

Research Paper

Rejection Sensitivity among School Children with Working Mothers and Homemaker Mothers

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ABSTRACT

Background: Rejection sensitivity is a cognitive-affective disposition characterized by heightened expectations, perceptions, and reactions to interpersonal rejection. Family environment and parental involvement play a significant role in children's socio-emotional development. Maternal employment status has been proposed as a factor influencing children's emotional experiences and interpersonal perceptions. **Aim:** The present study aimed to compare rejection sensitivity among school children with working mothers and homemaker mothers and to examine the influence of gender on rejection sensitivity. **Methods:** A comparative cross-sectional design was employed. The sample comprised 120 school children, including 60 children of working mothers and 60 children of homemaker mothers. Participants were assessed using the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, chi-square tests, and a 2×2 factorial ANOVA were performed. **Results:** Children of homemaker mothers ($M = 123.33$, $SD = 50.33$) demonstrated slightly higher rejection sensitivity scores than children of working mothers ($M = 116.91$, $SD = 50.19$); however, the difference was not statistically significant, $t(118) = -0.70$, $p = .485$. Gender differences were also non-significant, $t(118) = 0.60$, $p = .553$. Chi-square analysis indicated no significant association between maternal employment status and rejection sensitivity level, $\chi^2(1) = 0.30$, $p = .582$. The 2×2 factorial ANOVA revealed no significant main effects of gender, $F(1,116) = 0.35$, $p = .556$, maternal employment status, $F(1,116) = 0.48$, $p = .488$, or interaction effect, $F(1,116) = 0.13$, $p = .722$. **Conclusion:** Maternal employment status and gender did not significantly influence rejection sensitivity among the school children studied. The findings suggest that factors other than maternal employment status may play a more important role in the development of rejection sensitivity during childhood.

Keywords: *Rejection Sensitivity, School Children, Working Mothers, Homemaker Mothers, Gender Differences, Child Mental Health*

Rejection sensitivity refers to the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to social rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Children who exhibit high rejection sensitivity often experience difficulties in peer relationships, emotional regulation, self-esteem, and psychological adjustment (Thomas et al., 2020;

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Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). Elevated rejection sensitivity has been associated with depression, anxiety, loneliness, interpersonal conflicts, and maladaptive social behavior (Vanhalst et al., 2018; Slavich et al., 2020; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021).

Family relationships are central to children's emotional development. Parents provide emotional support, social learning opportunities, and models for interpersonal interaction (Bowlby, 1988; Cassidy & Shaver, 2018). Maternal involvement has traditionally been viewed as a significant contributor to children's socio-emotional well-being through the development of secure attachment relationships and emotional regulation capacities (Groh et al., 2019; Zimmermann et al., 2020). However, changing social and economic conditions have resulted in increasing participation of women in the workforce, leading to ongoing discussions regarding the impact of maternal employment on child development (Ali et al., 2021).

Previous research has produced mixed findings regarding the influence of maternal employment on children's emotional adjustment. Some studies suggest that children of working mothers develop greater independence and social competence, whereas others emphasize the importance of parental availability and emotional responsiveness in promoting positive developmental outcomes (Risi et al., 2021; Nivison et al., 2026). Contemporary research indicates that parenting quality, attachment security, and family functioning may be more important predictors of child adjustment than maternal employment status alone (Hutchings et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether maternal employment status contributes significantly to children's perceptions of interpersonal acceptance and rejection.

Although considerable research has examined rejection sensitivity, attachment processes, and child adjustment, limited evidence is available regarding rejection sensitivity among children of working and homemaker mothers in the Indian context. The present study addresses this gap by examining the influence of maternal employment status and gender on rejection sensitivity among school children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rejection sensitivity (RS) is a cognitive-affective processing disposition characterized by anxious expectations, heightened perception, and intense reactions to interpersonal rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Originally conceptualized by Downey and Feldman (1996), rejection sensitivity has been associated with emotional dysregulation, depressive symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, social withdrawal, aggression, and impaired peer relationships across developmental stages (Thomas et al., 2020; Vanhalst et al., 2018; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021).

