

Indian Elder Daughters: A Qualitative study on Roles, Responsibilities and its influence on Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how birth order, roles and responsibilities and cultural expectations influences the mental well-being of Indian firstborn daughters. Firstborn daughters are often expected to be more mature, offer guidance to their siblings as well as balance their familial expectations and personal goals simultaneously. They are often the second or third parental figure in the household, and strive to be the perfect role model for their younger siblings. They also have to display qualities of leadership, and obedience to family values and cultural expectations. The study also points out how these responsibilities could possibly burden and psychologically impact the mental health of Indian firstborn daughters. The finding highlights several psycho-social stressors faced by elder daughters in India.

Keywords: *Firstborn daughter, Psycho-social stressors, Roles and Responsibilities, Cultural expectations, Family Values*

In the modern era, family roles and responsibilities helps individuals to find purpose, connect deeply with others, learning values like empathy and duty. Each family member, whether it being parents, grandparents, children and siblings have different responsibilities based on their kinship roles, and are expected to perform the said responsibilities well to ensure that each individual in the family is mutually benefited, both emotionally, psychologically and economically from being part of a family.

Family dynamics refer to the patterns of interactions between family members, their roles, and responsibilities. They significantly influence an individual's perception of themselves, others, and society (Jabbari et al, 2023). Mothers and fathers both play a significant role in shaping family structures, setting values, establishing boundaries, providing primary care, and providing guidance for a child's growth and development.

However, firstborns are, often a young child's first companions, collaborators and even rivals. Since they receive parental attention more compared to their younger siblings, firstborns often display stronger skills in areas like leadership abilities, responsibility and academic achievements (Price J, 2006). Psychotherapist Alfred Adler's Birth Order Theory

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states that first-born children often display qualities such as being more rule-oriented, strict, cautious and may be even neurotic (Lagardo et al, 2024). They even play an important role in offering early lessons to their younger siblings, aids in social interaction with others, empathy and conflict resolution. Elder siblings could act as role models for their younger siblings (McHale et al, 2012). They could take up in some situations, a quasi-parental role; especially in cultures where roles and responsibilities are shared. They take up the responsibilities of guidance, protection, nurturance for their younger siblings (Tucker, 2001). Elder Siblings, particularly first-born daughters play a significant role in family dynamics. Research has indicated that when received adequate parental support and guidance, first born daughters tend to begin providing nurturance to new born siblings at a young age (Gottlieb, 1985). They tend to display qualities such as natural leadership, high achievement in academics, self motivation influenced by familial expectations and care-giving abilities. However despite all these, elder daughters tend to experience emotional exhaustion and reduced emotional expression, increased stressed levels due to keeping up with their parent's high expectations regarding their academic achievements and personal behaviour, whilst tackling problems like being compared to their siblings all the time. Many elder daughters reported to struggling to keep balance between their familial responsibilities and their academic pursuits (Capuz, 2024).

Research has shown that elder daughters may have high levels of perfectionism and self criticism due to high parental expectations. They tend to internalize these expectations, leading them to believe that their worth is tied to achieving accomplishments (Borgstede et al, 2023). Recently, the term “elder daughter syndrome” coined by family therapist Kati Morton had gone viral all over social media platforms, shedding light on the struggles faced by first-born daughters in families (Leno, 2024).

The purpose of the study is to look into how being the eldest daughter in Indian family dynamics, affects their identity, and mental state. The study explores the role of factors such as parentification, role overload, emotional stress, financial dependency, and identity crisis. By studying these individuals, we can also understand the influence of cultural and familial expectations and how their assigned roles affects their emotional and psychological well-being. This would aid us in understanding the complex condition of first-born daughters across India, and may influence future implications in counseling practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Birth Order Theory

Birth Order Theory was proposed by Austrian psychotherapist Alfred Adler, who first proposed it in the year 1927. Adler introduced the concept of birth order in his book “*Understanding Human Nature*”, emphasizing its impact on children's personality and overall identity development. He suggested that an individual's position within the family, significantly influences their personality, behavior, and coping strategies. He highlighted how the roles and expectations associated with family hierarchy influences their psychological traits. According to Adler, firstborns are the ones who initially enjoys undivided attention and care from their parents, until being dethroned by the arrival of their younger siblings. Since they are pressured to conform to parental values and expectations, they tend to be conscientious, responsible, and often leadership-oriented but may also feel burdened by expectations or displaced when a sibling is born. They may also develop traits of perfectionism and fear of failure due to high expectations placed on them by their

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families. This theory is relevant to this study as it provide framework for understanding how firstborn daughters are affected by familial expectations.

Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory was developed by psychiatrist Murray Bowen in the late 1950s. He, introduced this theory as part of his broader framework known as Bowen Family Systems Theory, in which he views the family as an emotional unit. This theory focuses on how family as a unit, could influence an individual's behaviour, emotions and overall psychological development. There are several core concepts in this theory which discusses how an individual's identity is formed, how stress within families impacts their mental health, how their interpersonal relationships are formed, how individual's coping skills are developed and how family as a unit could aid in the development of resilience in individuals. This theory is relevant to this study, as it discusses how interactions between family members could influence the behaviours, emotions and coping skills of elder daughters.

Role Theory

Role theory was developed as a multidisciplinary concept involving the fields of sociology, psychology, and anthropology. It was formalised contributions from several influential scholars like George Herbert Mead, Ralph Linton, Talcott Parsons, and Robert K. Merton, during the mid-20th century. Each of these scholars contributed in studying the influence of roles in various social and cultural contexts. This theory states that a role, is a set of expectations, norms, and behaviors associated with a particular social position. Individuals perform roles within a social system, influenced by cultural norms and interpersonal interactions. Role theory is widely applied in fields such as family studies, organizational behavior, and identity research. This theory is relevant to this study as roles assigned to firstborn daughters can impact their sense of self. They may also experience role strain and role conflict, due to managing excessive responsibilities and balancing different roles.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A research study was conducted to investigate the “The Impact of the Authoritarian Parenting Style and Birth Order on Perfectionism from a Cultural Perspective”. This study explores the psychological implications of familial roles, particularly the responsibilities shouldered by elder daughters. It identifies elder daughters as central figures in family dynamics, often tasked with care-giving and mentoring roles. These expectations can lead to the development of leadership traits and heightened responsibility but may also contribute to stress and perfectionist tendencies. The study emphasizes the nuanced impact of birth order on psychological development and family interactions, offering insights into how elder daughters navigate their roles within their families (Borgstede, 2023).

An article in the International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts investigates “Understanding Eldest Daughter Syndrome (EDS)”, a psycho-social phenomenon which disproportionately burdens eldest daughters with roles of care-giving, leadership, and familial mediation. The article examines the influence of various cultural norms like Confucian filial piety in Eastern societies and individualism in Western ones which heighten these pressures in elder daughters. Manifestations of these pressures include anxiety, perfectionism, and conditional self-worth, often leading to burnout. While EDS fosters positive traits such as empathy and independence, it frequently results in socio-emotional challenges and mental health risks. The paper advocates for systemic interventions to

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address these inequalities and reduce the psychological toll on eldest daughters (Chatterjee, 2024).

A study conducted to understand the “Strong Independent Ate: The Experiences Of Firstborn Daughters In a Private University And Its Effects On Their Priorities In Life”. This study examined the unique challenges faced by eldest daughters in Filipino families and how these affect their priorities in life. The study highlights the cultural expectation that eldest daughters act as secondary caregivers, often prioritizing family needs over personal aspirations. Key struggles identified includes suppressing emotions, facing high parental expectations, and enduring favoritism toward younger siblings. Despite the challenges, eldest daughters often demonstrate resilience and responsibility, albeit at the cost of emotional well-being and personal goals. The study emphasizes the need for supportive family dynamics and psychological resources for eldest daughters (Capuz et al., 2024).

