

Research Paper

“Her Silent Struggle”: Unveiling Gender Roles and Mental Health of Married Working Women

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ABSTRACT

The ratio of women in the workforce in India has increased due to various factors, including economic growth, improved education, and increased gender sensitivity. However, the traditional gender roles still persist and frames women primarily as caregivers and nurturers, responsible for managing household chores alongside their jobs. This study examines the lived experiences of married working Indian females from Generation Y and their perceived psychological stress resulting from the prescribed gender roles. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 6 females. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, the study has explored their significant outlook towards life. The study reveals the unfading influence of traditional gender roles on the work-life balance, dual role-conflict, and eventually on the psychological well-being of the participants. The findings contribute to understanding the complexities of gender roles in the present Indian society.

Keywords: *Gender Roles, work-life imbalance, mental health, married women, interpretative phenomenological analysis*

World Health Organization (2015) defines gender roles as socially constructed roles, activities, attributes and behaviors that are considered appropriate in a society for men and women. Researches have shown that dissatisfaction with the prescribed gender role may increase the prevalence of mental health problem (Ciar, 2000), thus, adding to highlight the relation between mental health and gender roles. Mental health is a “state of well-being in which individual realizes their abilities, can cope up with normal stresses, can work productively and are able to make a contribution to their communities” (WHO,1950).As cited by Artal in 2019, Mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and lower levels of well-being are more prevalent among women due to different factors like social, economic, and environmental determinants and Gender roles are contributing factors to poor mental health(Marmot,2012). Previous researches have shown that there is a shift in gender roles of women, as an expansion in roles and responsibilities is seen, by them becoming more agentic than their previous generation (Anderson,2009). Although they are contributing to fulfil the economic needs of the family by coming into workforce, but their primary role is still considered to be a nurturer who is majorly responsible to manage family needs despite herself doing a full-time job. All of this has eventually created double-burden

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Received: July 28, 2024; Revision Received: September 23, 2024; Accepted: September 27, 2024

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and work-life imbalance (Olah,2018). Also, Greenhaus and Beutall in 1985 has defined Work and family conflict as an inter-role conflict where roles and responsibilities pressure from family and work domains are incompatible in some respect. Work vs family conflict is more prevalent in countries with greater gender inequality and collectivist functioning of society (Allen.T. D, 2020).

India is a country where collectivism and individualism coexist. It is a country where concerns for family depicts collectivist attitude and realizing own needs and goals are considered to be individualist in nature (Sinha.J, 2014). It is always expected from women to manage work and family effectively and be multi-tasking. Work and non-work life equilibrium is seen as women’s potential to manage and function in multiple context (personal and professional life) with little conflict (Clark, 2000; Unger son &Yeandle 2005). Work-family conflict (WFC) was explained thoroughly by Kahn and his associates in 1964 by developing a model of role theory which depicts tension between work and family roles as an inter-role conflict in the context of a person working in an organization. Women employees are the ones who are more worried and concerned about family and work roles interfering with each other. Maintaining a perfect work-life balance becomes difficult for women due to the traditional roles expected from them in our society where the idea of work-family conflict and balance is considered as a new and neglected concept for women than their male counterparts. Moreover, women belonging to traditional societies like India are more susceptible to experience such phenomenon than other societies especially comparing it from the west.

Due to the globalization and modernization of society, more women are seen into workforce in India (Patel.K, 2014). But as per Kelly global workforce insight report (2016), Women in India are more likely to quit jobs during childbearing years and later at mid of their career due to the ‘double burden syndrome’—a culture where both women and men feel that family and household duties are fundamentally and primarily the responsibility of women.

