized that women's ARA would mediate the relationship between PCV and incivility. Hence, our fourth hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 4: Women's ARA significantly mediates the relationship between PCV and incivility.

Conscientiousness might play an important role in the escalating process that leads from a negative event to negative behaviors. Studies have demonstrated that conscientiousness is meaningfully and negatively associated with interpersonal and organizational deviance (Mackey *et al.*, 2021), the negative norm of reciprocity (Gervasi *et al.*, 2022), and incivility (Taylor *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, conscientious individuals tend to be careful, planners, and responsible (Wilmot and Ones, 2019); therefore, their temperament is less inclined to react negatively. Conscientious people set high standards for themselves and other supporting behaviors essential to high-quality performance (Taylor *et al.*, 2012); these characteristics would be expected to slake the willingness to violate workplace and social norms. Furthermore, since conscientious individuals tend to choose words with care, preferring order and regularity (Wilmot and Ones, 2019), they likely avoid perpetrating incivility. As conscientiousness is particularly high in women (Costa *et al.*, 2001), it is important to understand if this personal trait could interrupt their *tit-for-tat* mechanism. Thus, our next hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 5: Women's conscientiousness negatively moderates the relationship between ARA and incivility.

Figure 1 summarizes the proposed relationships and illustrates our hypothesized conceptual model.

Insert Figure 1 here

Research methodology

Sampling

Our sample includes employees of four organizations located in Italy that operate in different industries. Several organizational behaviors and HRM authors have stressed that heterogeneous samples allow researchers to avoid contextual constraints (Härtel and O'Connor, 2014). Indeed, since context is particularly meaningful throughout workplace mistreatments, influencing their occurrence, outcome, and victims' perception and reaction (Hershcovis *et al.*, 2020), using data from multi-organization samples allows to go beyond contextual boundaries (Härtel and O'Connor, 2014). We selected medium/large organizations with a range of employees from 50 to 400. The four organizations that took part in the study are: (1) a prosecutor's office, (2) a credit institute, (3) a pharmaceutical industry, and (4) a large-scale distribution company. We used an online self-report questionnaire. Questions were written in Italian using a back-translation procedure to resolve discrepancies. A pilot version was pre-tested using 25 employees not included in the actual data collection to check for the precision of vocabulary and the presence of possible ambiguity. Moreover, five academic experts on the topic checked the questionnaire. The pre-test revealed that the final questionnaire was clear and intelligible. Before conducting the survey, we visited the organizations to explain the research objective, understand the organizational context, and gain the support of top management. HRM contacted the full-time employees to request participation. We developed a fifteen-page questionnaire with 51 items. To decrease the social desirability bias (Podsakoff

et al., 2003), the cover letter emphasized that participation was anonymous, answers were neither right nor wrong, no reward was provided, and data was managed with maximum confidentiality. Board and human resources management e-mailed 318 women employees an electronic link and a cover letter explaining the research purposes. To avoid a potential non-response bias in our sample, we conducted a wave analysis, comparing early and late respondents to control variables and the dependent variables of our hypothesized model (Rogelberg and Luong, 1998). T-test showed no significant differences, so there are no concerns about non-response bias. After discarding incomplete or incorrect questionnaires, we obtained a valid sample of 194 respondents (response rate = 61%). Respondents averaged about 46 years old and 20 years of work experience.

Measures

To measure our variables, we adopted scales validated in previous studies. We used a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to capture each measure (see Appendix A).

PCV was measured with four questions on the nine items scale developed by Robinson and Morrison (2000). Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed with statements such as "I feel extremely frustrated by how I have been treated by my organization".

ARA has been hypothesized as a multi-dimensional variable composed of the following three variables:

- *Personal norm of negative reciprocity* was captured using nine items of the Perugini and colleagues' (2003) questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate how much they fit with statements such as "I suffer a serious wrong, I will take my revenge as soon as possible, no matter what the costs."

- *Anger* was assessed using the seven anger-related items of the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss and Perry, 1992). Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree with statements such as "I flare up quickly but get over it quickly."

