

## Article

# Workers' Observation of Uncivil Leadership: Is Tolerance for Workplace Incivility a Gendered Issue?

Isabel Carmona-Cobo <sup>1,\*</sup> , Eva Garrosa <sup>2</sup> and Esther Lopez-Zafra <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Campus Las Lagunillas, University of Jaén, 23071 Jaén, Spain; elopez@ujaen.es

<sup>2</sup> Department of Biological and Health Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, Autonomous University of Madrid, 28049 Madrid, Spain; eva.garrosa@uam.es

\* Correspondence: iccobo@ujaen.es; Tel.: +34-953-212-412; Fax: +34-953-211-881

**Abstract:** In the context of organizational psychology, this study aimed to examine workers' gender biases in tolerance when observing leaders' incivility in the workplace. Based on role congruity theory, this paper proposes analyzing the gender differences in workers' evaluations of awareness and tolerance of workplace incivility considering the gender of a leader who commits different incivility behaviors against an employee. Moreover, we posit that the type of incivility is also gendered. A sample of 547 workers (male and female) randomly played the roles of observers whereby they rated a scenario describing a leader (male or female) who publicly humiliates and openly doubts an employee's judgment (overt incivility—agentic), or leaves out and pays little attention (covert incivility—communal) to an employee. The results indicate that male workers tolerated incivility less when role incongruence occurred, such as when male leaders used covert incivility. In contrast, female workers were consistently less tolerant when role congruence occurred with the leader's gender, such as when male leaders were overtly uncivil. Furthermore, compared to males, female workers were more aware and less tolerant of incivility when a female leader was overtly or covertly uncivil. This paper provides empirical insights and fulfills an identified need to study how gender bias in workplace incivility can be enabled in organizations. The implications for practice can drive the development of prevention strategies within the field of management and human resources.

**Keywords:** gender; leadership; observers; organizations; role congruity; workers; workplace incivility



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## 1. Introduction

In the field of organizational psychology, the knowledge about interpersonal mistreatment in the workplace has led to the development of a wealth of constructs [1]. In this issue, workplace incivility refers to a subtle form of interpersonal mistreatment at work, where women workers are frequently victims [2–5]. It has been defined as “a low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect” [6] (p. 457). Examples include making disrespectful comments, asking questions about personal matters in professional settings, ignoring or not listening to colleagues, and overlooking sharing in collaborative work. Consequences of workplace incivility affect individuals, groups, and organizations. Currently, recent evidence also demonstrates its effects on behavioral responses [7].

The existing discussions strengthen the social nature of workplace incivility with three roles that workers can play: the targets/victims, the actors/perpetrators/instigators, and the witnesses or observers. Thus, empirical research has contributed to the knowledge of workplace incivility by distinguishing between experienced (i.e., the targets/victims of uncivil behavior), witnessed (i.e., witnessing or observing uncivil behavior), and instigated incivility (i.e., the actors/perpetrators/instigators of uncivil behavior) [8,9]. To date, a great deal of research has examined targets and instigators [10]; however, the exploration of observers' reactions is a new line of research. The present study broadens the knowledge

in the field of organizational behavior, with a focus on observers, and contributes to this nascent literature within the context of witnessed or observed workplace incivility.

The distinctive feature of workplace incivility, compared to other counterproductive behaviors, is its ambiguity [6]. Conceptualized as subtle and ambiguous, workplace incivility can go unnoticed for observers who barely recognize and report its incidence, thus becoming a tolerated manifestation of gender bias [5,11]. It can be the starting point in fostering more oppressive forms of aggression in organizations [12]. However, few studies have empirically examined the role of observers, despite their positive role in reacting to manifestations of and intervening in incivility [13–16] rather than blaming the victim or doing nothing [17]. To date, we still do not know what makes observers detect and react to uncivil behaviors. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature on workplace incivility regarding the key elements that make observers conscious and react to incivility. Our study aligns with this aim by explaining the observers' motives to reject or tolerate incivility, providing the opportunity to stop the adverse outcomes of future episodes.

Gender has proven to be crucial in workplace incivility by demonstrating the gender bias toward female workers who are selectively victims [2,3]. However, a key theme within observing workplace incivility is to know whether gender bias is also relevant for observers. Thus, a next step needed in the field of workplace incivility is to address whether observed workplace incivility is a gendered phenomenon [5,11,14]. The initial growing literature on this point has shown gender differences among future workers in that women detect and react to incivility more strongly than men [17]. Similarly, a recent study conducted by Sinclair [18] in a sample of mainly students revealed that females reacted more strongly than males to a coworker incivility incident. Moreover, as adverse behavior, one would expect to find no differences when rating identical scenarios of incivility. However, female leaders who behave in an uncivil manner tend to be penalized more heavily when they are leading actors of uncivil behaviors than their male colleagues are when in the same position and performing the same behavior [19,20].

