

## Levels of psychological distress among working and non-working women

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### ABSTRACT

Psychological distress is defined as a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression and anxiety; these symptoms are tied with somatic symptoms that are likely to vary across cultures. Distress is one of the variables which is less explored. Distress can have underlying vulnerability towards psychological morbidity. Factors of distress (person centered & environment centered) affects an individual in his day-to-day life; of which the environmental factor of distress (work status) is affecting the working population nowadays and women are very vulnerable towards it. This study tried to identify the level of psychological distress and the vulnerability of women towards mental disorder, according to their work status (working and non-working). The purpose of this study is to determine the difference in the Levels of Psychological Distress among unmarried working and non-working women. A total number of 144 participants of unmarried women, (working = 80, non-working = 64) ranging between the age of 23-30 years from Kolkata and Bangalore. The data was collected by administering Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), by Kessler et. al. (2002). Independent sample t-test is used to determine the difference in psychological distress between the two groups. The results indicated that there is no significant difference in the level of psychological distress between working and non-working women. Present finding adds to the literature as the lack of published data ascertaining the relationship between the two variables, psychological distress and work status. From this study it is found that work status does not contribute to the level of psychological distress. There can be other personal or social factors which might contribute more to the level of psychological distress among working and non-working women.

**Keywords:** *Psychological Distress, Work Status, Working Women, Non-Working Women, Factors Of Distress, Person Centered, Environment Centered*

Psychological distress is defined as a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression and anxiety; these symptoms are tied with somatic symptoms that are likely to vary across cultures. The defining features of psychological distress are the exposure to a stressful event that threatens the physical or mental health, the inability to cope effectively with this stressor and the emotional turmoil that results from this

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ineffective coping. Stress theory suggest that there is greater prevalence of psychological distress among women, elderly, minorities, unmarried and those with lower SES status, that can be explained by lack of stress buffering resource in these group. Studies have proved that there is relation between psychopathology and psychosocial stress, emphasising upon **person centered and environment- centred** as the frame work for psychological distress. (Dohrenwend 1974).

**Stress** is simply the body's response to change, caused by excessive pressure of work. According to Hans Selye (1963) stressful events induce marked strain on the person's adaptive capability that in turn causes an interruption of the person's routine or habitual functioning. Selye (1963) stated that stress causes great interference to the system's physiological and psychological homeostasis. **An acute or chronic** condition is regarded as **distress** in which people have been subject to traumatic experiences and not being able to control the stressor and it *affects the mental health*. Psychological distress is "a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression and anxiety". It is described as a non-specific mental health problem (Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend 1982). Nonspecific psychological distress (NPD) is characterized by a constellation of psychological and somatic symptoms that are common among individuals with a wide range of mental disorders but are not specific to any single disorder. Psychological distress is viewed as an emotional disturbance that may impact on the social functioning and day-to-day living of individuals. Distress is a diagnostic criterion for some psychiatric disorders, together with impairment in daily living, a marker of the severity of symptoms in other disorders.

From the previous researches it has been seen that women are generally more vulnerable towards psychological distress than men. And also, women who are working and managing both work life and family life are more distressed than women who are not working. But in some studies, it has been seen that women who are not working, they are also distressed when their surroundings are demanding (distress due to unemployment). It depends on how the person is perceiving her environment and that leads to distress. Dr. Islahi F. (2017) conducted a research on women, work and stress. The study aims to discuss stress among women in relation to their work. Working and non-working women exhibited insignificantly different level of stress varying respect to different factors. A research conducted by Shukla S., Dr. Jaiswal M., Agrahari K. and Shingh A. (2016) on stress level among working and nonworking women. This study has found out that working women's have significantly higher level of stress than non-working women. Patil M. (2016) conducted a research on stress level of working and non-working women. The major findings of the study reveal that the working women have more stress than the non-working women. Another study shows, done by, Rai D., Kosidou K., Lundberg M., Araya R., Lewis G. and Magnusson C. (2012) on psychological distress and risk of long-term disability, a population-based longitudinal study. It was found that, levels of psychological distress associated with an increased likelihood of obtaining a disability pension later in life. Mild psychological distress was independently associated with the award of a disability pension for both somatic and psychiatric diagnoses. Also, study done by McQuillan J., Greil A. L., White L. and Jacob M. C. (2003) on infertility and psychological distress among women. suggests that the long-term effects of infertility experience are not dependent on role accumulation and only modestly related to resources. Infertility is associated with substantial long-term distress only for those who are not mothers. Women who have neither biological nor social children, infertility is associated largely and statistically significant higher levels of distress. Barnett R. C., and Brennan R. T., (1995) did a research to determine the relationship between job