A research was conducted to investigate the “Older sisters and Younger Brothers: the Impact Of Siblings on Preference for Competition”. This study investigated the influence of sibling dynamics, specifically older sister-younger brother pairs, on competitive preferences. The study revealed that older sisters often assume managerial or care-giving roles, which can reduce younger brothers' competitive tendencies. Conversely, these older sisters develop traits typically aligned with masculinity, such as self-confidence and competitiveness, especially compared to women with younger sisters. The research highlights the interplay of birth order, gender, and role expectations in shaping personality and behavior. These findings align with theories on role assimilation and sibling competition (Okudaira et al., 2015).

A research study conducted on “Parental Support and Firstborn Girls’ Adaptation to the Birth of a Sibling” in the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, explores how parental support affects firstborn girls' adaptation to the arrival of a sibling. Their study highlights the complex interplay of parental behaviors such as Prenatal maternal and post natal paternal support and children’s emotional responses. The findings emphasize the importance of tailored parenting strategies for fostering positive sibling relationships. Firstborn daughters often exhibited nurturance and care-giving behaviors toward siblings, influenced by parental modeling and situational dynamics, showcasing their central role in family dynamics (Gottlieb et.al,1990).

Research Objectives

- Objective 1:** To identify the various roles and responsibilities of Indian elder daughters.
- Objective 2:** To identify the psycho-social stressors faced by elder daughters in Indian families.
- Objective 3:** To identify the psycho-social stressors affecting elder daughter’s mental health.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research method used for this study is called as Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique that involves the process of finding, examining, and summarizing recurring patterns (themes) in a dataset. Six phases are involved: getting to know the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating themes, defining

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and labeling themes, and creating the report. This method's versatility allows it to be used to a variety of theoretical frameworks and research problems. Since theme analysis may be applied both inductively and deductively and doesn't require a specific theoretical framework, its adaptability and accessibility distinguish it from other qualitative research methods. Thematic analysis emphasizes the development of themes rather than just summarizing facts, acting as a fundamental technique that influences and intersects with numerous other qualitative approaches (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Population

The population consisted of young Indian adult females who are the firstborn daughters in their families, under the age range of 18-30 years in this study. The participant population was decided on the basis of convenience sampling.

Sample

The sample consisted of 10 firstborn females, from Indian families, who were aged between 18-30 years as participants.

Sampling Method

The sampling method that was used in this study is convenience sampling.

Inclusion criteria

- Participants must be within a specific age between 18–35 years.
- Participants must be first-born daughters from Indian families.
- Participants must be unmarried.
- Participants must have younger siblings or elderly grandparents.
- Participants must provide informed consent and should be willing to participate in the study.

Exclusion criteria

- Participants who were not in the specified age range were excluded.
- Participants who are not from Indian families were excluded.
- Participants who are married were excluded.
- Participants who do not have younger siblings or elderly grandparents were excluded.
- Participants with cognitive impairments were excluded.

Data Collection

Data was collected through the usage of in-depth and semi-structured interviews for this study. Apart from software's used for recording and transcription, not much else was used for the process of data collection. Telephonic interview was conducted on participants who were geographically dispersed. Each interview lasted about 15-20 minutes and each participant underwent one interview. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable, natural setting, which would allow participants to relax and share their thoughts.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is used in this research. Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research which involves careful reading of each set of data, and looking for similar patterns in the meaning of the data, to create themes and sub-themes. Researchers look carefully at

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the information they have gathered and code important parts so they can sort them into themes and sub themes that highlight key points. This method helps in understanding and organizing the data, to provide an in-depth understanding of experiences, or behaviours involved.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed about their right to privacy and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no remuneration was provided. The participants were explained about the purpose of the study. The permission for recording the voice clips was obtained and assured about the confidentiality of the data. Verbal consent was taken from the participants for the interviews that were conducted via telephone.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Roles and Responsibilities of Indian Elder daughters

The analysis of responses from participants in this study revealed that Indian elder daughters face several roles and responsibilities in family dynamics. The study showed that these roles and responsibilities are distinct and other family members place an expectation on the participants to perform all of them well. The following sub-themes were identified from the data.