In summation, the research shows the following: (1) observers can play a turning point in the incivility spiral because they can notice and react to uncivil behaviors [5,11]; (2) gender is relevant in the field of workplace incivility and might also influence observers' tolerance [2,3]; (3) there are gender differences when observing workplace incivility since females react more strongly than males [17,18]; (4) the gender of the leaders who commit incivility is significant for future workers and might also be relevant for real workers, that is, the observed uncivil behaviors performed by female leaders are recognized to a higher extent than those of male leaders, and even more so in a masculine field [17,19,20]. This study goes further by building on the knowledge of observed workplace incivility as a gendered phenomenon. Specifically, we contribute to the knowledge by analyzing gender differences in (1) workers' evaluations of the awareness and tolerance for workplace incivility, considering (2) the gender of a leader who commits uncivil behaviors, and (3) different uncivil behaviors (type of incivility) against an employee.

### 1.1. Overt and Covert Manifestations of Incivility

Recent evidence suggests that not all uncivil behaviors have the same effects [17,21]. Given the advances in studies on microaggressions [22,23], we used the workplace incivility scale [24] to investigate the role of manifestations of incivility, ranging from direct or overt behaviors to indirect or covert behaviors. Therefore, our study contributes to the knowledge by introducing two specific manifestations of incivility: overt incivility and covert incivility. First, the term *overt incivility* can be used to refer to an episode in which a leader publicly humiliates an employee at a meeting or openly doubts the employee's judgment, such as by making disrespectful comments. Second, we use the term *covert incivility* to refer to an episode where an employee is omitted or excluded from a workgroup or receives little attention, such as being ignored or not listened to by colleagues. Based on the above theoretical distinction, it makes sense to expect differences in the degrees of tolerance for

incivility among workers' observers, depending on the specific manifestations of leaders' incivility, either overt or covert.

### *1.2. Role Congruity Theory in the Context of Workplace Incivility*

A major theoretical contribution of our study is that it explains gender bias in workers' tolerance for observing a leader performing workplace incivility on the basis of role congruity theory [25]. This theory postulates that prejudice toward female leaders is due to the perceived incongruity between the female gender role and the leadership role. Similarly, our study posits that overt and covert manifestations of incivility might be differentially tolerated by real workers when observing a female or male leading actor of incivility, as occurs with current students (future workers) [17,18], although overt and covert incivility are both dysfunctional behaviors regardless of the gender of the leader.

Specifically, our study postulates the idea that differences in tolerance for workplace incivility might be explained by the degree of congruence or incongruence that workers' observers perceive between the gender role (male or female leader) and the manifestations of uncivil leadership (overt or covert incivility). Therefore, we posit that the type of incivility is also gendered. Given the prejudice against female leaders when evaluating leaders' behavior as less favorable when it is enacted by a woman than by a man, overt and covert manifestations of incivility may also result in penalties for female uncivil leaders who violate the standards of communality, whereas the agency of uncivil male leaders may be strengthened. This idea is in line with recent studies' results. In particular, research has shown that women report more incivility from other women who are more agentic at work than male actors of incivility [26]. In addition, there is a study that concludes that team positive affect decreases when there is a female (rather than male) uncivil member in the team, due to the agentic and aggressive nature of uncivil behavior [27].

We support this theoretical contribution by drawing upon role congruity theory [25] to associate overt incivility with agency and covert incivility with communality. Overt incivility (i.e., humiliation) might be ascribed to the agentic characteristics of the male gender role (i.e., aggressive and dominant) and thus, be assumed to be an agentic manifestation of incivility. That is, an episode in which a leader publicly humiliates an employee or openly doubts the employee's judgment may be considered to be aggressive or active uncivil behavior more congruent with societal expectations of the agency of the male gender role. Hence, we might expect overt incivility to be perceived as more congruent with male uncivil leaders. This might imply that workers' observers may show higher tolerance for overt incivility when it is performed by male leaders instead of female leaders. However, the agency of female leaders who commit overt incivility may be less tolerated by workers' observers.