- *Hostility* was assessed using the eight hostility-related items of the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss and Perry, 1992). Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree with statements such as "I am sometimes eaten up with jealousy".

Incivility was measured using the 14 items related to instigated and experienced workplace incivility in the questionnaire developed by Blau and Andersson (2005). Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they registered some behaviors like "How often someone put you down or was condescending to you in some way".

Conscientiousness was assessed using nine conscientiousness-related items of the Big Five Inventory questionnaire (John and Srivastava, 1999). Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed with statements such as "I see myself as someone who does a thorough job".

Control variables

Based on previous studies, demographic variables such as age (Koon and Pun, 2018), tenure (Yang and Treadway, 2018), and organization type (Hu et al., 2019) were measured initially because of their potential effects on the relationships postulated in this study. However, to avoid unnecessarily decreasing statistical power, it is generally recommended to exclude the control variables that fail to show significant relationships with the dependent variables (Becker, 2005). None of the control variables had a significant effect; thus, subsequent hypotheses testing did not include these controls (Bernerth and Aguinis, 2016).

Analysis and results

Preliminary analyses

Table II reports the scales' means, reliability values, and zero-order correlations among variables.

Insert Table II here

As shown in Table II, all the Cronbach's Alpha values were satisfactory (>.70). All the variables showed significant Pearson's *r* values, indicating positive and negative correlations values between variables, except for the correlation between conscientiousness and negative reciprocity. Following Fornell and Larcker's (1981) suggestions, we accepted AVE values below 0.5 because CR values were all satisfactory (>.60), as well as Cronbach's Alpha, indicating a still adequate convergent validity of the constructs.

Measurement model

To conduct the first step of covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), we run a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS v.26. The maximum likelihood of AMOS was used to estimate the psychometric properties of our hypothesized four-construct model: *PCV*, *ARA*, *incivility*, and *conscientiousness*. First, we estimated the fitting indexes and statistical assessment of the new multi-dimensional variable ARA, composed of *anger*, *hostility*, and *negative reciprocity* (see Table III).

Insert Table III here

Table III shows that all the standardized indicator loadings (γ) of the latent variable were higher than .30, which is the required threshold. Similarly, the reliability of the indicators ($\gamma2$) was also satisfactory for all the constructs. Moreover, the reliability (α) and internal consistency

(CR) of each construct were higher than .70 as required. Finally, both the absolute fitting indexes ($\chi2$/df=1.514; GFI=.89; RMSEA=.05) and the relative fitting indexes (CFI=.93; IFI=.93; TLI=.91; NFI=.82) of the ARA variable were acceptable. Table III shows that the ARA constructs' psychometric properties were validated through the CFA analysis.

Next, we proceeded with the CFA of the whole model. First, all factor loadings between indicators and latent variables were significant (p<.01). Next, the CFA resulted in satisfactory fitting indexes, both absolute: $\chi2$ / df=1.685; GFI=.925; RMSEA=.062; and relative: CFI=.915; IFI=.912; TLI=.908; NFI=.915. As shown in Table II, the Cronbach's alpha values of all constructs were satisfactory, thus indicating the reliability of the considered dimensions; further, each construct's composite reliability was higher than .70, thus indicating the variables' internal consistency. Finally, we assessed the common method bias (CMB) following the pertinent guidelines (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003): first, Harman's one-factor test did not identify a single general factor accounting for the majority of the total variance (which was equal to 22.58%); second, we used the *one-factor model* procedure, comparing our hypothesized model with a model loading all items into a single common method factor. Our model showed highly superior fitting indexes with respect to the one-factor model, which was also statistically different from ours. Hence, CMB is unlikely to represent a threat to our study.

