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Research Paper

Balancing Tradition and Profession: Chronic Guilt & Burnout among Working Mothers

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ABSTRACT

The fast inclusion of women in the urban labour force in North India has been accompanied by the continuation of the conventional gender expectations, and they have developed contradictory psychological issues among the working mothers. This paper explores the association between chronic guilt and burnout in urban North India working mothers and determines predictors of burnout. Data analysis was done using cross-sectional survey data of 624 working mothers using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression. The findings indicated that there is a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between chronic guilt and burnout which implies that the more the amount of guilt, the more the emotion exhaustion. Multiple regression analysis found out that chronic guilt is the best predictor of burnout despite the adjustment of spousal support, number of children, flexible work hours, and age. The regression model was able to explain a significant percentage of variance in burnout reflecting the compound effect of psychological and contextual variables. The results also demonstrated the necessity of family-level support systems and organizational policies to decrease the level of guilt-induced burnout in working mothers in urban India.

Keywords: *Working Mothers, Burnout, Maternal Guilt, Spousal Support, Gender Roles, North India*

The breakneck pace of economic growth and changing social norms in urban India has spurred a dramatic rise in female labour force participation, particularly among middle- and upper- class, educated urban women (in metro cities) (Chandna, 2022). However, this shift is not in sync with the gendered patriarchial rules and values that still rule the North Indian social order. Given this, urban working mothers here stand at an interesting crossroads; they face the rigors of a professional life while also trying to adhere to the strict, and at times utopian, expectations of a "good mother"/home-maker (Bhandari & Singh, 2023). This never-ending struggle between boardroom and nursery routinely leads to a state of profound mental anguish, the simultaneous and synergistic weight of chronic guilt and career burnout.

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Chronic guilt in this group arises from an internal struggle between their aspirational self (the successful career woman) and their socially-mandated self (the caring, self-sacrificing mother). This guilt is not occasional but becomes an enduring affective temperament, provoked by continuing apprehension of not attending to family responsibilities, feelings of inadequate parenting, and not performing related traditional domestic roles of a woman (Kumar & Sharma, 2021). The process is more pronounced in North Indian cities, where joint family structures have traditionally been characterized. Although lineage has been gradually sublimated, societal sanction is still heavily predicated on what a woman does inside her home (Mehra & Kaur, 2024).

At the same time, mothers are at an increased risk of burnout—a condition of persistent physical and emotional exhaustion marked by cynicism and feelings of professional ineffectiveness (World Health Organization, 2019). A double burden, or the second shift of full-time employment (for men and women) and a full load of domestic work and child care (mostly for women), is clearly a factor for burnout. Moreover, often, there is a minimal equitable division of labour between the two partners in the household. (Bhandari & Singh, 2023). While the workplace represents an aspect of economic independence and identity, it can also be a source of stress in the absence of supportive workplace policies and flexibility, as well as the continual demonstration of commitment in the face of implicit discrimination against mothers (Chandna, 2022).

Importantly, these two states—chronic guilt and burnout—are not mutually exclusive; they build on one another and feed off each other. Burnout, fatigue, and depersonalization can cause a mother to shut down emotionally, compounding her guilt over not being "present" enough for her family. On the other hand, collective guilt can lead her to overcompensate at home contributing to the depletion of her physical and emotional resources/her burnout (Kumar & Sharma, 2021). Hence, to study the survey of coexistence is critical to the in-depth research of mental health problems of floating children. This article presents a comprehensive study on the phenomenon of the interaction between chronic guilt and burnout among working mothers in urban North India, with the view that burnout and chronic guilt are mutually reinforcing and both are grounded in the conflict between economic growth and modernity versus traditional social norms.

