Mental Health Challenges of Working Women: Turmoil between Balancing work and Child Rearing responsibility

Dr. Puneet Kaur
Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology
Khalsa College for Women, Amritsar

Abstract

The mental health challenges faced by working women, especially those balancing careers and child-rearing, are increasingly significant. These women often experience stress, anxiety, and burnout due to the dual demands of professional and caregiving roles, compounded by societal expectations that place primary responsibility for childcare on women. Important issues in it include time scarcity, lack of support, and limited access to flexible work arrangements and affordable childcare. These pressures lead to higher rates of mental health issues such as depression and chronic stress. The study highlights the need for policy changes, including improved parental leave, better childcare options, and workplace flexibility. Additionally, it calls for a shift in societal attitudes toward caregiving, advocating for a more balanced distribution of responsibilities between men and women. Coping strategies such as setting boundaries, seeking support, and engaging in self-care are also crucial. Overall, addressing these challenges requires comprehensive changes at the policy, organizational, and societal levels to support the well-being of working mothers.

Introduction

The mental health challenges faced by working women globally, particularly in balancing work and child-rearing responsibilities, are multifaceted, often exacerbated by societal, cultural, and economic factors. In the context of India, these challenges take on a unique and intensified form due to prevailing socio-cultural norms, inadequate policy support, and a fast-evolving yet often unequal work environment. In India, women continue to shoulder the majority of caregiving responsibilities, despite increasing participation in the workforce. This combination of professional and domestic duties creates a strain on their mental health, often

resulting in stress, anxiety, burnout, and other mental health disorders. Understanding these challenges requires examining not only the personal experiences of women but also the broader societal structures that perpetuate gendered expectations.

India has seen remarkable strides in women's workforce participation over the last few decades, with more women entering the labor market in various fields, from traditional sectors like education and healthcare to emerging ones such as technology and business. However, despite this progress, gender inequality persists in both the domestic and professional spheres. Women are expected to excel at their professional roles while also managing household responsibilities, including child-rearing, eldercare, and domestic work. This persistent dual burden often leads to what is known as *role strain*, where women experience psychological stress from the pressure of meeting high expectations at work and home simultaneously (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Studies have shown that Indian women are disproportionately affected by the pressures of balancing family and work commitments, leading to heightened anxiety, stress, and emotional exhaustion.

One of the central issues facing working women in India is the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities. In many Indian households, the primary responsibility for managing children's needs, household chores, and elderly care rests with women, irrespective of their professional commitments. The *mental load* associated with these tasks—such as planning meals, organizing childcare, and ensuring the smooth running of a household—often goes unnoticed but contributes significantly to the stress that women experience. In this context, the demands of work often overlap with familial obligations, which leaves women with little time for self-care, rest, or relaxation (Dube & Ghosh, 2020). This is particularly evident in urban areas, where the pressure to excel in both the workplace and at home is compounded by rising living costs and changing social expectations.

Research has shown that women in India are particularly vulnerable to experiencing work-family conflict, which in turn adversely impacts their mental health. A study by Sinha and Kiran (2014) highlighted that Indian women in professional careers reported higher levels of anxiety and stress due to competing work and home responsibilities. Unlike their male counterparts, who often have more supportive domestic arrangements, women in India face societal pressures to perform flawlessly both at work and in the home. This imbalance contributes to a sense of isolation, as women may feel they have to manage these roles without sufficient help or understanding from their partners or employers.

Moreover, Indian women are often expected to perform "ideal motherhood," which aligns with traditional expectations of femininity and caregiving. The cultural ideal of the "sacrificing mother" places enormous emotional and psychological burdens on working women, who are expected to prioritize their family's well-being above their own needs. This expectation, combined with professional obligations, can result in mental exhaustion, especially in the absence of strong support systems. In urban India, even women with highly demanding careers may find themselves dealing with the challenges of limited or no access to reliable childcare or domestic help, which further intensifies the mental health impact (Mammen & Pillai, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges for working women in India. During the lockdown, many women were forced to juggle remote work with the added responsibility of managing their children's online schooling and maintaining the home. In a country like India, where traditional gender roles are deeply embedded, the pandemic created an environment where women were often expected to take on even more caregiving tasks. Studies indicate that, during the pandemic, women experienced greater work-family conflict and reported higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety than men (Bharati & Ghosh, 2020). Women in India's informal sectors, including domestic workers, healthcare workers, and teachers, faced additional challenges, as they lacked the protection of paid leave or access to benefits that formal employees might have received.