Hypotheses testing

AMOS (v.26) was used to conduct the second step of our CB-SEM analysis to empirically and simultaneously test the hypothesized path coefficients of our model. First, we evaluated through a CFA the fitting indexes of the structural model in terms of absolute indicators ($\chi2$ / df=1.376; GFI=.997; RMSEA=.044) and relative indicators (CFI=.996; IFI=.995; TLI=.965; NFI=.968). Next, we proceeded with the assessment of mediation and moderation analysis. The results are illustrated in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 here

The statistical analysis showed that women PCV had a significant and positive impact on their perceived organizational incivility (β=+0.310; p<.01). Hence, *H1* was confirmed. Similarly, PCV also significantly and positively impacts ARA (β=+0.315; p<.01), which in turn had a significant and strong effect on incivility (β=+0.687; p<.01), thus empirically supporting both *H2* and *H3*, respectively. Next, we followed Baron and Kenny's (1998) procedure to evaluate ARA's mediating effect on the relationship between PCV and incivility. As a result, the effect of PCV on incivility was significantly reduced (β=+0.091; p<.05) thanks to the effect of ARA, which resulted in a partial mediating variable. Hence, *H4* was partially supported by the analysis. Finally, we tested the hypothesized moderating role of women's conscientiousness on the relationship between ARA and incivility. To do so, we computed an interaction variable with SPSS (v.26), which allowed us to calculate the joint effect of the independent variable ("*X*"; ARA) and the moderating variable ("*M*"; conscientiousness) on the dependent variable ("*Y*"; incivility). Thus, we computed the interaction term *M* [ARA_x_Conscientiousness] and estimated its impact on the *Y* variable: as shown in Figure 2, conscientiousness had a significant moderation role in the relationship between *X* and *Y* (β=-0.499; p<.01), indicating a significantly lower impact of ARA on incivility for high levels of conscientiousness. Hence, *H5* was fully supported by the analysis. This conditional effect is illustrated in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 here

The mediation effect has also been tested following the procedure proposed by Hayes (2017) using SPSS PROCESS macro (v.4.0). Specifically, to conduct the mediation analysis (model

4 of PROCESS), we used the bootstrapping method (5,000 bootstrap samples). We computed 95 percent bias-corrected lower-level confidence intervals (LLCIs) and upper levels confidence intervals (ULCIs) around the indirect effect estimates.

The independent variable, PCV, should be significantly related to the mediation variable, ARA. After controlling for the effect of the independent variable, the mediation variable should be significantly related to the dependent variable, namely incivility. Mediation is indicated by the significance level of the indirect effect from PCV to incivility through ARA, as indicated by the *p*-value or the LLCIs and ULCIs (Hayes, 2017).

As shown in Table IV, PCV is significantly related to incivility (β=+0.03; $p<0.05$), providing statistical support for *H1*. Similarly, PCV is significantly related to ARA (β=+0.15; $p<0.01$), supporting our *H2*. The mediation variable, ARA, is positively related to incivility (β=+0.15; $p<0.01$), providing statistical support to *H3*. Concerning the relationship between PCV and incivility, the indirect effect (+0.02) differs from the direct effect (+0.03), with LLCI and ULCI (+0.0088; +0.0384) that did not comprise 0 as required (Hayes, 2017). Hence, ARA resulted as a significant mediator of the relationship between the independent and the dependent variable, supporting *H4*.

Insert Table IV here

Discussion and implications

The empirical analysis showed that it is crucial to consider women's attitude to reciprocate aggressively to understand the micro-mechanisms that underlie the escalating process of negative behaviors like incivility. Indeed, the three constructs we aggregated in the ARA

variable, namely anger, hostility, and negative reciprocity, significantly mediated the relationship between PCV and incivility.

Although the literature widely analyzed PCV and incivility under the norm of reciprocity framework (Gervasi *et al.*, 2021), the scarce studies on women and negative organizational behaviors significantly underestimate the importance of women's reciprocal attitude. However, as women endure workplace incivility more frequently than men (Di Fabio and Duradoni, 2019), their well-being is particularly at risk; thus, a better understanding of the unsafe dynamics of the phenomenon might represent a promising strategy to prevent it.

