

Navigating Stress and Mental Health among Female College Students: A Comparative Study of Marital Status and Rural–Urban Residential Background

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ABSTRACT

The mental health and well-being of college-going girls are a critical area of concern, as they face many stressors during this phase of life. The aim of the research is to explore the relationship between mental health and stress among college-going girls. Using purposive sampling, 100 college-going girls were selected from various government colleges in the district of Bhojpur, Bihar. Further, the sample was divided into two groups based on marital status: married (N=50) and unmarried (N=50). For data collection, the Stress Scale, developed by Dr. M. Singh (2002), was used to assess the level of stress, and the Mental Health Scale, developed by Dr. Kamlesh Sharma (2002), was used to evaluate the overall mental health of the participants. Correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between stress and mental health, and a Student t-test was used to compare the levels of stress and mental health between married and unmarried groups. The results showed a significant negative correlation between stress and mental health among overall college-going girls, an Insignificant negative correlation between stress and mental health among married girls, and a significant negative correlation between stress and mental health among unmarried girls. Further, a significant mean difference was found between married and unmarried college-going girls on the variables stress and mental health.

Keywords: *Mental Health, Stress, Married-Unmarried girls, College Students*

Stress is a natural response of the body towards the challenges you have in your life, which make you feel threatened and upset in life. It can be defined as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing a spectrum of physical, emotional, and psychological responses triggered by various factors, such as personal relationships, friends, family, the workplace, and demands for attention or action. It is a pervasive experience, with individuals experiencing stress to varying degrees. How an individual responds to stress plays a pivotal role in influencing their overall well-being and mental health (Scott, 2024).

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Stress can be categorized into four major categories like acute stress, chronic stress, episodic acute stress, and eustress. Acute stress is a short-term but intense type of stress. It occurs when a traumatic and upsetting unexpected event occurs suddenly in our life, for example a car accident, an assault, a natural disaster, etc. This is called a temporary stress; such type of stress triggers immediate physical and emotional reactions. Chronic stress is a long-term stress that we experience in our day-to-day life because of ongoing bad situations and unnecessary pressure. It can take a year to develop and have a severe effect on our health and well-being. Episodic acute stress is a type of stress that happens frequently and becomes a regular part of someone's life. It can be because of recurring issues like continuous domestic violence, child abuse, poor health, such kinds of stress don't go away easily and keep coming back & making our life very stressful. Eustress is known as a positive type of stress that is beneficial and motivates anyone toward their goal. It fills you with new energy and enhances your focus, encourages personal growth and development. Such a kind of stress you can feel when you start a new business, plan for a wedding, or prepare for a big presentation. It helps you to accomplish challenges and leads to a feeling of satisfaction.

Students represent a distinct demographic undergoing one of the most critical phases of life. During this period, they encounter numerous stressful events that significantly impact their development as well as their well-being. The challenges they face are unique to this transitional stage, making it a pivotal time for their personal and academic growth (Asif et al., 2020). If we compare the challenges of today's college students with a decade ago, we come to know that today's college students face more complex challenges. Common stressors include increased academic demands, adapting to a new environment, and changes in family relationships. These factors contribute to a heightened level of stress and complexity in their lives (Kumaraswamy, 2013).

According to WHO (2022), Mental health is a state of well-being where one can handle life's stressors effectively, recognize and use their ability effectively, recognize & use their potential, and work productively.

Factors Affecting Mental Health

Many factors can impact our mental health, such as physical health, diet, sleeping patterns, traumatic experiences, abuse, domestic violence, genetic mental health problems, poverty, family conflict, neglectful behaviour, excessive stress, etc. We can classify these into biological factors, psychological factors, and social factors.

Biological Factors

Biological factors such as physical health have a significant impact on mental health. Physical health is closely linked to mental well-being as chronic disease, injuries, and physical conditions give strain to the mind and body and lead to mental health problems (Doan et al., 2023). Diet also impacts mental health as a balanced diet keeps us physically healthy, which is linked to mental health. The sleeping pattern can lead to anxiety and depression; a sound sleep has a significant impact on emotional regulation, cognitive performance, and overall mental stability. Hereditary mental health problems can increase the risk of developing a mental health disorder. Lastly, age is a factor that affects mental health differently across the life span; such as adolescents might face issues related to identity and peer pressure, whereas older adults might experience mental health challenges related to loneliness and cognitive decline.