From the previous literature it is seen that even though the number of women working in workforce has increased, the gender roles remain the same and represent the double burden model of women in dual-earner families. Researches shows that women who have experienced domestic and caregiving burden in higher amount have reported poorer physical health and also higher rates of depression and anxiety (Lozano.M, 2017). Gender role stress is also linked with limited coping strategies with increase chances of developing anxiety, eating disorders and behavioral style issues (Rodríguez, 2021). In India the researches have predominantly focused and emphasized the topic of gender roles in quantitative fashion, leaving unaddressed need for in-depth exploration and qualitative assessment thus have somehow failed to capture the nuances, lived experiences and the complexities in the life of Indian work women. The previous literature has provided a backdrop for factors and problems faced by working women mentioned by quantifying it, but it has also opened doors for the researchers and has given direction to understand and going in depth to know how women are feeling and experiencing it individually and by exploring this concept further in a qualitative manner.

The present study tries to cover this research gap. Also, as Generation Y has to play different challenging roles in their lives and they are also considered as a workforce asset for the country it becomes important to understand perspective of working women of this generation and the challenges, perspectives and experiences of married working women belonging to this demographic. To understand the concept qualitatively, IPA was adopted

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that explore topics which are ambiguous, emotionally laden and complex in nature. It makes the researcher understand the perspective and experiences of individual related to a phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2015)

Therefore, considering its relevance, the present study tries to find answers for how Indian working married females are experiencing the concept of gender roles in their lives and how they are experiencing dual roles in their lives. The study also explores how dual roles are influencing their mental health and depicts the concepts related to it in an idiographic manner.

METHOD

Participants Recruitment

The participants were selected as per the inclusion criteria i.e., a purposive sample of married women who are working and are also managing their household were selected. All the participants were well-versed in English as it was one of the inclusion criteria. The sample was small and homogenous to do justice with interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2009). Participants were 6 married working women of age range from 25-40 years (generation Y) that were taken for the study. The mean age of the participants is 33.8 years. All the participants were working professionals from Delhi-NCR. All the participants have at least professional work duration of 6 hours in a routine. Participants were interviewed by the first author and were audio recorded. The language of the interview was English and American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study.

Participant table:

Participants(pseudonyms)	Age	Profession
Parvati	35	Boutique Owner
Arpita	26	HR manager at MNC
Daisy	37	Assistant professor
Saba	27	Teacher (TGT)
Meenal	33	Physiotherapist
Trisha	40	Teacher (PGT)

Table 1

Data Collection

Individuals were interviewed individually and recorded with consent, after explaining the purpose of the study and assuring them about the confidentiality of the results. Open ended questions were asked for the interview following with probing questions. The anonymity of the participants was protected by all means. Funneling approach was used for the questioning process (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Appropriate prompts were used to capture the experiences effectively. The interview questions were refined as per the answers of individual participants and to explore the individual experiences that would do justice to the research questions. Some of the original questions that were asked as follows:

1. According to you what is your role and what is expected from you. How do you feel about it
2. How does it feel to manage work and family simultaneously.
3. Does your work affect your family life and vice versa. Share some instances
4. Family role is the primary role of a woman. Share your opinion

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All the ethical standards were met during the procedure of data collection. Interviews lasted for 45-60 minutes and manual transcription produced six individual verbatim transcripts.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcripts was done using IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The process involved reading and re-reading the transcripts again. Later, in-depth reading of each transcript in the initial phase was done to generate the emergent themes out of it by extracting the key features of the texts by the first author. Further analysis was carried out by refining the themes and identifying the master and subthemes after multiple discussion with the second author.

Reflexivity

The subjective perspective while doing qualitative research automatically steps in the research process (Olmos-Vega, 2022). Taking interviews of married working females has resurfaced the experiences that are related with the scenario seen by the first author in her family, as her mother and most women in her family are working woman and she has seen how her mother has also managed her family and work life together. Along with this the second author is also a working married woman and her experiences, expertise and interest in the topic has added more depth to the study. Criteria given by Yardley (2000) were referred during the research process to keep the quality of the study intact.

Ethical considerations

The need for approval for this study was waived off as it was considered low-risk due to its non-invasive nature, based on general topic and informed consents were provided to the participants. Also, the study fell within exempt categories as it did not involve invasive procedures or interventions. Additionally, all the ethical standards that include permission to record, respect to the participant, confidentiality and anonymity were met during the study.