Indeed, although previous studies found that women are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviors (Sheppard and Aquino, 2017), our findings demonstrate that this assumption can change by adding the personal norm of negative reciprocity in a more encompassing construct. Because women tend to reciprocate more than men (Chaudhuri and Sbai, 2011), they are more likely to become involved in the incivility mechanism. Our results indicate that managers can run the organization more effectively by weakening the ARA of women employees. Thus, we stress that effective organizational management should not underestimate these levers to mitigate negative workplace behaviors.

Theoretical implications

Following the social role theory (Eagly, 1997), previous studies on women and CWBs have often focused on women's attitude to avoid aggressive responses to negative organizational phenomena; however, these findings are quite contradictory to those who found the presence of severe forms of interpersonal relationships among women at work (Sheppard and Aquino, 2017). We filled the gap between the two perspectives by constructing a more comprehensive construct, namely the ARA, and adding the personal norm of negative reciprocity to anger and hostility. Indeed, ARA better explains the micro-mechanisms that underlie negative responses

to negative events. Thus, we contributed to CWBs and incivility literature by demonstrating that conclusions on negative behaviors could not be generalized without considering women's perspective. Indeed, for the first time, this study investigates the mechanisms leading PCV to incivility, analyzing just women's attitudes. In this way, contrary to previous researchers that found that women avoid expressing anger and aggressiveness, tolerating more mistreatments (Domagalski and Steelman, 2007), we showed that the ARA of female employees leads to the reciprocation of negative behaviors. This is also in contrast to findings based on the social role theory (Eagly, 1997), which states that women show learn gender-appropriate behaviors (Martin and Phillips, 2017), respecting men's power and authority (Karakowsky *et al.*, 2004; Zurbrügg and Miner, 2016).

We contributed to reciprocity literature (Gervasi *et al.*, 2021) by giving more insights into the personal norm of negative reciprocity and gender diversity. We also contributed by demonstrating how other women's traits can mitigate the escalating process toward negative behaviors. Using conscientiousness as a moderator between ARA and incivility, we explained how this trait could significantly reduce negative responses to negative events.

Practical implications

Our study offers practical insights to HRM who want to mitigate negative workplace behaviors or prevent them, especially for women employees whose well-being is particularly at risk (Di Fabio and Duradoni, 2019). Our findings reveal that the escalating process of negative organizational behaviors significantly depends on personal characteristics. Thus, managers must create general positive conditions for the organization and customize their interventions to employees' differences, avoiding gender stereotypes. The awareness that women encounter more workplace difficulties has significant practical implications for the organization since it should stimulate the investigation of this phenomenon by the best-intentioned managers

(Sheppard and Aquino, 2017). Our study offers insights to managers who want to know the mechanisms that bring women to become involved in detrimental organizational phenomena. Based on gender differences, managers can avoid stereotyping women as more compliant and submissive. Since men's and women's organizational effectiveness depends on the fit with the setting, a gender bias could be dangerous for the organization. In this case, on the one hand, women tend to avoid aggressive behaviors; on the other, they tend to reciprocate what they have received. Thus, managers can monitor the presence of remarkable ARA and intervene before leading from PCV to incivility. Furthermore, they can discourage the reaction to negative behaviors with other negative behaviors. One path could be reducing the negative reciprocity attitude, demonstrating that a negative response is an unsuccessful strategy, or encouraging other forms of reaction to negative behaviors like mediation, communication, or negotiation. Since research has demonstrated that an immediate and frequent reaction between parties involved in negative reciprocity decreases the likelihood of displaced revenge (Greco *et al.*, 2019), a prompt clarification could reduce the intense negative emotional state of PCV. Consequently, the development of incivility would be less likely. Furthermore, managers can depress incivility by encouraging open communication and implementing procedures that facilitate respectful and civil interactions.

Limitations and further research

Our survey-based approach may have influenced the measurement accuracy. Indeed, our cross-sectional data do not allow us to understand changes in the target population's characteristics. Future research could test the hypotheses using longitudinal data. Furthermore, although the presence of a heterogeneous sample, we tested our model only on Italian organizations. Future research could test our hypothesis on samples from different countries to understand what extant cultural differences could affect the presented model.

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