experiences and psychological distress. The magnitude of the relationships between job experiences and psychological distress not found to be differing between men and women. Again, a study done by Whelan C. T., (1994) on social class, unemployment, and psychological distress. In that study, weak support was found for the hypothesis of differential vulnerability among women. Unemployment actually had a stronger impact for men in higher social classes among men. Unemployment and economic deprivation are the major factors leading to social class differences in psychological distress. Lastly, study done by, Ensel W. M., and Lin N., (1991) on the life stress paradigm and psychological distress. Results were found to be (1) stressors and resources in the social environment have a direct impact on depressive symptoms, (2) social resources mediate the effects of social stressors on psychological distress, and (3) psychological resources indirectly affect distress by enhancing social resources. The role played by the social environment in the life stress process involving psychological distress is substantiated. So, from the various studies it has been seen that women are more vulnerable towards psychological distress.

### ***Rational of the paper***

Distress is one of the variables which is less explored. Stress theory holds that major life event, and chronic strains accumulates and the individual's ability to readjust can be overwhelming resulting into greater vulnerability towards physical and psychological disorder. Distress can have underlying vulnerability towards psychological morbidity. Factors of distress (person centred & environment centred) affects an individual in his day-to-day life. And the environmental factor of distress (work status) is affecting the working population nowadays and women are very vulnerable towards it. Distress raises the issue of delineating "normality" varying through intensity & inform across and within societies. There is dearth of published material explaining the role of environment factor in particular 'work status' as a contributing factor for psychological morbidity. This research will help in understanding the same.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Objective***

To determine the difference in the Levels of Psychological Distress among working and non-working women.

### ***Hypothesis***

There will be a significant difference in the level of psychological distress of working & non-working women.

### ***Variables***

Independent Variables- Work status - working and non-working women

Dependent Variables- Level of psychological distress (likely to have no disorder/likely to have moderate disorder/likely to have severe disorder) measuring by K10

### ***Operational Definitions***

Nonspecific psychological distress (NPD) is characterized by a constellation of psychological and somatic symptoms that are common among individuals with a wide range of mental disorders but are not specific to any single disorder.

### ***Sample***

**Sample Description:** Unmarried working and non-working females in the young adult category (20 to 45 years)

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**Sampling Size:** 144 (80 working 64 non-working)

**Sampling Method-** In the present study **Purposive Sampling Method** has been used.

### *Inclusion Criteria-*

1. Female young adults in the age range of 23-30 years.
2. Female young adults working in any private sector who worked 8 hours duration shifts.
3. Female young adults who are unmarried.
4. Working female young adults who have a minimum of 2 years work experience.
5. Female young adults working and non-working who possess an undergraduate degree.

### *Exclusion Criteria-*

1. Female young adults who are separated or divorced.
2. Female young adults who have a history of psychiatric disability/ challenges in the past.
3. Female young adults who are working in the service sectors.

### *Tools for Data Collection*

1. Informed consent form
2. Socio Demographic Sheet
3. Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)

**Procedure for Data Collection-** Informed consent and socio-demographic details has been taken from the participants. Then data has been collected via both offline (direct) and online modes.