In contrast, covert incivility (i.e., exclusion) might be ascribed to the communal characteristics of the female gender role (i.e., careful and passive) and thus, assumed to be a communal manifestation of incivility. That is, an episode where an employee is omitted or excluded from the workgroup or that receives little attention may be considered a passive or indirect uncivil behavior more congruent with societal expectations of the communality of the female gender role. Therefore, we might expect covert incivility to be perceived as more congruent with female uncivil leaders. This might imply that workers' observers may show higher tolerance for covert incivility when it is performed by female leaders instead of male leaders. However, the communality of male leaders who commit covert incivility may be less tolerated by workers' observers.

### *1.3. Gender Differences among Workers' Observing Incivility*

It is well known that there is gender bias in workplace incivility [2–5]. However, there is a dearth of studies exploring gender differences when female and male workers' observers rate an episode of uncivil behavior of a leader. We build on the knowledge of observed workplace incivility as a gendered phenomenon, suggesting gender differences on the basis of role congruity theory [25]. Male workers' observers might pay attention to

the incongruity between the gender role and the manifestations of uncivil leadership. That is, they might tolerate an episode in which a male leader performs covert incivility, but less so tolerate a female leader who performs overt incivility. However, female workers' observers might rate an episode of workplace incivility (both overt and covert) higher than males, and they might also rate the congruity between male leaders performing overt incivility higher. Thus, our study goes a step further to this uncovered issue and postulates that female workers' observers will tolerate an incivility episode differently than males. Moreover, we posit that these differences will depend on the degree of (in)congruity of uncivil leader behavior.

Due to societal expectancies of leadership, males often have a more masculine construal of leadership than females [28,29]. Male leaders are expected to be dominant in social relationships at work because of the congruence between the agentic characteristics of the male stereotype and leadership roles. As mentioned above, covert incivility (communal) might be expressed indirectly and thus be less tolerated—and therefore more easily detected—when performed by a male leader because of the incongruence between the male leader's agency and the communal characteristics of covert incivility (i.e., exclusion). Building on this idea, the present study fills the gap on gender differences and postulates that male workers' observers may consider the incongruity between the communality of covert incivility and the agency of male leadership. Thus, male workers' observers might be less tolerant of male leaders who commit covert incivility. That is, the communality of male leaders who commit covert incivility may be penalized instead of the behavior typically expected of male leader agency in terms of overt uncivil behaviors [30]. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Male workers will show higher awareness and less tolerance than female workers when a male leader uses covert incivility rather than overt incivility.*

In contrast, female leaders are expected to be passive in social relationships at work because of the congruence between the communal characteristics of women and leadership roles. As explained above, overt incivility (agentic) might be less tolerated—and therefore, more easily detected—when performed by a female leader because of the incongruence of overt incivility and leadership role agency with the stereotype ascribed to women as communal. Based on role congruity theory [25], we postulate that male workers' observers may consider the incongruity between the agency of overt incivility and the communality of female leadership. Thus, male workers' observers might be less tolerant of female leaders who commit overt incivility. They may expect female leaders to be communal in social relationships at work, as stereotypically believed. Thus, male workers' observers may pay more attention to the agency of female leaders who act with overt incivility because of the incongruence of overt incivility and leadership role agency with the stereotype ascribed to women as being communal. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *Male workers will show higher awareness and less tolerance than female workers when a female leader uses overt incivility rather than covert incivility.*

In addition, gender differences in social roles highlight that females more easily distinguish psychosocial problems in workplace settings than males. Research has shown that females identify mistreatment at work as more offensive, inappropriate, or insulting than males do [31]. In fact, recent evidence suggests that females identify workplace incivility as a construct (overt and covert) more than males do, regardless of its manifestation [19,20]. These differences might be more pronounced when females observe female leaders behaving in an uncivil way because both overt and covert incivility are considered adverse behaviors. Thus, females observing workplace incivility, in comparison with male observers, might identify overt and covert incivility as negative behaviors at work, and even more so when female leaders commit incivility. This could be because female observers identify a lack of civility more than males do and detect the incongruity of the agency

of the leadership role with the stereotype ascribed to women as being communal to a greater extent [17,18]. Based on previous results, we posit that female workers' observers might pay more attention to uncivil behaviors instead of to the person who performs these uncivil behaviors. Hence, workplace incivility might be less tolerated—and therefore, more easily detected—by female workers' observers for both overt and covert incivility when performed by a female leader. Based on this idea, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *Female workers, in comparison with male workers, will show higher awareness and less tolerance when a female leader uses both overt and covert incivility.*