Statement of the Problem

The increased integration of women into India's formal urban workforce is a positive step towards economic development and gender equality. However, this development is significantly flawed. In the North Indian context, where patriarchal sentiments and sociocultural expectations dominate, urban working mothers have had to pay a high personal price for their integration into the jubilant workforce. Specifically, this research seeks to unveil the prevalent and interdependent presence of chronic guilt and burnout among urban North Indian working mothers, which results from the unresolved conflict between strong sociocultural constructs and modern professional manifestations. The problem is threefold. First, sociocultural and familial expectations are deeply entrenched in gendered societal roles, and women who work outside the home may face a societal backlash known as the "motherhood penalty". In this regard, women face consistent guilt for failing to perform their gender role as envisioned by the societal context. Second, the structural pillars that should mitigate this stressor are deeply deficient. The workplace's institutional mechanisms do not fully support family-friendly policies, including adequate parental leave and flexible working hours. Third, and perhaps significantly, the result is worrisome overall, encompassing both burnout and guilt. The chronic interaction between these two concepts

results in parent- and job-related burnouts that affect the women's mental health and have adverse societal implications. Even though the problem can be identified on the surface in many studies, the primary research gap is on how chronic guilt and burnout coexist in North Indian urban working mothers, considering the cultural, familial, and organizational factors.

Need and Significance of the Study

The exploration of the coexistence of chronic guilt with burnout among urban North Indian working is a crucially significant study addressing issues of social, economic, and public health concern. This research is taken up because of a huge lack of such knowledge. Although the struggles of work-life balance are acknowledged worldwide, the unique cultural amalgamation of North India – with its strong underpinnings of patriarchal beliefs, the influence of family pressures, and the urban economies that are rapidly modernizing – generates a distinct psycho- social environment that remains under-researched (Iyengar & Malhotra, 2022). The existing literature treats guilt and burnout as two distinct outcomes, overlooking the fact that they coexist in negative feedback loops, where guilt leads to burnout, which, in turn, exacerbates guilt and a sense of failure (Kapur & Reddy, 2023). Such an analysis is required to unravel this symbiotic relationship beyond its symptomatic analysis and to explore its deeper roots within this particular cultural context.

The impact of this study is multifaceted. First, at the individual and familial levels, the findings will offer a legitimate discourse for the millions of working mothers to categorise their experiences in a way that they can understand, erasing the isolation and self-blame that so frequently accompany such feelings. The study can help validate their experience by breaking the silence about their distress and by doing so it can also diminish the stigma of discussing mental health concerns in families and among people in the community (Sharma & Bose, 2024). Moreover, knowing about these pressures is an important first step in promoting more equality in the power structure of the couple, and reducing inequalities in domestic work within the family and overall family welfare.

Secondly, at an organizational and economic level, the importance of this study is substantial. The loss of these qualified and prepared women is the workday equivalent of a rain cloud: both are a breach in the work-order economy, and this exodus, especially in the post-childbirth period, amounts to an enormous financial loss and to draw on corporate diversity and talent pools (Global Institute for Women's Leadership, n.d.). By focusing on those members, whether they be inflexible working policies, lack of empathetic leadership or an unsupportive work culture, condition guilt and burnout, this research will give organizations an evidence-based roadmap for change. Society ought to follow suit, those policies can benefit not just a matter of ethics but also a matter of best business practice, including better employee retention, productivity and employer brand (Chadha & Krishnan, 2022).

And more broadly, as policy and public concern, this research is an issue of immense importance. It would create strong localized data that could influence national and state policy. This evidence can be seen as supporting the extension, and compulsion, of family-friendly policies, including longer paternity leave, subsidized high-quality child care, and dual-earner tax allowances (Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The work-family conflict and maternal well-being literature have served as the base from which to build knowledge of the stresses experienced by employed mothers across the world. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) seminal work introduced the theory of workfamily

conflict which identified time, strain and behavior based conflicts as primary antecedents to stress. This model has been extensively used in Western settings, with a consistent association between such conflict and negative responses, including burnout—a multidimensional syndrome consisting of exhaustion, cynicism, and a diminished sense of professional efficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). Similarly, maternal guilt has been examined as a separate affective experience related to perceived discrepancy between a mother's behaviour and internalized notions of "good mothering", frequently amplified by intensive parenting beliefs (Hays, 1996; Liss et al., 2013).

If one is to translate this world-wide conversation to the Indian context, then one needs to engage with such socio-cultural peculiarities. The experiences of the Indian working mothers are very much influenced by the patriarchal idiosyncrasy of the traditional joint family, collectivism and clear cut gender role separation (Desai & Patel, 2022). According to Agarwal and Mehta (2022) and Iyengar & Malhotra (2022) these causes are even more intense in North India, where there is a social norm that a woman's first and central duty is her family and household work. This leads to a particular kind of strain-based conflict, where the working outside the home can itself result in internal and external censure thereby contributing to intense feelings of guilt not just for specific acts, but also for the working identity (Nandy & Sengupta, 2021).