**Procedure for Data Analysis-** Two groups of female young adults who are working and non-working respectively has been compared using the independent sample t-test analysis in SPSS version 20.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to study on levels of psychological distress among working women and non-working women who belonged to the young adult category. Purposive sampling method has been used to collect the sample. The data collected was first subjected to descriptive analysis followed by independent sample t-test as part of the inferential statistics procedure for testing the hypothesis formulated to study the proposed research question/objectives.

It was found through the analysis, that, there is no significance difference in the level of psychological distress of working and non-working women. And so, the null hypothesis has been accepted. It has been seen both working and non-working group has almost equal level of psychological distress, as the means were, respectively,  $M=23.95$  for working women &  $M=23.84$  for non-working women. The t value is  $t=0.08$  on 0.05 level of significance and it shows that there is no significant difference between the groups.

In the previous studies, environmental factors such as SES, social stress has been studied as the key factors of distress. In this study “work status” has been taken as the environmental factor which is a major contributor of distress. The results of this study indicate that, external factors like work status is not a contributor for psychological distress. It seems that,

both working and non-working women are equally distressed. The reasons can be different for individual to individual as each individual has different environment and temperament. It can be said that, the way an individual perceives his/her environment is what contributes to the psychological distress of that person. Various empirical evidence supports the hypotheses derived from the stress-distress model: exposure to stressful events or life conditions tends to vary across social groups and the impact of the exposure to specific stressors on mental health is more or less severe depending on the resources available to cope with this stress among people belonging to these groups. Some studies have focused on specific stresses consistent with the role-identify theory (e.g., life transition such as job loss, marital breakdown; family and work-related conflict) whereas others cover a wide range of stressors including individual and environmental stressors. For the present study, environmental factor of distress, work status, has been measured and it has been found that, it does not contribute to the level of psychological distress. So, it can again be said that, psychological distress of an individual depends on how that individual perceives his/her environment.

Previous studies showed that, work status as an environmental factor has its role in the workers life and the distress perceived by the worker. The role of worker (Gispert et al. 2003, Phongsavan et al. 2006, Schieman, Van Gundy, and Taylor 2001, Walters, McDonough, and Strohschein 2002) act as a protective factor against psychological distress. According to Warr and Jackson (Warr and Jackson 1987), the role of worker fosters the psychological well-being not only because it is a valued social role but also because working provides financial resources and opportunities for control, skill use, socialisation and externally generated goals. So, this can be a reason for the working group to be not high on psychological distress scale. Again, the researcher during the data collection, came to know from many of the participants that, they like their job and what they do in that job. They define themselves through their position in the workplace and also recognises herself as an important part of that organisation she is working. So, doing a preferred job can be a reason of low distress and the individuals are not perceiving the environment as threatful or demanding.

On the other hand, women who are not working and also in the age range of 23-30 years, are having distress more than expected. This can happen due to unemployment or any other societal pressure on them. Unemployed are viewed as a group at risk of psychological distress because they do not have access to these benefits although some work-related advantages (e.g., skill utilisation; socialisation) may be obtained outside the work environment (Warr and Jackson, 1987). McKee-Ryan et al. (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005) carried out a meta-analysis to test the hypothesized influence of unemployment on psychological wellbeing where psychological distress was one of the measures of mental illness. This meta-analysis confirmed that, in general, unemployment is a risk factor for mental illness though the detrimental effect of unemployment varies across categories of unemployed. In Indian context, women who are unmarried and also not working, can have a lot of environmental stressors which leads to higher level of psychological distress and also mental illnesses. Society is a place where an individual is judged and criticized for many external factors and those factors are perceived as demanding and threatful by people, especially women. And that gives a lot of stress to them which are again perceived as demanding, and as a result distress comes into the picture.