Household Chores and Care-giving

Participants gave detailed accounts of their expected roles and responsibilities. Several participants admitted that doing household chores and taking care of siblings and grandparents were few of the main responsibilities expected from elder daughters.

“..... Being the elder daughter, it's our responsibility of looking after our sibling, our responsibility of looking after the kitchen to help, our responsibility look after our grandparents health and many more.....” (Participant 1, 18 years).

Analysis- Participant one's response shows that elder daughters are tasked with the duties of doing household chores and provide care-giving to family members, particularly their grandparents.

“.....I I had to take care of my siblings by helping them with their homework, assignments and my baby brother as well. Sometimes it affects my well being negatively but it also helped me become more responsible as a big sister.....” (Participant 2, 21 years).

Analysis- Participant two's response shows how elder daughters behaviour is towards their younger siblings. They act as younger siblings teachers, and display parenting behaviour.

Contributing Financially

Elder daughters, especially those who have completed their education or are in the process of completing their education, are also expected by their families to contribute financially to their households. Many of them feel that this is an unspoken expectation or something that is subtly hinted to them during daily conversations.

“.....Being the first child, there is always this expectation to contribute financially. This is subtly manifested by family members talking about the future, like me

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working and earning enough to look after myself and my family”(Participant 3, 22 years).

Analysis- Participant three’s response shows that elder daughters do face the expectation of getting a job in the future and contributing financially to the family’s needs. This however is not openly discussed to the elder daughter, instead they subtly indicate it as an expectation that the participant has to fulfill in the future, once their education is completed.

“.....My family wanted me to manage the financial aspects as they firmly believed it would help me to use finance efficiently.....”(Participant 4, 24 years).

Analysis- Participant four’s response revealed that families tend to place the financial responsibility on elder daughters. This aids them in developing skills to use finances properly.

Being a Role Model

Many participants stated about the responsibility of being the role model to their younger siblings placed upon them by their families.

“..... And while I was with the younger brothers, whatever the steps I do, I need to be very careful because the way I'm choosing will be their path in their life to be a role model.....”(Participant 4, 24 years).

Analysis- Participant four’s response revealed that elder daughters have to be cautious regarding any decision they take for themselves. This is due to elder daughters being assigned the responsibility of being role models for their younger siblings. Firstborn daughters have to be careful about what they decide as their younger siblings could set them as an example and follow a similar path.

“.....I can't do that whatever I like... because of that I don't have any friends, nor I've any social life, my life is just being a responsible, good, eldest sister and a daughter, who has to definitely be a good and perfect role model”(Participant 5, 18 years).

Analysis- Participant five’s response revealed that elder daughters sometimes cannot have their own free will to do things they like, as they have to be perfect role models for their younger sibling. Due to this, they tend to miss out on their social lives, as being a role model places a considerable amount of restrictions on them.

Theme 2: Psycho-social stressors faced by Indian elder daughters

The result of the study indicated about several psychosocial stressors faced by firstborn daughters while engaging in domestic responsibilities. The following sub themes were identified from analysis

Role Overload

Several participants stated that they were handling multiple tasks at the same time. These tasks involved household and care-giving duties, studies, and work. Participants stated that during the times they were not able to perform all these tasks efficiently, they felt bad about themselves.

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“.....There was a time I took on too much in my plate and I couldn't handle it. And I ended up feeling so horrible that I had to give up all of it. So I didn't do any of the things that I wanted to do. I just took too much more than I could handle.” (Participant 6, 21 years).

Analysis- Participant six's response revealed that firstborn daughters tends to experience role overload from trying to balance different responsibilities. They end up feeling overwhelmed from too many tasks and feel dejected when they are able to not perform them well in time.

“..... I always feel overwhelmed because trust me, it's too difficult to handle household duties, studies, work and personal life, it disturbed you mentally, physically, but still because we love our family so we do always take care of our family.....” (Participant 5, 18 years).

Analysis- Participant five's response revealed that firstborn daughters find it difficult to manage household duties and their personal lives. However they still commit to these tasks because they love their families.