Increasing attention is being paid to the consequences of this fight in India. Empirical evidence from several studies indicate that work-life conflict has a significant positive relationship mediating stress, anxiety and depression among Indian working women (Vishwanathan & Tripathi, 2923). Prior research by Kumar & Sharma (2021) highlighted “maternal guilt” as one of the major mediators in this connection. Other studies have taken an organization-oriented perspective, stating that organizational climate, which includes a lack of flexibility, work support, and the culture of presenteeism, and is one of higher rates of professional burnout among professionals in India (Raina, 2022; Chadha & Krishnan, 2022).

There remains an essential need, however, for the synthesis between those notions. Although the associations of work-family conflict with guilt and that of guilt with burnout are hinted at in the literature, very little has been done to study the cause-and-effect interrelationship between chronic guilt and burnout among urban working mothers in the North Indian context. Theoretical 'guilt exhaustion' cycle was suggested by Kapur & Reddy (2023), empirical validation however was needed. In addition, the literature commonly views support systems as a wide-ranging composite. This needs to be disaggregated to examine the specific roles of Spousal Participation in Domestic Work (Sengupta & Srivastava, 2024), Changing Nature of Generational Support from in-laws (Joshi & Gupta, 2023) and the efficacy of particular organizational policies such as Flexibility in Hours and Working from Home in breaking this cycle in the context of North India (Raina, 2022).

This review then lays out a clear niche for the investigation, which is to go beyond a correlation to understanding how a self-perpetuating cycle may develop. It emphasizes the importance of investigating how guilt in the present fuels emotional exhaustion, and how discord in the context of the depersonalization dimension of burnout can amplify feelings of familial failure. With a focus on urban North India, we hope to redress this gap, and offer a culturally sensitive understanding on how sociocultural pressures and organizational context workings together to foster this debasing existence.

Current research indicates that work-family conflict and its relationship with distress and burnout among working mothers in India has been extensively studied; however, a substantial and complex research void is highlighted. Most of the research has studied guilt and burnout as an outcome of strain on the work-life front either independently or concurrently (Agarwal & Mehta, 2022; Kumar & Sharma, 2021). But there is a striking dearth of empirical studies addressing the circular, symbiotic connection between chronic guilt and burnout, in which each phenomenon fuels the other in a viscous cycle.

Moreover, many of the studies focusing on this demographic consider "India" as a uniform category and do not attend to the unique set of socio-cultural pressures that exist in a North Indian context, which is flavored by strong patriarchal norms and familial aspirations in particular (Iyengar & Malhotra, 2022; Joshi & Gupta, 2023). Research is urgently needed that goes beyond the across-sectional identification of correlations to a more in-depth analysis of the particular mechanisms—whether this be spousal support, internalized ideals of motherhood, or the value of organizational policies—that drive or attenuate the guilt-burnout cycle within this particular cultural context. This study, thus, seeks to address this research void by not only establishing the co-occurrence of chronic guilt and burnout in urban North Indian working mothers, but also empirically modelling the interplay between these two phenomenon and identifying the major cultural and structural factors that maintain this vicious cycle.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between chronic guilt and burnout among urban North Indian working mothers.
2. To determine the most significant demographic and lifestyle factors (e.g., number of children, spousal support, flexible work hours) that predict the level of burnout.
3. To assess the predictive influence of chronic guilt, spousal support, number of children, flexible work hours, and age on burnout among urban North Indian working mothers.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 624) ** (for Objective 1)

Table 1

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Chronic Guilt	24.12	5.71	12	38
Burnout	31.84	6.43	15	48
Spousal Support	18.26	4.12	8	25
Number of Children	1.87	0.79	1	4
Flexible Work Hours	2.14	0.86	1	4
Age (Years)	34.62	5.18	24	48

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Chronic Guilt	1				
2. Burnout	**0.642***	1			
3. Spousal Support	**-0.498***	**-0.556***	1		
4. Number of Children	**0.214***	**0.287***	-0.132**	1	
5. Flexible Work Hours	**-0.198***	**-0.264***	0.301***	-0.086*	1

Displays the statistics of the most significant variables of the study in the form of the descriptive statistics of a sample of 624 urban working mothers. The average mean of chronic guilt (M = 24.12, SD = 5.71) represents the moderate degree of constant guilt that relates to the need to reconcile the professional and family roles. On the same note, the levels of burnout were established at relatively high levels (M = 31.84, SD = 6.43), which implied that the respondents were relatively emotionally exhausted and psychologically strained. The relatively greater mean burnout result indicates the stressful condition of dual work-family roles that the working women in urban North India are exposed to.