In the past few decades, empirical evidence has accumulated regarding the epidemiology of psychological distress. It has been seen that, stressful events and life conditions and the lack

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of valued social roles come up as significant risk factors for psychological distress whereas inner resources (e.g., self-esteem) and external resources (e.g., income) are important protective factors. It was also seen among workers, high work demands, low decision latitude, poor social support at work, and minimal rewards increase the risk of psychological distress. This evidence supports the fact in the present study, why working women are having high distress. Work-related factors do not explain all the variations in psychological distress observed in workers but the integration of the various elements that make up the social environment of workers (i.e., work, family, social networks, local community-neighbourhood). This observation in various studies is supporting the fact in present study, why non-working women are also having high distress. The reason is not only the environmental factor, work status, rather, other factors of environment of an individual which he/she perceives as demanding and stressful.

From, the present study it can be concluded that, work status, is not a contributor to the psychological distress for the present group of participants. In this study, both the groups, working and non-working women were found equally distressed, though the causal factors differ for both the groups. It's in the temperament of an individual, how he/she perceives the world and his/her environment in which he/she is present. If the person is perceiving it to be demanding then it becomes stressful for that person otherwise not.

Psychological distress can be identified through anxiety, depression and somatic symptoms. This study tried to identify the level of psychological distress and the vulnerability of women in young adulthood towards mental disorder. As high psychological distress leads to having mental disorders, specifically, anxiety, depression and also somatic symptoms. So, it can be said that, the vulnerability of women to have mental illness, due to psychological distress does not only depend on their work status, rather it may depend on other cultural/social/environmental/personal factors. It was found in this study that both the groups are highly distressed and so it can be said that they are also highly susceptible to mental illness and psychological distress.

The descriptive statistics of Psychological distress of a sample of 144 under women, among which  $n=80$  is working and  $n=64$  is non-working women. The mean score for Psychological distress of the group of working women was ( $M = 23.95$ ), and standard deviation was ( $SD = 8.246$ ). The skewness (.466) and kurtosis (-.317) are identified between +1.96 and -1.96, hence the distribution is normal. The mean score for Psychological distress of the group of non-working women was ( $M = 23.84$ ), and standard deviation was ( $SD = 7.600$ ). The skewness (.810) and kurtosis (.407) are identified between +1.96 and -1.96, hence the distribution is normal.

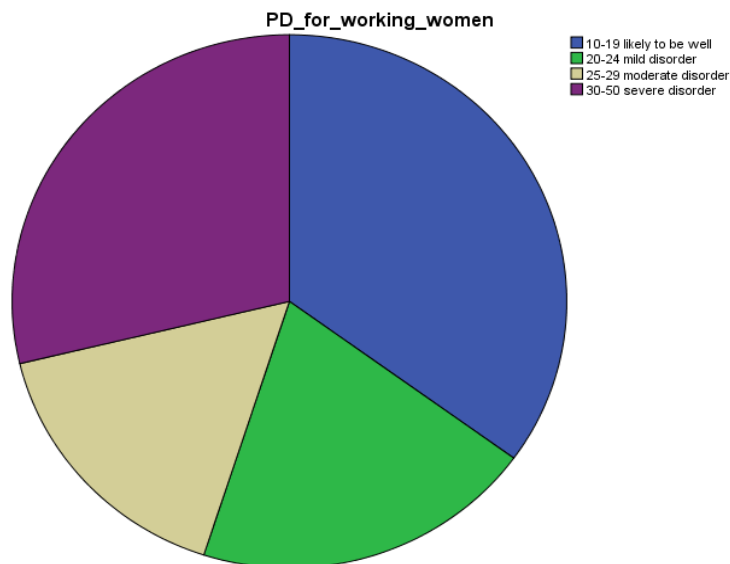
**Table 1**

Dependent variable	Occupation	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
Level of psychological distress	Working	80	23.95	8.246	.080	142	.937
	Non-working	64	23.84	7.600			

The independent sample t-test result shows that, the t value is  $t = 0.080$ ,  $df = 142$  and  $p = 0.937$ .