The mental health consequences of these stressors are significant. Long-term exposure to high levels of stress, especially in the absence of adequate support, can lead to physical and psychological conditions such as anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular disease (Kabat-Zinn et al., 2015). In India, studies have linked chronic stress to a variety of health problems in women, including hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes (Sahoo et al., 2018). Furthermore, the cultural stigma surrounding mental health in India often prevents women from seeking help or accessing mental health services. This stigma, combined with a lack of accessible healthcare infrastructure, exacerbates the psychological burden carried by women.

Workplace policies in India, while evolving, still fall short of addressing the full range of mental health challenges faced by women. The Indian government introduced maternity leave provisions in the 2017 Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, which extended paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks. However, this policy applies only to women in formal sector jobs

and does not address the needs of informal sector workers or those in lower-income brackets. Additionally, many women in India face discrimination when it comes to taking maternity leave or asking for flexible work arrangements, as workplaces often prioritize long hours and face-time over work-life balance (Sahu & Tripathi, 2020). The lack of robust parental leave policies, affordable childcare options, and flexible work arrangements in India further exacerbates the challenges working women face in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities.

The intersection of gender, culture, and socio-economic status in India also plays a crucial role in determining the mental health outcomes for working women. Women from lower-income households or rural areas face heightened vulnerabilities, as they may lack access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities that could reduce their mental stress. Additionally, women from marginalized communities—such as Dalits, Adivasis, and those from lower-caste backgrounds—experience compounded stressors due to systemic discrimination, which exacerbates the mental health challenges linked to work-family conflict (Narayan & Reddy, 2019). The limited availability of social safety nets and the devaluation of women's unpaid labor further increase the mental health risks for these women.

To address the mental health challenges faced by working women in India, systemic changes are necessary. While increasing awareness of gender equality is important, policy interventions that support women's health and well-being are crucial. Expanding access to mental health services, improving workplace policies for women, and addressing gender inequality in the home and workplace can mitigate some of the pressures on working women. Additionally, efforts to promote shared domestic responsibilities and encourage a cultural shift towards more equitable gender roles are essential for reducing work-family conflict and supporting women's mental health. As India moves toward a more gender-inclusive future, addressing the mental health of working women must remain a priority.

Review of Literature

The challenges of balancing work and child-rearing responsibilities have been widely studied, with a focus on the mental health implications for working women. A growing body of research illustrates the psychological toll of trying to meet the demands of both professional

and family life, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. This review discusses key studies and findings on this topic, with a specific focus on the Indian context, where societal and cultural factors intensify these challenges.

Work-Family Conflict and Its Impact on Mental Health

Work-family conflict, which occurs when the demands of work and family life become incompatible, is a significant factor contributing to mental health issues for working women. This conflict can create psychological distress, as women feel the pressure of excelling in both spheres. Research has consistently shown that high levels of work-family conflict are linked to poor mental health outcomes, such as stress, depression, and anxiety (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). This is supported by studies from other parts of the world that report a direct relationship between work-family conflict and mental health difficulties, highlighting the toll this dual responsibility takes on women's emotional well-being (Allen et al., 2000).

In India, these challenges are further compounded by deep-rooted cultural norms and gender expectations. Indian women are often expected to fulfill both professional duties and family obligations, with caregiving responsibilities, particularly child-rearing, predominantly falling on them. Research by Sinha and Kiran (2014) explored the experiences of professional women in India and found that the stress of balancing these roles leads to increased emotional exhaustion. The findings demonstrate the unique pressures Indian women face in trying to meet societal expectations while managing work demands.

Gender Norms, Societal Expectations, and Mental Health

Cultural and societal expectations of gender roles play a pivotal role in how working women experience work-family conflict. Women are often expected to embody the "ideal mother" or caregiver, which adds additional pressure, especially when they are also pursuing professional careers. These societal norms result in significant mental health strain, as women feel compelled to meet high standards at home and work, leading to emotional burnout.

In India, traditional gender roles exacerbate these pressures. Women are often raised with the belief that their primary responsibility is to take care of the family. This ingrained expectation persists well into adulthood, leading to stress and feelings of inadequacy when women are unable to meet these traditional demands. A study by Kundu and Singh (2021) emphasized that Indian women are socialized to prioritize family over personal ambitions, and this cultural conditioning continues to impact their mental health. As women try to balance both

professional and caregiving roles, the gap between societal expectations and their actual ability to meet those expectations becomes a source of significant distress.