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Psychological Factors

Psychological factors such as traumatic experiences, abuse, and excessive stress significantly impact mental health. Traumatic experiences, events like natural disasters, war, or personal assaults, have been associated with mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Bodziak et al., 2021). Danga et al. (2023) found that the refugees who were exposed to traumatic events exhibited a high level of anxiety and depression. Abuse during childhood has a worse and long-lasting impact on mental health (Xiao Z.,2021).

Social Factors

Social factors such as domestic violence, poverty, family conflict, neglectful behaviour, work environment, and financial instability significantly lead to severe emotional distress, anxiety, and depression, which significantly impact the mental health of a person.

According to the “Student Health and Wellness Survey, 56% of students reported that they have experienced chronic stress during college days”, which is a significant contributor to students’ mental health. Chronic stress can negatively impact academic performance and decrease academic achievement (Flaherty,2023). The percentage of students who are experiencing mental health problems has increased nearly 50% since 2013 (Lipson, Sara Ketchen et al., 2022). According to the National Healthy Mind study, 60% of college students reported mental health problems (Eisenberg D. et al., 2022).

College life is full of exciting opportunities, new experiences, and personal growth, as well as has set of challenges that can create stress and disturb the mental health of students. There are lots of reasons why stress and mental health are important considerations for college-going girls. These are academic pressure, social pressure, worries about career and future, and balancing the responsibilities of home and college. Barbayannis et al. (2022) found that high academic stress is significantly associated with poor mental health. Academic stress significantly impacts the mental health of female students as compared to male students (Baiju M., Rajalakshmi, V. R., 2021).

Married college-going girls face many mental health challenges because of the dual pressure of academic and marital responsibilities. Balancing studies with household duties and marital expectations can lead to significant stress. There are many common stressors like time management, financial concerns, family concerns, and academic concerns. These stressors can negatively impact their psychological well-being, leading to anxiety, depression, and mental health issues (Shivani, Chaudhary, P., Randhawa, R.K.,2021).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shivani et al. (2021) systematically reviewed 40 articles on stress and coping among married female students. The PubMed/ Medline & Google Scholar search engine was used to review articles. Out of these 40 articles, 13 were reviewed, and based on the review concluded that married woman students were more stressed and using maladaptive coping mechanisms.

Asif S, Mudassar A, Shahzad T, et al. (2020) explored the frequency of depression, anxiety, and stress among university students in Sialkot, Pakistan. 500 students from GC Women's University were selected as a sample using a simple random sampling method. The study lasted 5 months, from February 2019 to June 2019. A demographic sheet and DASS–21 were used for data collection. The results show the frequency of depression, anxiety, and stress among university students is 75%, 88.4% and 84.4% respectively.

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Gupta & Tiwari (2019) investigated the mental health status of college-going youth. The sample was college-going 180 boys and 180 girls aged 19 to 20 years, taken through simple random sampling from government and private colleges. Results revealed that the majority of youth had good mental health and showed good emotional stability.

Chandrashekarappa S., Murthy N., Rama Krishnaiah M. et al. (2016) studied the prevalence of mental health disorders among adolescent girls and the association of mental disorder with various socio-demographic variables. 664 adolescent girls between 16 and 19 years old were selected as the sample. Mini-International Neuropsychiatric version 6.0 was used to collect data. The results indicate that among 664 adolescent girls, the overall prevalence of mental health was found to be 15.5%, with major depressive disorder was 37%, dysthymia 12.3%, panic disorder and social phobia 15.7%, post-traumatic stress disorder 10%, OCD 7.8%, and GAD 6.7%. A significant association was found between mental health and various socio-demographic variables.

Bhat & Majeed (2015) conducted a study to evaluate the mental health status and the relationship between mental health status and emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, self-concept, security, insecurity, and intelligence of college-going youth of Kashmir. The sample was 300 youths, of which 150 boys and 150 girls were selected through a stratified random sampling method from different colleges located in the Baramulla District of Kashmir. The mental health battery developed by Singh & Sen Gupta (1987) was used for data collection. The result shows that there is no significant relation that exists between mental health status and emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, self-concept, and security–insecurity dimensions of mental health.

Sharma & Kirmani (2015) examined depression and anxiety among college-going boys and girls. For data collection, the Beck Depression Inventory and the Beck Anxiety Inventory were used. By a convenient sampling method, data were collected in group settings. To analyse the data t-test was used. The results show that the girls have more symptoms of depression and anxiety as compared to boys. The finding also revealed that professional students reported more symptoms of depression and anxiety than the non-professional students.