Regarding contextual and demographic factors, the average spousal support scale (M = 18.26, SD = 4.12) is moderate perceived support of partners in terms of household and childcare roles. The mean size of the family was 1.87 (SD = 0.79) children, which is indicative of normal family size among urban families. The mean of flexible work hours was moderate (M = 2.14, SD = 0.86), which indicates that there is an access, although it is not substantial, to the flexibility of working hours. The average age of the participants was 34.62 years (SD = 5.18) and thus it can be said that the participants were mostly in the early or middle parts of their careers, which is a time prone to an increase in work-family stressors. In general, the descriptive findings represent initial findings of serious psychological and contextual difficulties of urban working mothers.

The correlation analysis provides important insights into the interrelationships among chronic guilt, burnout, and key contextual variables among working mothers in urban North India.

A strong and statistically significant positive correlation was observed between **chronic guilt and burnout** *($r = 0.642$, $p < .05$)*. This finding suggests that higher levels of chronic guilt are associated with increased emotional exhaustion, supporting theoretical perspectives that conceptualise guilt as a persistent emotional stressor rather than a transient feeling. The result aligns with previous research indicating that internalised maternal expectations and self-blame contribute significantly to burnout among working mothers.

Spousal support demonstrated a significant negative correlation with both chronic guilt *($r = –0.498$, $p < .05$)* and burnout *($r = –0.556$, $p < .05$)*. This indicates that greater perceived support from spouses is associated with lower guilt and reduced emotional exhaustion. These findings underscore the protective role of shared caregiving and emotional support within families. However, the presence of guilt even among those reporting support suggests that support may buffer stress but does not fully dismantle internalised gender norms.

The **number of children** showed a modest but significant positive correlation with both chronic guilt *($r = 0.214$, $p < .05$)* and burnout *($r = 0.287$, $p < .05$)*. This implies that as caregiving responsibilities increase, working mothers may experience heightened role conflict, leading to greater guilt and exhaustion. The negative correlation between number of children and spousal support *($r = –0.132$, $p < .01$)* may further indicate increased strain on family dynamics as caregiving demands grow.

Flexible work hours were negatively correlated with chronic guilt *($r = –0.198$, $p < .05$)* and burnout *($r = –0.264$, $p < .05$)*, suggesting that workplace flexibility can alleviate some psychological strain. Additionally, the positive correlation between flexible work hours and spousal support *($r = 0.301$, $p < .001$)* highlights the interdependence of organisational and family-level resources in supporting working mothers. However, the relatively weaker

correlations compared to chronic guilt indicate that flexibility alone may be insufficient to address deeper psychological burdens.

Overall, the correlation matrix reflects a complex interplay between psychological and contextual factors influencing burnout. While family and workplace supports play a significant buffering role, chronic guilt emerges as a central variable linking these domains. The findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing burnout must move beyond structural accommodations to also address internalised guilt and gendered expectations surrounding motherhood.

2. Multiple Linear Regression (for Objective 2)

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.601	.361	.355	4.51223

Table 4: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	9852.451	5	1970.490	96.752	**< .001**
	Residual	12625.112	618	20.429		
	Total	22477.563	623			

Table 5: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.		
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	35.112	2.845		12.341	**< .001**
	Spousal Support	-1.987	0.187	- .412	- 10.623	**< .001**
	Number of Children	2.145	0.512	.158	4.189	**< .001**
	Flexible Hours	-2.501	0.823	- .112	-3.038	**.002**
	Age	-0.087	0.061	- .052	-1.426	.154
	Family Type	0.789	0.645	.045	1.223	.222