However, female workers' observers might pay more attention to the agency of male leaders who act with overt incivility because of the congruence of overt incivility and leadership role agency with the stereotype ascribed to men as being agentic. Studies have shown that women who occupy lower positions in the organization are frequently victims [2,3]. Therefore, female workers' observers might empathize and identify the agency of male leaders acting overtly rather than covertly uncivil by rating a congruence pattern to a higher extent. Thus, female workers' observers might be less tolerant of male leaders who commit overt incivility. We propose the following:

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *Female workers, in comparison with male workers, will show higher awareness and less tolerance when a male leader uses overt incivility.*

#### 1.4. The Present Study

The present research falls within the field of organizational psychology and human resources management. Theoretically, our study contributes to the existing literature on workplace incivility by explaining gender bias in tolerance for workers' observing leader actors of workplace incivility on the basis of role congruity theory. Until now, the extant literature has demonstrated clear statements. Workplace incivility is a stressor with serious consequences that selectively affects women workers. It has a social nature, and it is ambiguous and subtle. It generates a spiral where actors, victims, and observers play important roles. Despite a great deal of knowledge on incivility, there are four key themes and discussions to date that remain unclear.

First, we know that the role of observers is relevant to curb workplace incivility. There is nascent literature about observed workplace incivility, revealing a gap in the knowledge of the specific motives that drive observers to notice and react to uncivil behaviors. In order to theoretically contribute to this knowledge, our study posits that gender is also a key element for observers. Second, workplace incivility is a stressor with serious consequences that selectively affects women workers. However, it is currently unknown whether the gender of the observer influences the rate of incivility episodes. Our study contributes to the knowledge by analyzing the observers' points of view and posits gender differences on the basis of role congruity theory. Third, we know that future workers rate incivility episodes differently, with females more strongly rating incivility than males [17]. Thus, there is a gap in the literature regarding what happens with real workers' observers. Our study addresses this point by determining the social functioning of incivility when workers are rating incivility episodes. Fourth, the gender of the leader who performs uncivil behaviors is relevant when rating incivility. Thus, the gender role matters in uncivil leadership. Hence, our study builds on the knowledge of the influence of gender when there is abusive leadership, such as when leaders commit incivility. This implies that there is gender bias by means of the gender differences among workers' observers, who are influenced by the gender of the leader who commits incivility.

In summary, our study contributes to research on observed workplace incivility as a gendered phenomenon in several ways. First, it fosters a better understanding of the (in)congruity patterns of observers. This study not only focuses attention on observers as third parties in the incivility spiral [6] but also analyzes the observer–perpetrator context using the latest theoretical perspectives on incivility [14,27,31]. Second, a particular theo-



retical contribution of this study is the relationship between the role congruity theory of Eagly and Karau [25] and workplace incivility. In fact, there is some evidence that supports this contribution [26,27]. Third, in understanding previous evidence that suggests the importance of the form of the manifestation of incivility as interpersonal mistreatment in the workplace [1,17,21], we expand this idea in our research and test overt and covert incivility by associating overt behavior with the agency typically connected with males and covert behavior with the communality associated with females. Finally, we already know there is gender bias regarding how overt and covert forms of incivility may influence future workers' tolerance [17], but the present study aimed to explore the gender bias among current workers in order to propose specific interventions.

International organizations advocate the necessity of implementing psychosocial strategies to prevent occupational risks for female workers [32,33]. In this sense, our study provides pragmatic insights into better understanding gender bias in workplace incivility and preventing adverse consequences for women workers. In short, our study integrates current approaches to workplace incivility and contributes important findings to foster the prevention of future incivility incidents in the workplace.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants and Procedures

A sample of 547 workers living in southern and central Spain (231 men and 316 women) participated in this study ( $M_{age} = 40.97$ ,  $SD = 12.16$ ). Over half were married or living with a partner (63.8%) and had children (53.9%), whereas nearly half were single (30%) and had no children (43.5%). The participants were recruited from a variety of occupations, such as education (38.6%), health (9%), administration (8.5%), business (7.5%), technology companies (6.1%), and service companies (5.3%), and were approached in their work contexts and asked to contact other possible participants using the snowball sampling technique. Participants meeting the criteria had a high educational level (i.e., 61.2% had a university degree and 15.7% had a master's degree) and at least one year of work experience. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. Furthermore, the confidentiality of the data and participant anonymity was assured. The researchers explained the instructions to the participants who completed the online survey using a computer or electronic device at work during their private time prior to the beginning of work.