Cultural Expectations

Participants had also agreed that there are certain cultural expectations placed upon them, to fulfill their duties. They do however, feel that these cultural expectations should not be placed on elder daughters alone.

“.....Yes I do agree to that there are cultural expectations that are put upon us elder daughters of each and every family. The older I got the more I realized that us girls are not the only ones who are supposed to feel obliged to these expectations.....” (Participant 7, 22 years).

Analysis- Participant seven's response reveals that there are several cultural expectations placed upon elder daughters of every family. However, they feel that these expectations are not only just placed on them, but others as well.

“..... it falls to the elder daughter to act like an elder son. And when they failed to meet such expectations because they were not socialized to actually behave like a man. And there is no winning really.” (Participant 8, 22 years).

Analysis- Participant eight's response shows that there is a cultural expectation placed on firstborn daughter that not only involves care-giving duties, and household chores but also to take over tasks within the family that is similar to the tasks of an elder son, especially in homes where they have no elder sons. Balancing these expectations are difficult and failure to meet these expectations would end up getting them criticism.

Theme 3: Psychological Impact

The result of the study analyzed the psychological impact of the identified psycho-social stressors on Indian elder daughters. Balancing several roles, such as care-giving, parenting, finances and other cultural expectations could lead to several psychological problems in these individuals. The following themes and sub-themes have been identified from analysing the given data.

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Stress, Anxiety and Burnout

Since eldest daughters have several responsibilities to perform, they have the tendency to feel stress, anxiety and burnout quite frequently.

“.....I personally feel like affects my life in general. I do get tired easily, mentally and physically. I get disturbed occasionally during study hours; not by her but by other family members to do chores or to give a helping hand. It increases my stress levels, thus making me feel anxious 24/7 and on edge constantly; making my mental health decline” (Participant 8, 22 years).

Analysis- Participant eight's response revealed that elder daughters feel overwhelmed and sometimes the task of achieving their personal goals get disturbed due to other responsibilities. This makes them feel stressed out and on the edge constantly.

“.....I have felt stressed out many times to the point I wanted a break from everything as I was feeling very burnt out. I usually keep problems to myself.....” (Participant 9, 21 years).

Analysis- Participant nine's response revealed that firstborn daughters do feel stressed out or feel burnout from time to time. They tend to keep their problems to themselves as well, and deal with it alone rather than seeking help.

Coping Skills

The study also analysed the coping skills firstborn daughters undertake to manage their stress levels and burnout. Several participants revealed to engage in poor coping strategies. They may engage in suppression of feelings instead of venting out in a healthy manner, and some engaged in behaviours of self-harm and alcohol abuse. Firstborn daughters who had supportive families and siblings had better coping strategies compared to those who did not.

“.....These negative emotions and thoughts are intense to the point where, its hard to explain, but I do have intense urge to be very violent to the person(s). but due to social desirability, I suppress it and I tend to inflict those emotions on myself or I try my best to cry it out.....” (Participant 10, 22 years).

Analysis- Participant ten's response reveals that negative emotions and feelings are extremely intense to the point that they experience thoughts of violent rage. However they suppress these emotions and cry it out to vent their emotions.

“..... I have turned to vapes and alcohol for relief. Self harm too. But I am currently on the journey to change them by exercising and like simple as climbing up the stairs to get some anger out. I also like to rash drive.....” (Participant 8, 22 years).

Analysis- Participant eight's response reveals that negative emotions and feelings which are suppressed by elder daughters tend to make them prone to problematic behaviours such as self harm, alcohol abuse to vent out their frustration.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this highlights the unique challenges faced by elder daughters in Indian families. By examining their roles, psycho-social stressors, and psychological impacts, the

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study provides critical insights into how traditional family dynamics and cultural expectations shape their lived experiences.