Jagdale S. (2015) conducted a study to determine the prevalence of mental health problems in girls on a college campus. Based on a quota non-probability purposive sampling method, 60 girl students studying in six colleges and from three faculties, namely arts, science, and commerce, were taken as a sample. For data collection, the mental health battery scale was used. The result shows that more than two-fifths of the respondents have low mental health.

Kotar A.B. (2014) studied the difference in mental health between married and unmarried women. The N =60 women (30 married and 30 unmarried) were selected from Bhavnagar City. The mental health scale developed by Dr. A. K. Shrivastav and Dr. Jagdish (1983) was used for data collection. For data analysis t-test was used. The result showed a significant difference between married and unmarried women. The mental health of married women was good compared to unmarried women.

Mannadhan & Ganesan (2014) analysed and compared the level of stress, anxiety, and depression among the Tamilian and Non-Tamilian students of Pondicherry Central University with a sample of 243 students from different departments. To analyse the data, mean, ANOVA, Chi-square, Correspondence Analysis, cluster analysis, Correlation, and Multiple

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regression analysis were used. The result shows that non-Tamilian students have low stress, while the Tamilian non-hosteler students have a moderate level of stress, and Tamilian hosteler students have a high level of stress. Overall, the study reveals that anxiety highly contributes to stress among students.

Martin & Maheswari (2003) studied the prospective association between the socio-economic factors and mental health of adolescent school girls. 60 girls from St. Mary's Girls Higher Secondary School were taken randomly as a sample. For data collection mental health scale was developed by Paul G. Ritvo et al. (1997), and to collect the socio-demographic data, a semi-structured questionnaire was used. The major finding shows that 54% of the respondents had a low level of anxiety, 52% had a high level of depression, 56% had low behaviour control, and 54.6% had a low level of mental health.

Objectives:

1. To find out the relationship between stress and mental health among college-going girls.
2. To find out the relationship between stress and mental health among married college girls.
3. To find out the relationship between stress and mental health among unmarried college girls.
4. To find out the mean difference between married and unmarried college girls in stress.
5. To find out the mean difference between married and unmarried college girls in mental health.

Hypothesis:

1. There would be no significant relationship between stress and mental health among college-going girls.
2. There would be no significant relationship between stress and mental health among married girls.
3. There would be no significant relationship between stress and mental health among unmarried girls.
4. There would be no significant difference between married and unmarried girls in stress.
5. There would be no significant difference between married and unmarried girls in mental health.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling:

As the purpose of the study was to find out the relationship of stress with mental health among married and unmarried college-going girls, according to that, the purposive sampling method was used for data collection, A total of 100 female students of postgraduate age between 22 to 25year (mean age = 21 years) were selected as the sample from different Government Colleges of Bhojpur District in Bihar. Further, on the basis of marital status, the sample was divided into two groups: 50 married and 50 unmarried girls. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, procedures, and the confidentiality of their data. Only those participants were included who voluntarily agreed to participate. The participants who left the data collection in between were removed from the study.

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Tool:

- **The Stress scale** developed by Dr. M. Singh (2002) was used to assess the level of stress. It consists of 40 items. Each item has three alternative responses – “always”, “sometimes”, and “never”, respectively. The Concurrent Validity of the scale was 0.61, and the split-half reliability and test-retest reliability were 0.82 and 0.79, respectively. For scoring, 2 marks were given for “always”, 1 mark for “sometimes”, and zero marks for attempting “never”.
- **Mental health scale:** The scale developed by Dr (Smt.) Kamlesh Sharma (2002) was used to assess the level of Mental Health. There were 60 statements in the scale, of which 30 were positive and 30 were negative. Each item has three alternative responses: “yes”, “indefinite”, and “no”. The test, re-test, and split-half reliability were found to .86 and .88, respectively, and the concurrent validity was found .79. For scoring on 30 positive statements, 2 marks were allotted for “yes”, 1 mark for “indefinite”, and zero for attempting “no”. On 30 negative statements, 2 marks were given for attempting “no”, 1 mark for “indefinite”, and zero marks for “yes”.

Procedure & Statistical Analysis:

After establishing a good rapport with the participants, the instructions were given by the researcher as mentioned on the first page of the scale. The test was administered in an individual setting to unmarried girls and married girls. The scale was administered individually, and each student took an average of 45 minutes to complete it. The scoring was done as per the manual. After the data collection, Pearson correlation and t-test analysis were used to analyse the data with the help of SPSS version 20.

RESULT & INTERPRETATION

Table 1 Showing Correlation between Stress and Mental Health among Overall College-Going Girls (N = 100).