Contemporary developmental models suggest that rejection sensitivity emerges through repeated interpersonal experiences and becomes a stable cognitive-affective schema that shapes social information processing (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). Recent theoretical work highlights that children with elevated rejection sensitivity tend to interpret ambiguous social situations as rejecting, thereby increasing vulnerability to peer stress and emotional difficulties (Thomas et al., 2020; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021).

Research has increasingly demonstrated the role of adverse childhood experiences in the development of rejection sensitivity. A recent meta-analysis involving 5,335 participants reported a significant positive association between child maltreatment and rejection

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sensitivity, indicating that negative early relational experiences contribute to heightened sensitivity to rejection later in life. Emotional abuse showed a stronger association than physical abuse (Gao et al., 2024).

Objectives

1. To assess rejection sensitivity among school children.
2. To compare rejection sensitivity between children of working mothers and homemaker mothers.
3. To examine gender differences in rejection sensitivity.
4. To investigate the interaction effect of gender and maternal employment status on rejection sensitivity.

Hypotheses

- **H01:** There is no significant difference in rejection sensitivity between children of working mothers and homemaker mothers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A comparative cross-sectional research design was adopted.

Inclusion Criteria

- Children aged 11- 14 years studying in aided school of Belagavi.
- Children whose mothers were either employed or homemakers.
- Children whose parents/guardians provided informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

- Children with known psychiatric, neurological, or developmental disorders.
- Children with serious medical illnesses affecting participation.
- Children with incomplete questionnaire responses.
- Children whose parents/guardians did not provide with informed consent.

Study Procedure

The study was conducted among 120 school-aged children, comprising 60 children of employed mothers and 60 children of homemaker mothers. The sample included both male and female students and was recruited from an aided school in Belagavi. Inclusion criteria were children aged 11-14 years studying in the selected school, whose mothers were either employed or homemakers, and whose parents/guardians provided informed consent. Children with known psychiatric, neurological, or developmental disorders, serious medical illnesses, or incomplete questionnaire responses were excluded from the study.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology, CMR University, on 20 January 2020. Permission was also obtained from the school authorities prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and assent was obtained from participating children. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. All data were anonymized and used solely for research purposes.

Instrument

- **Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ):** The RSQ was used to assess rejection sensitivity. Higher scores indicate greater sensitivity to interpersonal rejection.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, chi-square tests, and two-way factorial ANOVA. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Based on the uploaded dataset (N = 120 school children; 60 with homemaker mothers and 60 with working mothers)

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Rejection Sensitivity Among School Children

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Rejection Sensitivity Score	120	120.12	50.15	16.00	310.50

N = 120.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of rejection sensitivity among school children. The mean rejection sensitivity score was 120.12 (SD = 50.15), indicating a moderate level of rejection sensitivity within the sample. The scores ranged from 16.00 to 310.50, suggesting considerable variability in children's experiences and perceptions of rejection.

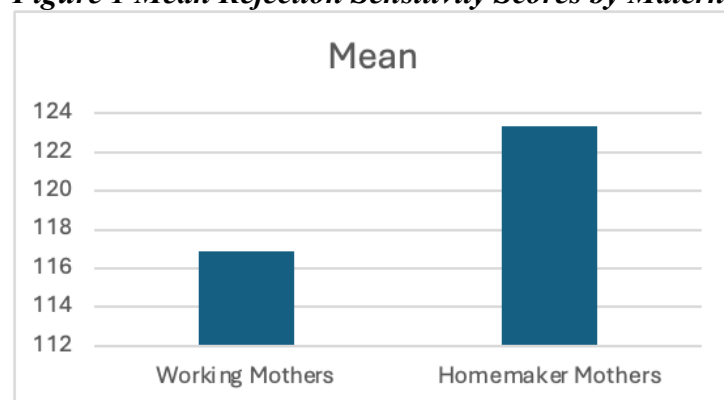
Table 2 Comparison of Rejection Sensitivity Between Children of Working Mothers and Homemaker Mothers

Maternal Employment Status	N	Mean	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Working Mothers	60	116.91	50.72	-0.70	.485	0.13
Homemaker Mothers	60	123.33	49.95			

Independent samples t-test; $df = 118$.