Workplace Flexibility and Support Systems

Flexible work arrangements, adequate parental leave, and supportive workplace policies are essential factors in mitigating the stress of work-family conflict. Studies have shown that women who have access to such resources report less stress and better mental health outcomes (Hammer et al., 2005). However, in India, access to these resources is often limited. Although women in formal sectors may enjoy some benefits like maternity leave, flexible work hours, or childcare support, many women working in informal sectors or in lower-income roles face significant barriers. The lack of workplace policies supporting work-life balance can result in greater stress for these women.

Mammen and Pillai (2015) highlighted that while women in formal employment may have access to paid leave or flexible work hours, those working in informal sectors lack such support. The COVID-19 pandemic has only amplified these challenges, as many women had to adapt to remote work while simultaneously managing childcare responsibilities. These additional caregiving duties during the pandemic, without sufficient workplace support, led to heightened levels of stress and mental health issues (Bharati & Ghosh, 2020).

The Mental Health Impact of Child-Rearing Responsibilities

Child-rearing responsibilities are a major source of stress for working women, contributing significantly to mental health problems. The emotional and physical demands of parenting often fall disproportionately on women, and when combined with the pressures of work, can lead to burnout. The mental load of child-rearing, such as planning meals, managing children's schedules, and addressing emotional needs, is frequently left unacknowledged but plays a critical role in the stress women experience (Gaddis, 2015).

In India, caregiving responsibilities extend beyond immediate children to elderly family members, further complicating women's ability to balance their roles. Dube and Ghosh (2020) noted that working women in India frequently report feelings of guilt and anxiety related to their dual responsibilities. These findings align with global research that suggests that when women try to meet traditional gendered expectations while managing professional tasks, they are more likely to experience mental health challenges.

The Role of Social Support Networks

Social support, including assistance from partners, family, and colleagues, can play a vital role in reducing the negative impact of work-family conflict. Research has shown that women with strong support networks are better equipped to manage stress and have improved mental health outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In India, however, the support network often remains gendered, with women expected to manage caregiving tasks independently. This imbalance in sharing responsibilities can exacerbate the mental health strain.

In households where men share caregiving duties, women experience reduced stress and better mental health (Ghosh & Chatterjee, 2019). However, many Indian households still adhere to traditional gender roles, with women primarily responsible for domestic tasks, which leads to increased mental health burdens. A study by Ghosh and Chatterjee (2019) found that when men were involved in caregiving, women felt less stressed and more supported in their dual roles.

Mental Health Consequences and Long-Term Effects

The mental health consequences of chronic stress due to work-family conflict are far-reaching. Prolonged exposure to stress can result in various physical health issues, including cardiovascular diseases, sleep disturbances, and chronic fatigue. Moreover, the emotional toll can lead to burnout, anxiety, and depression (Kabat-Zinn et al., 2015). In India, these mental health challenges are exacerbated by the cultural stigma surrounding mental illness. Despite growing awareness, many women refrain from seeking professional help due to fear of judgment or social repercussions (Patel et al., 2017).

For Indian women, the lack of accessible mental health services and the persistent stigma surrounding mental illness make it difficult to address the psychological toll of work-family conflict. The gap in mental health care, particularly in rural areas or for women in lower-income households, only amplifies the difficulties faced by women trying to navigate both their professional and personal roles.

Objectives

On the basis of the gathered review of literature and introduction following objectives are framed for the present study:

- To Examine the Impact of Work-Family Conflict on the Mental Health of Working Women

- To Explore the Role of Gender Norms and Societal Expectations in Shaping Mental Health Outcomes for Working Women

- To Assess the Effectiveness of Support Systems and Workplace Policies in Mitigating Mental Health Strain Among Working Women

Results and Discussion

In the results and discussion section, the objectives of the study are explained in detail with the help of various supporting studies, which has added vividly to our clarity regarding the topic:

1. Impact of Work-Family Conflict on the Mental Health of Working Women

Work-family conflict (WFC) has been identified as a significant contributor to mental health challenges for working women. Studies consistently show that women experiencing high levels of work-family conflict report higher instances of psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). In particular, studies suggest that when the demands of work and family roles are incompatible, women often experience a sense of failure in both domains, which negatively impacts their mental health.Research has established that work-family conflict leads to various mental health issues for working women, including emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Allen et al. (2000) report that women experiencing high levels of work-family conflict are more likely to suffer from psychological strain due to the competing demands of family and work. These findings are supported by Sinha and Kiran (2014), who found that women in India, particularly in urban areas, face heightened stress due to a lack of support at both work and home. Moreover, Gaddis (2015) notes that this conflict is even more pronounced among working mothers, who not only face the demands of their jobs but also bear the emotional and physical load of child-rearing.