Variables	Stress	Mental health
Stress	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.271**
Mental health	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.271**

** Significant at the 0.01 level.

If we see Table 1, the correlation coefficient value for mental health and stress among college-going girls is -.271, which shows a significant negative correlation between mental health and stress ($P < .01$). Thus, the null hypothesis that there would be no significant relationship between stress and mental health among college-going girls is rejected.

Table 2 Showing Correlation between Stress and Mental Health among College-Going Married Girls (N=50).

Variables	Stress	Mental health
Stress	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.013
Mental health	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.013

NS = Not Significant

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We can see in Table 2 the correlation coefficient between mental health and stress among married girls is (-.013), which shows an insignificant relation ($P > .05$) between these two variables. Thus, according to the results, the null hypothesis that there would be no significant relationship between stress and mental health among married college-going girls is accepted.

Table 3 Showing Correlation between Stress and Mental Health among Unmarried College Girls(N=50).

Variables		Stress	Mental Health
Stress	Pearson Correlation	1	-.347*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.014
Mental Health	Pearson Correlation	-.347*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.014	

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3 shows the correlation coefficient between mental health and stress among unmarried girls is -.347. It indicates a significant negative correlation ($P < .05$) between these two variables, stress and mental health. This negative value indicates a moderate inverse correlation between stress and mental health among unmarried college girls. Thus, the null hypothesis that there would be no significant relationship between stress and mental health, and stress among unmarried girls, is rejected.

Table 4 Showing Mean Difference between Married and Unmarried College-Going Girls on Mental Health (N =100).

Variable	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t (98)	Sig
Mental health	Married	50	67.94	17.672	2.035*	.045
	Unmarried	50	61.42	14.183		

*Significant at .05 level

Table 4 shows the comparison of married and unmarried groups in the mental health variable. The mean score for married girls ($M = 67.94$, $S.D. = 17.672$) is higher than the mean score for unmarried girls, $M = 61.42$ ($S.D. = 14.183$). The statistical t value is 2.035, which shows a significant difference ($P < .05$) between the two groups. Thus, the null hypothesis, which states that there would be no significant difference between married and unmarried girls in mental health, is rejected.

Table 5 Showing Mean Difference between Married and Unmarried College-going Girls on Stress (N = 100)

Variable	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t(98)	Sig
Stress	Married	50	27.80	5.897	-13.033**	.000
	Unmarried	50	47.66	9.018		

The above table shows the comparison between married and unmarried groups on the variable stress. The mean score for married girls, $M = 27.80$ ($S.D. = 5.897$), is lower than the mean score for unmarried girls, $M = 47.66$ ($S.D. = 9.018$). The t value is 13.033, showing a highly significant mean difference ($P < .001$) between the two groups. Thus, the null hypothesis that there would be no significant difference between married and unmarried girls in stress is rejected.

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CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to find out the relationship between stress and mental health among college girls based on marital status. Results show a significant negative correlation between these two variables. Baiju M. & Rajalakshmi V R (2021) examined the academic stress & psychological well-being among college students and found a significant relation between academic stress and psychological well-being. Barbayannis et al. (2022) also found that higher academic stress worsens the mental health of college students. Chandrashekarappa S., Murthy N., Rama Krishnaiah M. et al. (2016) studied the prevalence of mental health disorders among adolescent girls & the association of mental disorders with various socio-demographic variables. The results show a significant association between mental health and stress. Hence, it concludes that stress negatively impacts the mental health of college girls; as one variable increases, the second one decreases. Further, a significant mean difference was found between married and unmarried girls on the variables stress and mental health. Kotar A.B. (2014) found a significant difference between married and unmarried women in mental health. The mental health of married women was good compared to unmarried women. In conclusion, the mental health of married girls is better than unmarried girls, and they are less stressed compared to unmarried girls. The reason behind it may be academic pressure, future uncertainty, career concerns, and lack of a support system. As married girls receive emotional and physical support from their spouse, they don't worry about their future and career.

Limitations

The data was collected from a limited sample, and only female participants were selected to participate. Future research could consider other demographic variables, such as family type, living area as rural /urban, and other genders, to increase the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between stress and mental health, it is suggested that future studies employ an experimental design.

Implications

The research indicates the need for a mental health support program and stress management workshop, particularly for unmarried college-going girls, as they experience a higher level of stress. Educational campaigns about mental health should be organised at the college. It can encourage seeking help and destigmatize mental health issues. Overall, this research highlights the need for a peer support and counselling program for unmarried college-going girls to reduce their stress and promote mental health.

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Conflict of Interest

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