RESULTS

The analysis resulted in three themes along with subthemes in each resulted from IPA that emphasized on the flexibility in understanding the phenomena, context and participants meaning-makings which aligns well with the elaborate interaction of family dynamics, the societal expectations and experiences at workplace which are influencing the mental health of participants. The results are collaborated with the verbatims details extracted by the transcript text.

Table:2

Themes	Subtheme	Subtheme	Subtheme
1. Idea of Gender Role- An unchangeable Social Construct	a) Perception of Gender Roles	b) Gender role realization through Agents of Socialization	c) Demarcation of roles after marriage
2. Impact of work-life imbalance	a) Neglecting oneself	b) Physical and emotional effects	
3. Inner voice to lead gender neutral and happier life	a) Converting ideas to reality	b) Sharing of responsibilities not division of work	

1. Idea of Gender Role- an unchangeable social construct.

a) *Perception of Gender Roles*

According to the participants, Gender roles is a socially constructed idea for the participants that one needs to follow in order to be accepted in a society and in community. These roles are pre-defined and have been created separately on the basis of gender.

Parvati: “these are the roles that society has created for men and women. Like females have to manage house and men have to go out and earn.

It depicts the ideas and viewpoints that the participants have shared about gender roles with respect to their lived experiences. According to them gender roles are present, prominent and very much stable in our society. For participants it is an idea that will remain same even in future and in the coming years of their life. The verbatims highlights permanency of the concept that could neither be altered nor subjected to change.

Trisha: “it’s about how do we perceive our gender which is based on the society in which we live, they divide roles of women and men”. They are same and will remain same whether you like it or not

b) *Gender role realization through Agents of Socialization*

Participants expressed that they got to know about gender roles from different sources around them. These sources together explain the concept of agents of socialization that has reinforced the concept of gender roles in the lives of the participants. Family, parents, peer groups, culture religious scriptures, has influenced the perception of gender and its related roles by making the participants to realize about them.

Saba: I have realized about my roles from my family since childhood, who taught me how a girl should behave and from my religion and from our holy scriptures. In Indian society it is expected from a girl to manage house”

Since childhood, the participants are trained directly and indirectly to comply to their gender roles. They often felt that the society is stricter towards girls than boys in terms of assigning roles and duties to them and how a girl should behave. According to participants, mostly all orders, expectations, prescriptions, rules and regulations falls on the side of a girl child.

Trisha: every girl child is trained to be a good wife since childhood, “I never liked dal. When I was child, jokingly my relative said that you should develop a taste for it. what if in future your husband loves dal what will you do then so you should start eating it now. This was never been told to a boy “. She further added the idea is I should adjust with the norms of society i.e., to be submissive and docile

c) *Demarcation of gender roles after marriage*

As after marriage **responsibilities increases**, the Gender roles have become prominent and well defined after marriage. According to the participants, lot of things are **expected** from women that creates demarcation among roles, responsibilities and responses for male and female. Due to which they often feel unequal and less satisfied with their roles.

Meenal: to be adjusting is only expected from me, or I could say from a daughter- in-law. cooking after coming back from work is my duty and is expected from me, it is an unsaid rule that I have to follow with a smile on my face.

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Participants also felt that they are doing the prescribed roles just because they have to and there is no other option to say no to it. They are experiencing their changed lives and somewhere feeling diminished comfort and ease after marriage which is making them more aware about their particular roles of being a woman who is a wife, a mother or a daughter-in-law.

Daisy: before marriage your family supports you but after marriage no matter how much you are tired but you” ll be the one who will cook and make tea, helps the child in changing.

They have further added that, they feel their counterparts are incompetent for it, which is a sad thing as they feel. It implies and highlights their dissatisfaction with the situation around them. They are themselves trying to find solutions for it to reduce their stressful situation.