This was a quasi-experimental  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subject factorial design. Participants (worker's gender: male vs. female) were randomly assigned to one of the conditions where a leader (leader's gender: male vs. female) behaves in an uncivil way (workplace incivility: overt vs. covert) toward an employee. Consistent with similar studies [14,31,34], each condition used a written vignette followed by a questionnaire whereby participants were asked to play the observer role in the scene they read that described an episode of incivility from a leader toward an employee.

### 2.2. Manipulation

A similar number of male and female participants were randomly assigned to the conditions. Following Wilson, VanVoorhis, and Morgan's [35] sample size recommendations, male workers' cells ranged from 58 to 59, and female workers' cells ranged from 78 to 80. We followed the measurement guidelines established by Cortina et al. [24] to represent both overt and covert incivility episodes. For the overt incivility episode (see Appendix A), we simulated a scenario in which a male or female leader (the leader's gender was manipulated) publicly humiliated an employee during a meeting. For instance, the leader said that the employee always speaks too quickly and never seems to get to the point. The leader then stood up and said in front of everyone that the employee was explaining what everyone already knew. Additionally, the leader openly doubted the employee's judgment in a matter that was the employee's responsibility, doubted the employee's capacity to complete tasks correctly, did not sufficiently trust his/her work methods, and asked to

check and discuss the work plans daily. For the covert incivility episode (see Appendix B), we simulated a scenario in which an employee is omitted or excluded by the male or female leader (the leader's gender was manipulated). For instance, the leader ignored an employee in the hallway or while taking a coffee break with colleagues, or the leader looked through some papers, paid no attention, or turned to speak with someone else while an employee was speaking at a meeting. We were interested in representing different forms of incivility manifestations (overt vs. covert). The employee behavior was equal across conditions. Thus, the conditions simulated identical scenarios except for the manipulations.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Awareness of Incivility

We used 10 adjectives based on the definition of Andersson and Pearson [6] to measure the level of incivility of the leader's behavior. The adjectives included characteristics of the definition of incivility, such as rude, demeaning, intentionally harmful, or belittling, rated on 4-point scales ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). Lower scores closer to 1 indicated a higher awareness of incivility and thus, a higher detection of the incivility episode (i.e., "I totally agree that the leader's behavior was rude, demeaning, intentionally harmful, or belittling"), whereas higher scores closer to 4 indicated a lower awareness of incivility and thus, a lower detection of the incivility episode (i.e., "I totally disagree that the leader's behavior was rude, demeaning, intentionally harmful, or belittling"). Thus, awareness was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (high awareness of incivility) to 4 (low awareness of incivility). The alpha coefficient was 0.95.

#### 2.3.2. Tolerance for Incivility

The level of the participants' tolerance of the leader's behavior, representing incivility toward the employee, was measured by adjectives rated in a semantic differential ranging from 1 (i.e., appropriate, adequate, or bearable) to 7 (i.e., inappropriate, inadequate, or unbearable) also used in previous studies [17,21]. Lower scores closer to 1 indicated more tolerance for incivility while higher scores closer to 7 indicated less tolerance for incivility. Thus, tolerance was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (high tolerance for incivility) to 7 (low tolerance for incivility). The alpha coefficient was 0.87.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive and Main Analyses

We explored the impacts of our three independent variables (worker's gender: male vs. female; leader's gender: male vs. female; workplace incivility: overt vs. covert) by conducting a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on the participants' scores of the awareness and tolerance for incivility-dependent variables. To test the workers' gender differences from Hypotheses 1 to 4, we ran a 2 (worker's gender)  $\times$  2 (leader's gender)  $\times$  2 (workplace incivility) interaction ANOVA. Below, we report the male and female workers' ratings based on leader gender (Table 1) and the results of the ANOVAs (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Means and standard deviations for male and female workers within conditions ( $n = 547$  workers).

Variables	Scale	Male Workers				Female Workers			
		Male Leader		Female Leader		Male Leader		Female Leader	
		Overt Incivility ( $n = 58$ )	Covert Incivility ( $n = 58$ )	Overt Incivility ( $n = 56$ )	Covert Incivility ( $n = 59$ )	Overt Incivility ( $n = 80$ )	Covert Incivility ( $n = 80$ )	Overt Incivility ( $n = 78$ )	Covert Incivility ( $n = 78$ )
Awareness	1–4	1.74 (0.90)	1.57 (0.64)	1.70 (0.64)	1.77 (0.79)	1.41 (0.55)	1.68 (0.78)	1.54 (0.62)	1.45 (0.59)
Tolerance	1–7	5.78 (1.50)	6.31 (0.78)	5.91 (0.82)	6.00 (1.14)	6.43 (0.66)	6.32 (0.99)	6.30 (0.62)	6.43 (0.73)

Note. Awareness is rated on a scale ranging from 1 (high awareness of incivility) to 4 (low awareness of incivility). Tolerance is rated on a scale ranging from 1 (high tolerance for incivility) to 7 (low tolerance for incivility).

