

Perceived Stress, Burnout and Depression Among Pakistani Working Married Women: A Quantitative Study

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<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2025.14.2.79>

Abstract

Pakistan is a male-dominated society by culture, where women face numerous challenges in their daily lives. Recent studies have shown that working women report higher levels of perceived stress, elevated burnout, and depression. However, a gap still exists, as working married women have not yet been extensively studied concerning burnout as a mediator between perceived stress and depression. Therefore, the objective of this study is to fill that gap by investigating the association between perceived stress and depression, with burnout as a mediating variable, among 384 Pakistani working married women aged 25 to 40 with at least an intermediate level of educational qualification. The study employed a cross-sectional correlational design and utilised purposive sampling to collect data from 384 married working women in Pakistan, with a mean age of 30.54 years (SD=4.77). Three standardized questionnaires were used to assess the study variables: the Perceived Stress Scale, the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory, and the Beck Depression Inventory. Correlational analysis revealed significant relationships between perceived stress, burnout, and depression among the participants. Mediation analysis, conducted using Hayes' Process macro, indicated that burnout significantly and positively mediates the association between the predictor (perceived stress) and the outcome (depression). The study concludes with comprehensive implications, emphasizing the vital role of mental health professionals in raising awareness and encouraging women to seek psychological support.

Keywords: Perceived Stress, Burnout, Depression, Married Women.

Introduction

Pakistan is a male-dominated society where women are often subjugated. Despite ongoing awareness campaigns in the media and on the ground, cultural norms and mindsets persist, leading to the perception that women are inferior to men, and their rights continue to be violated daily (Gill et al., 2018; Zaheer et al., 2025). Moreover, despite these challenges, Pakistani

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women continue to be eager to pursue education and employment. Studies have shown that perceived stress—which can be defined as the subjective evaluation of stress experienced in response to specific situations—is commonly associated with working women (Arif et al., 2017; Kausar & Anwar, 2015). A previous study conducted on married working women in Pakistan reported high levels of stress, especially among those with limited coping mechanisms (Amin et al., 2022).

Burnout refers to emotional exhaustion, where a person feels overwhelmed due to prolonged elevated stress from not meeting demands on time. Recent and past studies have found that burnout is also associated with working women (Artz et al., 2022; Załuski & Makara-Studzińska, 2022). A study conducted in Jordan involving 600 employed women revealed that family tension, particularly related to children, significantly contributed to burnout. This, in turn, led to physical health problems such as headaches and heart issues (Alsawalqa, 2017).

Depression can be defined as a persistent state of sadness experienced nearly every day, accompanied by symptoms such as a lack of interest in daily or pleasurable activities, negative thinking about oneself, others, and the world, hopelessness, worthlessness, indecisiveness, hypersomnia or insomnia, suicidal ideation, or even attempts (Guo et al., 2022). Previous studies have reported that depression is more prevalent among employed women compared to non-working women (Dudhatra & Jogsan, 2012; Melchior et al., 2007).

A study conducted in Malaysia reported that 22.8% of married working women were found to be psychologically distressed, and 5% were diagnosed with depressive disorders. Data were collected using the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (M.I.N.I) and multistage sampling (Marhani et al., 2011). According to a systematic review, working women—particularly in the healthcare sector—experienced elevated burnout and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study recommended further research to address exhaustion among working women (Sriharan et al., 2020). However, another study among 124 employed women found lower perceived stress and higher levels of quality of life and marital satisfaction (Mehrra et al., 2019).

According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, developed in 1990 by Stevan Hobfoll and colleagues, stress occurs when individuals have inadequate resources, and their efforts to obtain or preserve these resources result in little or no gain. This theory suggests that stress levels increase when individuals perceive no return on the investment of their time and energy, leading to reduced motivation, burnout, and, eventually, depressive symptoms (Hobfoll & Freedy, 2017; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Studies have shown that burnout in working women often stems from perceived stress, which can lead to depression, notably when motivation and social support are lacking (Blom, 2012; Håkansson & Ahlborg, 2017; Grossi et al., 2003). However, a gap remains in applying this theory specifically to the experiences of married working women—an area that requires further exploration.

Despite these ongoing issues, there is limited literature in the Pakistani context examining the relationship between perceived stress, burnout, and depression among married working women. In particular, the mediating role of burnout between perceived stress and **depression** has not been statistically explored. Since everyday stress can lead to burnout, which in turn can lead to depression, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature. It will also provide meaningful implications for married working women and for Pakistani society by examining burnout as a mediator between perceived stress and depression.

Hypothesis

1. There is likely to be a positive and significant relationship between perceived stress, burnout, and depression among Pakistani working married women.
2. There is also likely to be a positive and significant mediating role of burnout between perceived stress and depression among Pakistani working married women.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational design to examine the relationship between perceived stress, burnout, and depression among Pakistani married working women.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to collect data from 384 married working women in Pakistan.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria comprised employed Pakistani women working in either the private or public sector, aged 25 to 40 years, with a minimum educational qualification of intermediate level, capable of understanding and completing the questionnaire.

Instruments

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)

This 10-item Likert scale (0–4), developed by Cohen et al. (1983), measures perceived stress, with reported reliability ranging from 0.84 to 0.91.