This research highlights the multifaceted roles, responsibilities, and challenges faced by elder daughters in Indian families, revealing significant psycho-social and psychological impacts shaped by cultural and familial expectations. The findings of this study revealed that elder daughters bear significant care-giving and household responsibilities, often expected to support siblings and elderly family members. These roles, though fulfilling in some cases, frequently come at a personal cost. Elder daughters often assist siblings academically and act as surrogate parents (Participant 2), while financial responsibilities emerge subtly, shaping their long-term goals and personal development (Participant 3). The responsibility of being a role model adds further complexity, requiring elder daughters to restrict personal freedoms to maintain an exemplary standard for younger siblings (Participant 5). Participants indicated a strong alignment with Role Theory, as their familial position dictated expectations of care-giving, financial contributions, and acting as role models (Biddle, 1986; Goode, 1960).

The participant's experiences also align with the Family Systems Theory, which explains how interdependent family roles impact individual behaviors and stress levels. Elder daughters' centrality in the family system often leads to overburdening, as they navigate the delicate balance between familial obligations and personal aspirations. The study also reveals that the convergence of household, care-giving, and financial expectations frequently results in role overload. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by multiple tasks, often leading to mental and physical exhaustion (Participant 6) (Haefner, 2014).

The socio-cultural expectations tied to their role exacerbate the stress, with many elder daughters assuming responsibilities traditionally associated with elder sons in families without male siblings (Participant 8). These stressors underline the pervasive impact of cultural norms in shaping elder daughters' experiences, often leading to feelings of guilt and inadequacy when they fail to meet these demands. Additionally, Stress and Coping Theory can be used to frame these experiences. While some participants demonstrated adaptive coping strategies, such as focusing on familial love as motivation (Participant 5), others reported maladaptive strategies, including self-harm and substance use (Participant 8). These findings highlight the need for a supportive family structure to mitigate stress and promote healthier coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The psycho-social stressors faced by elder daughters manifest in significant psychological challenges, including stress, anxiety, and burnout. Participants frequently reported feeling perpetually "on edge" due to the unrelenting demands of their role (Participant 8). The inability to balance personal and familial responsibilities leads to suppressed emotions, isolation, and unhealthy coping strategies (Participant 9). This highlights the long-term psychological toll of familial role expectations and cultural norms.

Participants with supportive families exhibited better emotional regulation and constructive coping skills, emphasizing the importance of familial support systems in alleviating psychological distress. The study underscores the importance of addressing the unique pressures faced by elder daughters through family counseling, workshops, and societal interventions. Encouraging equitable distribution of household responsibilities and

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challenging gendered cultural norms can help mitigate the psycho-social and psychological challenges experienced by elder daughters.

Limitations

The sample size used in this study is relatively small, comprising of only 10 individuals, falling under the age ranges of 18-30 years. Since the sample size is relatively small, it may not exactly be representative of the opinions of the vast population in the country. Therefore, there is a lack of diverse answers and opinions on the topic.

The study also has a limited number of themes and sub themes, though the study has brought up the key findings of psycho-social stressors which influences Indian firstborn daughter's mental health. However, the study did not delve into other likely factors such as Dysfunctional families, educational pressure, Sibling dynamics, and Marriage pressure.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study points out the multiple responsibilities that the eldest daughters feel they need to assume within their families; these responsibilities which range from caregiving to direct contributions toward family needs and to the service as role models for their younger siblings. Their roles subjected them to other psycho-social stressors such as role overload and cultural expectations that could drastically impact their mental well-being, imparting anxiety, stress, and burnout. These further lead to maladaptive coping strategies at present, which at times could be alleviated through family cohesion.

The conclusions drawn underscore how vital it has become to rethink family and cultural norms of assigning responsibilities. Open communication between family members and positive support and encouragement from them should lessen the burden placed on elder daughters. Secondly, mental health interventions, for example, counseling and stress groups, should become within reach of this population. Finally, future studies could track longitudinal effects of these experiences and interventions on the well-being of elder daughters from similar cultures.

Through this research, one elucidates a very firm basis within which gender, family roles, and mental health related; that is, for systemic and cultural transformation to take place, so as to empower the elder daughters into comfortable positions and protect their health.

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Conflict of Interest

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