**Table 2.** Interaction and main effects for male and female workers within conditions ( $N = 547$ ).

	Worker's Gender $\times$ Leader's Gender $\times$ Workplace Incivility Interaction		Leader's Gender $\times$ Workplace Incivility Interaction		Worker's Gender $\times$ Workplace Incivility Interaction		Worker's Gender $\times$ Leader's Gender Interaction		Workplace Incivility Main Effect		Leader's Gender Main Effect		Worker's Gender Main Effect	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> Value	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> Value
Awareness	6.28	0.012 *	0.21	0.650	1.35	0.246	1.21	0.272	0.09	0.767	0.09	0.771	8.94	0.003 **
Tolerance	4.49	0.035 *	0.43	0.514	3.37	0.067	0.28	0.600	3.89	0.049 *	0.34	0.558	21.51	0.000 ***

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , and \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

### 3.2. Hypotheses Testing

The results yielded significant interaction effects between the worker's gender, the leader's gender, and the type of workplace incivility on awareness ( $F(1, 539) = 6.28, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.012$ ) and tolerance ( $F(1, 539) = 4.49, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.008$ ) (see Table 2). These effects supported Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4, indicating that there are gender differences among male and female workers.

In line with Hypothesis 1, male workers showed less tolerance when a male leader was covertly uncivil rather than overtly uncivil ( $F(1, 539) = 9.41, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.017$ ). However, no effect emerged for male workers in awareness ( $F(1, 539) = 1.85, p = 0.174, \eta_p^2 = 0.003$ ). Thus, male workers did not show higher awareness when a male leader used covert incivility rather than overt incivility. Contrary to our expectations, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Male workers did not show higher awareness ( $F(1, 539) = 0.31, p = 0.581, \eta_p^2 = 0.001$ ) or less tolerance ( $F(1, 539) = 0.23, p = 0.631, \eta_p^2 = 0.000$ ) when a female leader used overt incivility rather than covert incivility.

These significant interactions support the expectations of Hypothesis 3. Specifically, female workers showed higher awareness and less tolerance when a female leader was uncivil both overtly ( $F(1, 539) = 4.20, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.008$  and  $F(1, 539) = 5.81, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.011$ , for awareness and tolerance, respectively) and covertly ( $F(1, 539) = 7.44, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.014$  and  $F(1, 539) = 7.47, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.014$ , for awareness and tolerance, respectively) than male workers. Congruent with Hypothesis 4, female workers showed higher awareness ( $F(1, 539) = 7.79, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.014$ ) and less tolerance ( $F(1, 539) = 16.40, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.030$ ) than male workers when a male leader was overtly uncivil. Moreover, the results showed that female workers scored higher in awareness—but not lower in tolerance—when the male leader was overtly uncivil rather than covertly uncivil ( $F(1, 539) = 5.85, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.011$ ).

Additionally, there were main effects of the worker's gender on awareness ( $F(1, 539) = 8.94, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.016$ ) and tolerance ( $F(1, 539) = 21.51, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.038$ ). Female workers showed higher awareness and less tolerance for workplace incivility (overt and covert) than male workers. Moreover, there was a main effect of workplace incivility on tolerance ( $F(1, 539) = 3.89, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.007$ ), which meant that both male and female workers showed less tolerance when the incivility was covert rather than when it was overt.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Overview of Findings

The aim of this study was to test workers' gender biases in tolerance when observing leaders' incivility at the workplace as a result of awareness and tolerance. Our results show gender bias, mostly confirming our hypotheses. Gender differences among workers' observers were found. As expected, our findings revealed that male and female workers' observers differ in the role (in)congruity pattern when observing workplace incivility. Male workers' observers are less tolerant when role incongruence occurs, such as when male leaders (agentic) use covert incivility (communal), which is indirect and more congruent with the female communal stereotype.