Table 2 shows the comparison of rejection sensitivity scores between children of working mothers and homemaker mothers. Although children of homemaker mothers ($M = 123.33$, $SD = 49.95$) reported slightly higher rejection sensitivity than children of working mothers ($M = 116.91$, $SD = 50.72$), the difference was not statistically significant, $t(118) = -0.70$, $p = .485$. Thus, maternal employment status did not significantly influence rejection sensitivity among school children.

Figure 1 Mean Rejection Sensitivity Scores by Maternal Employment Status



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Figure 1. Mean rejection sensitivity scores among children of working mothers and homemaker mothers. Children of homemaker mothers reported slightly higher rejection sensitivity scores than children of working mothers; however, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .485$).

Table 3 Gender Differences in Rejection Sensitivity Among School Children

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Boys	60	122.85	46.67	0.59	.553	0.11
Girls	60	117.39	53.77			

Independent samples t-test; $df = 118$.

Table 3: presents the comparison of rejection sensitivity scores between boys and girls. Boys obtained a slightly higher mean score ($M = 122.85$, $SD = 46.67$) than girls ($M = 117.39$, $SD = 53.77$). However, the difference was not statistically significant, $t(118) = 0.59$, $p = .553$. Therefore, gender was not associated with significant differences in rejection sensitivity among the participants.

Figure 2 Mean Rejection Sensitivity Scores by Gender

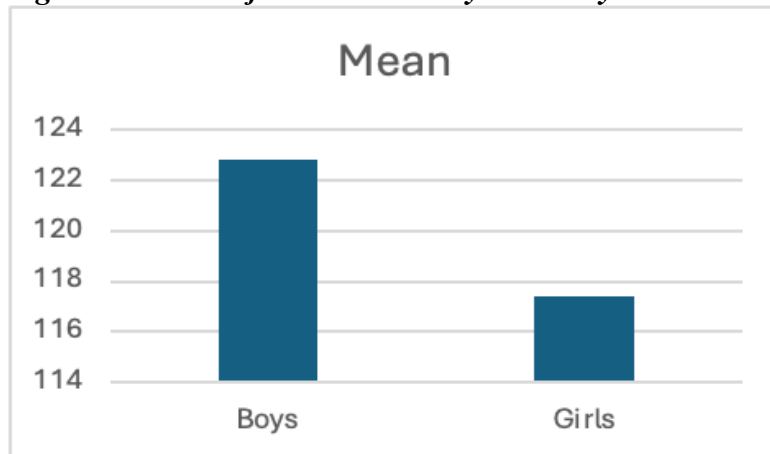


Figure 2. Mean rejection sensitivity scores among boys and girls. Boys reported slightly higher rejection sensitivity scores than girls, although the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .553$).

Table 4 Mean and Standard Deviation of Rejection Sensitivity by Gender and Maternal Employment Status

Gender	Homemaker Mothers Mean $\pm$ SD	Working Mothers Mean $\pm$ SD
Boys	124.42 $\pm$ 48.36	121.28 $\pm$ 45.47
Girls	122.25 $\pm$ 53.02	112.53 $\pm$ 54.93

Table 4: displays the group-wise means and standard deviations for rejection sensitivity based on gender and maternal employment status. Among boys, those with homemaker mothers reported slightly higher rejection sensitivity than those with working mothers. Similarly, girls with homemaker mothers reported higher rejection sensitivity compared to girls with working mothers. However, the observed differences across groups appear small and require inferential testing to determine statistical significance.