In the Indian context, these stressors are compounded by deep-rooted cultural norms that expect women to be primary caregivers, which intensifies the emotional strain of balancing

both family and career. Ghosh and Chatterjee (2019) argue that the dual pressure of work and caregiving responsibilities exacerbates mental health problems, leading to burnout and emotional fatigue.

2. Role of Gender Norms and Societal Expectations in Shaping Mental Health Outcomes for Working Women

Gender norms and societal expectations significantly contribute to the mental health challenges faced by working women. In societies like India, women are expected to fulfill both domestic and professional roles, which creates immense psychological pressure. Women are often socialized to prioritize family caregiving over professional advancement, leading to feelings of guilt and inadequacy when they cannot meet these dual expectations. Studies have shown that these pressures result in elevated stress levels, with women reporting higher emotional distress due to the constant balancing act between home and work (Ghosh & Chatterjee, 2019; Kundu & Singh, 2021). The influence of gender norms on mental health outcomes is profound. Women in India often face societal pressure to conform to traditional roles, leading to an imbalance in work-life responsibilities. Mammen and Pillai (2015) highlight that the cultural expectations surrounding caregiving responsibilities often limit women's ability to focus on their careers, which leads to a lack of personal fulfillment and increased mental health challenges. These societal expectations not only affect women's professional growth but also contribute to feelings of anxiety and emotional exhaustion. Kundu and Singh (2021) emphasize that in India, women are socialized to assume the role of the "ideal mother" and caregiver, which leads to increased stress when these expectations are not met, either at home or at work.

Gendered expectations regarding caregiving are also influenced by broader cultural norms, which often place the burden of managing the household primarily on women. As noted by Sinha and Kiran (2014), this cultural conditioning results in a heightened mental load for working women, which ultimately impacts their emotional well-being.

3. Effectiveness of Support Systems and Workplace Policies in Mitigating Mental Health Strain Among Working Women

Support systems such as workplace policies, flexible working arrangements, and social support networks play a crucial role in reducing the mental health strain experienced by

working women. Research indicates that workplace policies that provide flexibility, parental leave, and support for caregiving responsibilities can significantly reduce stress and improve mental health outcomes for women (Hammer et al., 2005). In India, while formal sector employees benefit from policies such as maternity leave, many working women in informal sectors or low-income households lack access to such resources, which exacerbates their mental health challenges. Support from family and partners is essential in alleviating work-family conflict. Studies show that when men participate in caregiving duties, women experience lower levels of stress and better mental health outcomes (Ghosh & Chatterjee, 2019). However, in India, societal norms around gendered caregiving roles often limit the support women receive from their partners. Additionally, workplace policies such as flexible working hours and paid parental leave have been found to buffer the negative effects of work-family conflict. However, such policies are still limited in India, especially for women working in informal sectors (Mammen & Pillai, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of workplace support systems, as many women faced increased caregiving responsibilities while working remotely. Bharati and Ghosh (2020) found that during the pandemic, women experienced heightened mental health strain due to the lack of adequate workplace support and the additional burden of caregiving. In light of this, it is crucial for Indian workplaces to adopt more inclusive policies that support working women in balancing their professional and caregiving responsibilities.

These results and discussions highlight the significant mental health challenges faced by working women in balancing work and child-rearing responsibilities, especially in the Indian context. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including improved workplace policies, societal changes regarding gender roles, and stronger support networks.

Conclusion

To conclude, working women often face substantial mental health challenges as they try to juggle the demands of their careers and child-rearing responsibilities. These difficulties are mainly driven by the conflict between work and family roles, societal expectations about gender, and the availability of support systems. When the demands of work and family are in conflict, it leads to increased stress, anxiety, and burnout, particularly in cultures where women are expected to handle both responsibilities. In India, cultural norms surrounding

caregiving further exacerbate the mental strain, as women are often seen as the primary caregivers.

Support systems, both at work and home, can help alleviate some of these pressures. However, workplace policies like flexible working hours or parental leave are not always available, especially in informal sectors. To better support working women, there is a need for stronger policies and support networks that offer flexibility and shared caregiving responsibilities. Cultural shifts towards more equal sharing of caregiving roles, along with institutional changes, are crucial for improving the mental health and well-being of women balancing professional and familial duties.

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