In contrast, female workers' observers notice and treat incivility as less tolerant than males. They are consistently less tolerant when the leader's gender role congruence occurs, such as when male leaders are overtly uncivil, which is congruent with the masculine



gender role. Our results indicate that females, compared to male workers' observers, were more aware and less tolerant of workplace incivility in which a female leader was overtly or covertly uncivil. Thus, female workers' observers were less tolerant of a female leader acting uncivilly (regardless of the type), whereas they were less tolerant of a male leader acting overtly. These findings are in line with previous studies, where women were more aware of incivility than men [36], probably because they are more frequently victims [2,3] or because of a socialization process in which women learn that they are expected to pay more attention to emotions and others' feelings more than men are [37].

#### 4.2. Theoretical Implications

We interpreted our results in the light of role congruity theory [25]. This theory proposes that there is congruency in being a man and a leader but incongruency in being a woman and a leader, as being a leader is considered to be agentic [38]. In fact, the literature demonstrates that female leaders are penalized when they lack communality [39], leading to prejudicial evaluations against women [40]. In addition, there are also penalties to the agency of female workers who act in an uncivil manner [26,27]. Our results consistently support the initial idea of an incongruence pattern in male workers and a congruence pattern in female workers.

Our study shows that, albeit displaying the same dysfunctional behavior, female workers perceive workplace incivility to a higher extent than male workers. Why is the behavior of a female leader more likely to be perceived as uncivil than that of a male leader? We base the answer to this question on gender role (in)congruity. Males consider overt incivility (direct) an agentic means of expression and thus, are aware when incongruence takes place, that is, when male leaders act covertly. In other words, males perceive covert incivility (i.e., omission) as being related to the communal feminine role and therefore, are aware when male leaders act covertly. Similarly, female evaluations followed an underlying congruent gender role pattern. Specifically, females noticed incivility when it was overt (agentic) and performed by male leaders.

Our findings are in line with recent studies that connected experiencing incivility with the leader's communality or agency. For example, Gabriel et al. [26] found that women report more incivility from other women than from men, especially when women are more agentic at work. Therefore, as in our study, the agency of females who are uncivil is penalized. In addition, Motro et al. [27] explored the impact of having an uncivil member in a team, revealing that people penalized a female uncivil member more than a male member. Going one step further, the evidence of the initial and present study highlights the necessity to better explore the key elements of gender bias when observing workplace incivility.

Additionally, in line with previous studies [5,41], our results show that gender differences in perception and tolerance of incivility depend on the type of incivility and on the leader's gender. This result is consistent with the idea that gender discrimination has become covert, and women workers are the main group affected in organizations [36,42,43]. Despite the harmfulness of incivility, our findings suggest the importance of the form in which incivility is expressed as gender bias. In general, we would expect people to report uncivil behavior. However, not all manifestations are equally tolerated. Following an incongruent gender pattern, male workers' observers were against covert incivility from males. Nevertheless, female workers' observers followed a congruent gender pattern, showing overt incivility from male perpetrators to a higher extent.

#### 4.3. Practical Implications

Considering the psychosocial nature of workplace incivility, interventions should be based on empirical evidence that has to be incorporated into prevention programs. Research has discussed primary preventive resources to effectively handle workplace incivility from a gender perspective [44,45] and the relevance of introducing sustainable innovative behavior within organizations [46]. Workplace incivility is adverse behavior that may foster a toxic workplace environment. It impacts the morale of employees

and influences workers' productivity [47,48]. Thus, enterprises and human resource departments should not only promote ways of reducing incivility but also raise employee awareness of which actions comprise covert or overt incivility by using problem-focused coping strategies [49] to implement civility training programs in the workplace [50,51]. In this way, incivility might be identified and rejected regardless of the type of incivility or the leader's gender.

This study offers guidelines for organizational sustainability, with interventions, to be implemented in organizations, focusing on prevention, which should be based on specific objectives identified by empirical research [52,53]. Specifically, our research emphasized the relevant role of workers' observations of workplace incivility because they can interrupt the incivility process. Considering that women are aware of incivility to a higher extent than men [54] and that they penalize agentic male leaders who are being overtly uncivil, interventions should train male and female workers in new forms of interpersonal respect within organizations [55]. For example, similar to interventions in healthcare contexts, companies can implement code-of-conduct policies that define respectful behaviors, and they should also offer educational training in assertiveness [56]. Similar to installing norms for respect, a recent study revealed the implications for organizations of positive leader behaviors that may diminish uncivil behaviors at work [57].

Incivility is a selective dynamic process that triggers gender bias in the workplace [2,3], and the distinction between overt and covert incivility is related to the role (in)congruity pattern as a gendered phenomenon. Thus, companies should include a gender equality axis in their program of psychosocial risks at all levels. Following the advice of international organizations [32,33], our approach was to pay attention to gender bias by means of specific uncivil behaviors (i.e., unremarked vs. declared) according to power positions [58,59]. As our ultimate goal is to initiate gender equality in organizations, the first step is an awareness of incivility as an ignored behavior. Given these outcomes, we recommend that organizations explicitly include measurable gender equality objectives in their gender equality policy.