Table 5 Two-Way ANOVA for Gender and Maternal Employment Status on Rejection Sensitivity

Source	SS	df	F	p	η^2p
Gender	893.80	1	0.35	.556	.003
Maternal Employment Status	1238.42	1	0.48	.488	.004
Gender $\times$ Maternal Employment Status	325.05	1	0.13	.722	.001
Error	296822.73	116			

Two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

Table 5: presents the results of the two-way ANOVA examining the effects of gender and maternal employment status on rejection sensitivity. The main effect of gender was not statistically significant, $F(1, 116) = 0.35$, $p = .556$, indicating that rejection sensitivity did not differ significantly between boys and girls. Similarly, the main effect of maternal employment status was not significant, $F(1, 116) = 0.48$, $p = .488$, suggesting that children of working mothers and homemaker mothers did not differ significantly in rejection sensitivity. Furthermore, the interaction effect between gender and maternal employment status was not significant, $F(1, 116) = 0.13$, $p = .722$. These findings indicate that neither gender nor maternal employment status, individually or in combination, significantly influenced rejection sensitivity among school children.

Figure 3 Interaction Plot: Gender $\times$ Maternal Employment Status

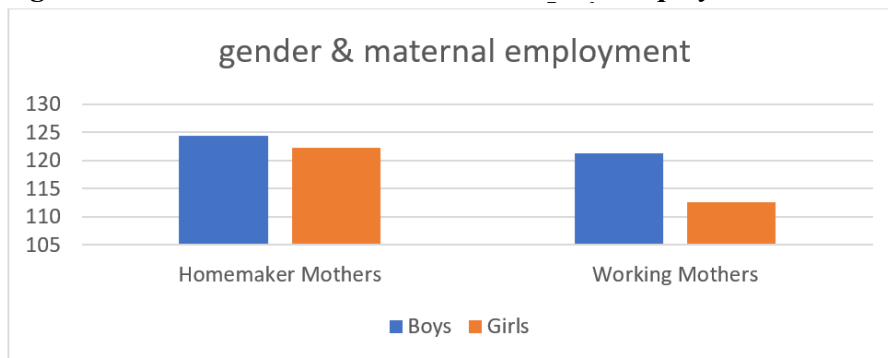


Figure 3. Interaction between gender and maternal employment status on rejection sensitivity. The nearly parallel lines indicate the absence of a significant interaction effect between gender and maternal employment status, $F(1, 116) = 0.13$, $p = .722$.

Interpretation

The findings indicate that school children with working mothers and homemaker mothers demonstrated comparable levels of rejection sensitivity. Neither the mean rejection sensitivity scores nor the distribution of high and low rejection sensitivity categories differed significantly across groups. The effect sizes were negligible, suggesting that maternal employment status alone may not substantially influence children's rejection sensitivity.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that maternal employment status was not significantly associated with rejection sensitivity among school children. Although children of homemaker mothers demonstrated slightly higher mean rejection sensitivity scores, the observed difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, no significant gender differences emerged. Male and female participants reported comparable levels of rejection sensitivity, suggesting that

interpersonal concerns regarding acceptance and rejection may be experienced similarly across genders during the school years. The absence of a significant interaction effect further indicates that maternal employment status influences boys and girls in a comparable manner. These findings indicate that factors such as parenting quality, attachment security, peer relationships, and temperament may have a greater influence on rejection sensitivity than maternal employment status alone.

Implications

The findings highlight the importance of focusing on children's emotional experiences and interpersonal relationships rather than solely on parental employment status. School-based mental health programs may benefit from incorporating social-emotional learning and interpersonal skills training to reduce rejection sensitivity and enhance resilience. In Indian collectivistic culture, maternal availability is culturally emphasized. Our findings of slightly higher RS in children of homemaker mothers (123.33 vs 116.91) which aligns with Western studies reporting no difference, suggesting parenting quality matters more than employment status.

Limitations

1. Cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Sample from single district limits generalizability. Maternal job type/hours not assessed.
2. The sample was restricted to a specific geographical region.
3. Self-report measures may be subject to response bias.
4. Other family variables such as parenting style, socioeconomic status, and attachment were not examined.

CONCLUSION

The present study found no significant differences in rejection sensitivity between children of working mothers and homemaker mothers. Gender differences were also non-significant. Maternal employment status and gender did not significantly predict rejection sensitivity among school children. Future research should explore broader family and psychosocial factors contributing to rejection sensitivity during childhood. School counselors may consider screening for rejection sensitivity among all children experiencing interpersonal difficulties, irrespective of maternal employment status. Parenting workshops on quality time can be protective.

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Conflict of Interest

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