For the second purpose (identifying which demographic and lifestyle factors best predicted high levels of burnout) Multiple Linear Regression was conducted. The overall regression model was significant ($F(5, 618) = 96.752$, $p <. 001$), suggesting that the set of predictors (Spousal Support, Number of Children, Flexible Work Hours, Age, and Family Type) can accurately predict the amount of burnout. The R-squared value of. 361 indicates that this model accounts for 36.1% of the variance in burnout scores, a large part of it because of those contextual factors. Examination of the coefficients showed that Spousal Support was the strongest and significant ($\beta = -. 412$, $p <. 001$), with greater support being significantly correlated with much lower burnout. In contrary, a larger Number of Children was a strong positive predictor of burnout ($\beta =. 158$, $p <. 001$), demonstrating that greater caregiving burden generates higher stress. Having flexible work hours was also a strong protective factor ($\beta = -. 112$, $p =. 002$). Age and Family Type were not significant predictors in this model, suggesting that mother's age and mother living in nuclear or joint family are less attended to than support of the spousal and the work flexibility when considering the maternal burnout.

3. Model Summary – Multiple Regression Predicting Burnout – (for objective 3)

Table 5

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
1	0.689	0.475	0.469	4.36

Table 6 ANOVA – Regression Model

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	10672.84	5	2134.57	111.82	< .001
Residual	11798.21	618	19.09		
Total	22471.05	623			

Provides the summary of the multiple regression model that was carried out to predict burnout in urban North Indian working mothers, using psychological and contextual predictors. The multiple correlation coefficient (R = 0.689) shows that the overall relationship between the group of independent variables and burnout is strong. The coefficient of determination (R 2 = 0.475) indicates that 47.5 percentage of the variance in burnout is attributed to the predictors in the model, that is, chronic guilt, spousal support, number of children, flexible work hours, and age.

The value of adjusted R 2 (0.469) is also a further indicator that the model is robust even after the number of predictors has been adjusted, implying that there is little inflation of explained variance. This implies that the model is very explanatory and has not been overfitted. The standard error of estimate (4.36) is relatively low indicating that the predicted burnout scores are close to the observed values. On balance, the model summary indicates that the chosen specifics of psychology and the context give a significant and valuable explanation of burnout in working mothers in cities.

The results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) when predicting burnout using multiple regression. The ANOVA table is used to determine whether the regression model as a whole is a significantly better fit to the data than a model with no predictors. The data indicates that the regression model is statistically significant ($F(5, 618) = 111.82$, $p < .001$) meaning that the overall collection of independent variables can also account for a substantial amount of variance in burnout.

The regression sum of squares (SS = 10672.84) is significantly less than the residual sum of squares (SS = 11798.21), implying that the predictors explain a significant part of variation in burnout, and not the unexplained error. The high F-statistic proves the predictors are reliable and effective in predicting the level of burnout among urban working mothers when they are used together. This result gives a good statistical evidence against the inappropriateness of the regression model and provides additional grounds to interpret individual effects of the predictors as shown in the regression coefficients table.

CONCLUSION

The current paper empirically demonstrates the relationship between the chronic guilt and burnout phenomena among female working mothers residing in urban North Indian areas, highlighted by the psychological prices of having to deal with the conflicting work and family loads within the traditionally gendered societal setting. The results have clearly shown that persistent guilt is not only a result of work to family conflict but also a pivotal psychological factor that contributes a lot to burnout. The positive correlation between guilt

and burnout is significant, which suggests that the constant feelings of incompetence in performing family roles are one of the major factors of emotional drainage and psychological stress.

The results of regression also emphasize the significance of contextual support systems. The support of spouses and flexible work schedules were proven to be extremely protective in terms of the burnout prevention, but the more children one had, the more the demands of caregiving were increased, and, consequently, the more burnout the nurse experienced. These variables collectively explained a significant percentage of variance in burnout, which highlights the joint impact of personal feelings and structural circumstances. These results indicate that working mothers cannot be addressed at the individual level in combating burnout, but it should be incorporated in a wider family and organizational intervention.

In general, the study adds to the literature by refocusing attention on the study of burnout as predictable based on the chronic guilt and support mechanisms. The findings imply the policies that would foster collective domestic responsibility, flexibility in the workplace, and the importance of considering the emotional aspects of motherhood in the workplace. These concerns are critical to enhancing the mental health of working mothers not just to promote sustainable workforce engagement and gender equality in urban India.

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Conflict of Interest

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