#### 4.4. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The use of hypothetical situations rather than witnessing actual leaders limits external validity; thus, actual behaviors might be used instead of self-reported behaviors to better visualize an incivility episode and to guarantee internal and construct validity. Although we created ad hoc questions, as recommended by Heilman and Okimoto [39], the range of the scales' points varied. For example, we used a range from 1 to 4 for awareness and from 1 to 7 for tolerance. Based on previous studies, and to facilitate the response of participants, it would probably be better to use the same range of responses. Furthermore, as our findings reported gender differences among workers, it would also be interesting to analyze these variables in a masculine or feminine context and to extend role congruity in the evaluation of observed workplace incivility in a masculine, agentic male domain (i.e., engineering) and a feminine, communal female domain (i.e., nursing). In addition, we recommend exploring the participants' beliefs about the gender stereotypes that might underlie their responses [34,39,60]. Including these recommendations in future studies could provide a better understanding of gender bias in workplace incivility.

## 5. Conclusions

Our study enhances both the theoretical and practical contributions to the current literature. This study focuses on current workers' observers as third parties in the incivility spiral and analyzes the observer–perpetrator context, which is a new approach that allows incivility to continue as a process in some enterprises.

More specifically, this study builds on the existing knowledge by introducing the terms “overt” and “covert incivility” as different manifestations of workplace incivility and analyzing the differing effect that uncivil behaviors may have on workers' observers.

Moreover, the main theoretical contribution of this study is the consideration that incivility behaviors are gender-related and thus, the explanation of observers' gender biases of incivility can be explained based on role congruity theory. Drawing upon this theory, we examined gender bias among female and male workers' observers in their degree of tolerance for uncivil leader behavior. In doing so, we contribute to a better explanation of the reactions and prejudices that observers may express in different situations and thus, considering context is of interest.

Empirically, our study extends the knowledge regarding workplace incivility as adverse behavior regulated by gender. The results highlight gender bias and the critical influence of the gender of both workers' observers and leaders on the tolerance for incivility manifestations, which differs according to overt or covert forms. Moreover, drawing on role congruity, this study adds to the growing body of evidence arguing that observers may foster the prevention or promotion of incivility. These findings are useful to organizations in developing civility interventions from a gender perspective. In doing so, more sustainability and healthy relations could be promoted in organizations.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of University of Jaén (Reference: NOV.17/2.PRY).

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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## Appendix A. Example of the Condition for an Overt Incivility Episode

Paco is an engineer and has worked for an IT company for five years. His job consists of resolving incidents and technical problems related to computer equipment. Since he began, he has shown himself to be good with computers, and he solves problems that arise each day.

Four months ago, a new middle manager, Luis, started working for the company. On several occasions, Luis, the leader, told Paco that he doubted Paco's capacity to complete tasks correctly and that he did not sufficiently trust how he worked. In addition, Luis said he would like Paco to check in with him daily about his work plans.

At the last meeting, Paco was explaining how to retrieve data that a virus had erased on all the company computers. Once Paco began speaking, Luis turned to a nearby colleague and said that Paco always talks too fast and never seems to get to the point. At that moment, Paco was explaining to Luis how he would solve the virus problem. Luis then stood up and told everyone that Paco was not telling them anything they did not already know. Luis then changed the subject, and the meeting went smoothly.

## Appendix B. Example of the Condition for a Covert Incivility Episode

Paco is an engineer and has worked for an IT company for five years. His job consists of resolving incidents and technical problems related to computer equipment. Since he

began, he has shown himself to be good with computers, and he solves problems that arise each day.

Four months ago, a new middle manager, Luis, started working for the company. On several occasions, Luis has ignored Paco when seeing him in the hallway. In addition, when they meet during a coffee break, Luis speaks with Paco's colleagues, leaving Paco out of the conversation.

At the last meeting, Paco was explaining how to retrieve data that a virus had erased on all the company computers. Once Paco began to speak, Luis began looking through some papers he had brought with him, paying no attention to Paco. At that moment, Paco was explaining to Luis how he would solve the virus problem. Luis turned away to speak with someone else while Paco was still speaking and paid no attention to what Paco was saying. Luis then changed the subject, and the meeting went smoothly.

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