Meenal: Husband won't do it. 9 out 10 times its only you and even when they do it you have to redo it. It is such a sad thing that most of the men of our country don't even know these basic skills of life. I don't like to do household chores I like the professional work role but still have to do cooking. Now I have hired a cook to help me out and thankfully my parents live nearby to help me to manage my kid when I am working.

2. Impact of work-life imbalance –

a) *Neglecting oneself*

The participants are affected by the family and work life pressure and feel that somewhere they are **neglecting one's own needs** in order to be efficient in both duties. Participants feel that giving importance to oneself is also important for one's own satisfaction. It improves understanding about self and provides a sense of positivity which was neglected in order to manage both the worlds and being dedicated to both

Arpita: I have neglected myself in order to be efficient professionally and personally which is somewhere wrong for myself I feel sometimes.

The participants are also **finding it hard to create a perfect balance between the two** that is somewhere bothering them in different ways. The idea to think about self is completely missing in their lives that is negatively affecting them.

Daisy: now I have gained a lot of weight overweight and don't get much time to do workout follow diet plans and now that I have started with my exercise, my schedule has become so hectic

b) *Physical and emotional effects*

In order to manage work-family efficiently participants are facing many negative aspects in their lives. They often **feel stressed, over burden, irritated, have feeling of guilt sometimes and some have physical impacts too like weight gain** as they are ignoring themselves and are just focusing to maintain both lives.

Saba: There is constant stress and pressure to work according to the time table in order to balance my work and family. My child has habit to play a lot even at night which I can't do sometimes as till night I am exhausted. I feel guilty for that.

All this is taking a toll on their mental and physical health and they are the ones who are paying a price for all the stressful factors around them.

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Parvati: I feel exhausted at times sometimes even skip doing exercise which is important for me as I need to lose weight.

A lot of emotions they are experiencing which signifies somewhere a streak of discontentment in their lives but still they are doing their prescribed duties

Arpita: sometimes I feel trapped, irritated and always feel fatigue. This feeling is very unsettling for me but have to manage both things with fake smile.

3. An Inner voice to lead gender neutral and happier life

a) Converting ideas to reality

This explores the idea that understanding gender roles with sensitivity is just an idea that still hasn't been implemented much in our society and will take a long time to make the required change. Participants feel that the roles are still somewhere are being refrained from initiating or making a change. Our society is still not ready to accept much change and newer ideas for the prescribed roles. For the participants, they are the ones who are obliged to comply to those roles.

Trisha: there is long distance from verbal yes to conscious help. Things will change when this distance decreases. Being a female, I should be nurturer, manage house, cook be submissive adjusting and docile. Even in educated families the idea of gender sensitivity, helping woman at home is all that is preached but not being practiced”

Further, participants have also mentioned that not only stereotypical gender roles are expected but also people around need you to be perfect in your role and be efficient in it without tolerating any mistake.

Parvati: I expect from my family to relax and let me do work at my pace and according to my wish as I am not in a competition to prove my skills. If you want things to be done faster than help me. I am taking help from my house help and my husband also supports me.

b) Sharing of responsibilities not division of work

participants feel that world would become a better place to live if work should be shared and not allocated solely only the bases of gender. When both men and women should be taught all kinds of work, then the idea of gender equality and sensitivity would become more practical and will be seen as a realistic approach to follow.

Daisy: cooking and cleaning are basic skills that everyone should know. Even men should be taught how to cook basic food. As we are supporting each other financially so same should be done for household chores. When both share each other responsibility by women going out to buy grocery and men cooking breakfast for family then life would become much easier.

For the participants sharing of work is important and a person choice and preference for doing a particular work should be considered first. Participants feel that this approach would be better for a couple to live peacefully. They have provided solution for the present stressful situation around and are thinking about an imaginary situation that may lead to an optimistic future.

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Meenal: work should be distributed as per choice not on the basis of gender. We shouldn't relate work with respect and dignity. If men try to help in kitchen and women want to fix electric circuit, this shouldn't be a taboo but should be promoted. Sharing of work is important and exchange of duties is always better to understand each other. Taking help from each other should be there.