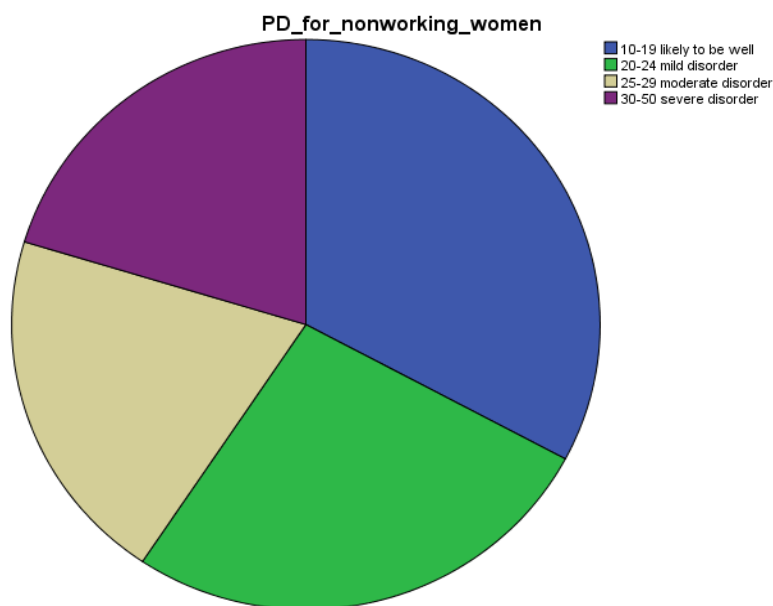
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*Showing the distribution of psychological distress according to the cut-off score of likelihood of having disorder of the group of working women of the sample taken for this study in the pie-chart.*



The distribution in the above pie-chart shows the cut-off scores and according to that likelihood of having disorder of the group of working women. The cut-offs are distributed as (given by Kessler et. al.), 10-19 = likely to be well, 20-24 = likely to have a mild disorder, 25-29 = likely to have moderate disorder, 30-50 = likely to have severe disorder. The frequencies of collected data are respectively, 28, 16, 13, and 23. The percentages are respectively, 35%, 20%, 16.3%, and 28.8% out of the total data of working women.

*Showing the distribution of psychological distress according to the cut-off score of likelihood of having disorder of the group of non-working women of the sample taken for this study in the pie-chart*



The distribution in the above pie-chart shows the cut-off scores and according to that likelihood of having disorder of the group of non-working women. The cut-offs are distributed as (given by Kessler et. al.), 10-19 = likely to be well, 20-24 = likely to have a

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mild disorder, 25-29 = likely to have moderate disorder, 30-50 = likely to have severe disorder. The frequencies of collected data are respectively, 21, 17, 13, and 13. The percentages are respectively, 32.8%, 26.6%, 20.3%, and 20.3% out of the total data of non-working women.

### CONCLUSION

The study shows that, there is no significant difference in the level of psychological distress between working and non-working women. The result shows that, both the groups are equally distressed and that can lead to mental illness especially, anxiety and depression, but the reason can be different, individual to individual.

Jorm et al., (Jorm et al. 2005) and Lincoln et al. (Lincoln et al. 2011) did a research and have found no overall significant difference in distress between unemployed and employed but a higher mean level of distress in individuals out of the labour market compared to employed individuals. The result of this study supports the results of the previous study it can be said that, even within the limitations of the current study, results indicated that in the Indian context no significant difference was seen between working and non-working women on the levels of psychological distress. The results of the study are significant as it indicates that work status as a variable does not seem to facilitate distress among young adult unmarried women and it would be imperative now to explore the study further to research married women as well to look at how multi roles may influence psychological distress. Further, the possibility that it may be work itself that provides a sense of identity and is not an added role to a woman requires exploration.

### Limitations

1. The study included a sample from only two metropolitan cities and to that end it may not be a representative of the population of female young adults;
2. The study has studied only a sample of young adult women who are unmarried. The married population was not included.

### Suggestions

The study instead of looking at working status of young adult females as a variable influencing psychological distress, could retain the work status of women as independent and explore further to research married women as well. The multi roles played by women in that case may reflect an influence on psychological distress. The possibility that it may be work itself that provides a sense of identity and is not an added role to a woman requires exploration.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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