DISCUSSION

According to National Family Health Survey (NHFS), only 32 per cent of married women are working in India between the age group of 15-49 years of age (NHFS-5, 2019-2021). As compared to this percentage it is also seen from the from that 98 per cent of married men are employed in India. This reflects the scenario after marriage in India that even though it is said that the time has changed, but still after marriage men are still considered to be the breadwinners of their family that again underlines the traditional prescribed gender roles in bold. This shed light on the absence of socio-economic empowerment of majority of Indian married women. The concept of a married working women is still considered as a new and recent concept in India. Even for this 32 per cent, enough resources and aid are still not provided to reduce their stress in professional and personal life, to explore those factors and to understand their need in a better way.

The study has explored the experiences of Indian working married females and the concept of gender roles in their lives. It has focused on how married females are experiencing dual roles in their lives and how these dual roles are influencing their mental health. The master themes along with subthemes shows that they have increased responsibilities and roles to perform in order to comply to the societal norms and they have to fit in to the idea of a perfect married women. This idea of a perfect married women has been ingrained in their mind either directly or indirectly since childhood and they have been trained to behave in a certain way in order to be accepted in a society and always had stereotypical attitude around that shows the perception of society towards the roles and responsibilities of women. This has again resurfaced the importance of certain theories to understand the experiences of the participants that are related to gender roles. Eagly's (1987) social role theory indicates that gender stereotypes develop from gender role division. Also, Sandra Bem (1981) has described about the culture in her gender schema theory which further states that gender schematic processing emerges from sex- differentiated practices in our society and also claims that children learn about male and female roles from the culture they grow in. Participants have gender stereotypical attitudes around and are following what their society is preaching them and wanted them to follow.

Participants are juggling between work and family roles and always feel some kind of pressure on them to do both efficiently. All this is creating a double-burden on them which is somewhere affecting their health. They are experiencing physical effects (fatigue, exhausted, weight gain) and also it is affecting them mentally (feeling stressed most of the time, having negative emotion like feeling of guilt). They are trying to cope up with this by voicing out their opinions, asking help from husband, family members and hiring maids, in order to make their life easier. The results are complementing with the prior studies that dissatisfaction with the gender roles can lead to poor mental health (Joel.L.Young, 2015). The results support prior studies that although it is said that time is changing and participation of women into workforce has also increased but still communion roles (cooperate, adjust) are expected from them at home and the prescriptive stereotypes in our society still wants them to avoid agentic roles i.e., power assertion (Rudmen & Glick,2002).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it could be said that even though small efforts and changes are seen in our society but gender roles are still traditional for modern women and there is a long way ahead to bring the required changes in our society as seen from the results of the present study.

The present study provides the perspectives of the married females from generation Y living in Delhi-NCR (India) which is a collectivist society, where collectivism coexists with individualism (Sinha.J,2004). It has highlighted an important perspective towards mental health of married working females and how their gender role is still traditional that is causing double burden on them. Generation Y has to play different challenging roles in their lives and they are also considered as a workforce asset. Understanding their perspective would be helpful in understanding their outlook towards life. Understanding their needs and satisfaction level towards the prescribed gender roles is important in improving the workplace condition that may improve their efficacy at work and condition at home and to their well-being, that may also be beneficial for their mental health and may improve their efficiency.

Directions for future researches indicates on including sample from other generations and other cultural societies as well doing a comparative analysis of different generations and culture. As the sample size is small, the results should be generalized with care. Further researches can minimize the loophole by increasing the sample data.

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Acknowledgment

I extend my sincere gratitude to Prof. Sheema Aleem for her invaluable guidance and support throughout the research process. I would also like to thank my participants, who shared their experiences, making this study possible.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declares that there is no conflict of interest for the study with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

How to cite this article: Mujeeb, N. & Aleem, S. (2024). “Her Silent Struggle”: Unveiling Gender Roles and Mental Health of Married Working Women. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(3), 2657-2666. DIP:18.01.256.20241203, DOI:10.25215/1203.256