Beck Depression Inventory – Second Edition (BDI-II)

The BDI-II is a 21-item Likert scale (0–3) developed by Aaron T. Beck (1961) to assess the severity of depression, with an internal consistency of 0.88.

Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI)

The OLBI consists of 16 Likert-scale items, ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (4). It measures burnout and has a high internal consistency of 0.81 (Demerouti, 1999; Tipa et al., 2019).

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly followed the APA 7 ethical code of conduct. Permission was obtained from the institution before data collection. The authors were contacted via email to obtain permission to use the questionnaires. Approval was also secured from the organizations where data was collected. Participants were given informed consent forms that clearly stated their participation was voluntary, they could withdraw from the study at any time, and there would be no negative consequences for doing so. After signing the consent form, participants received the study questionnaires for data collection. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their time and contribution.

Results

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants (N=384)

Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age			30.54	4.77
Socioeconomic Status				
Lower Class	215	56		
Middle Class	119	31		
Upper Class	50	13		
Qualification				
Intermediate	179	47		
Bachelor	62	16		

Master	127	33
Ph.D	16	4
Sector of organization		
Private Sector	231	60
Government Sector	153	40

Note: f=Frequency, %= Percentage, M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation.

The table above shows that participants from the lower class total 215 (56%), while those from the middle class are 119 (31%) and the upper class consists of 50 (13%). The mean age of the participants is 30.54, with a standard deviation of 4.77. Participants with intermediate qualifications make up 179 (47%) of the sample. There are 62 (16%) qualified at the Bachelor's level, 127 (33%) at the Master's level, and 16 (4%) at the Ph.D. level. A total of 231 participants (60%) work in private organizations, while 153 (40%) work in public organizations.

Table 2: Relationship of Perceived Stress, Burnout and Depression (N= 384)

Variables	1	2	3
1.Percieved Stress	-	.92*	.76**
2.Burnout		-	.81**
3.Depression			-

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The above table depicts significant relationship between percieved stress, burnout and depression.

Table 3: Mediation Analysis using Hayes Process Macro 4.1, Model 4 (N=384)

Antecedents		Consequences						
		Burnout (M)				Depression (Y)		
		β	SE	P		β	SE	P
Perceived stress (X)	a	1.38	.03	<.001	c'	.14	.13	.28
Burnout (M)	-				b	.85	.08	<.001
Constant	I	8.25	.98	<.001	I	-1.19	1.83	<.001
		$R^2 = .84$ $F = 2092.65$				$R^2 = .66$ $F = 374.89$		
		$P < .001^{***}$				$P < .001^{***}$		

Note: *** $p < .001$,

According to the table above, there is a positive and significant direct effect of perceived stress on burnout ($\beta = 1.38$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the direct effect of perceived stress on depression is not significant ($\beta = .41$, $SE = .13$, $p > .05$). However, the effect of burnout on depression is significantly positive ($\beta = .85$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$).

Table 3.1: Indirect Effect

Indirect Path	Effect	Standardized Effect	LLCI	ULCI
Social Connectedness	1.18	.68	.52	.83

Indirect effects depicts that burnout significant mediate the relationship of perceived stress and depression.

Discussion

Women in Pakistan are often subjugated and considered inferior. Their rights are frequently violated, and despite ongoing efforts by NGOs, lawyers, and the government, it remains a male-dominated society. Studies have shown that women face daily challenges, and the efforts to overcome these challenges remain inadequate, especially for employed women. Therefore, this study investigates the association between perceived stress and depression via mediator burnout among working married women in Pakistan to fill a gap in the literature and provide meaningful implications.

The first hypothesis of the study stated that there is likely to be a positive and significant association between perceived stress, burnout, and depression among Pakistani working married women. Correlational analysis supported this hypothesis, indicating that as perceived stress among working Pakistani women increases, so do burnout and depression. This finding aligns with previous research, which reported that stress and depression were higher among working women, who also perceived less social support, while non-working women reported better mental health and greater support (Abbas et al., 2019).

Another study investigating psychological distress among working women identified key stressors such as poor work-life balance, gender discrimination, peer behavior, lack of promotional opportunities, and sexual harassment (Arif et al., 2017). Similarly, research comparing working and non-working married women found that the former group reported higher levels of social dysfunction, hostility, and anger. The study attributed this to the stress of balancing job responsibilities with household duties, which intensifies emotional strain (Sadiq & Ali, 2014). A more recent study revealed that in Pashtun culture, early marriages are significantly and positively associated with mental health problems in females, such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Shahid et al., 2025).

The significant association between perceived stress, depression, and burnout may be attributed to higher cultural expectations in a developing and male-dominated society like Pakistan, where women are expected not only to work but also to manage childcare and household responsibilities. This dual burden increases mental stress, leads to burnout, and ultimately contributes to depressive symptoms.

The second hypothesis stated that burnout would play a significant mediating role between the predictor (perceived stress) and the outcome (depression) among working married Pakistani women. This hypothesis was supported through Hayes' PROCESS Macro (version 4.1, Model 4). The results indicate that burnout plays a key intermediary role in the relationship between perceived stress and depression. A similar study reported comparable findings—working women experienced higher levels of stress, depression, and exhaustion compared to men. The study attributed this to work-life imbalance, external life pressures, and possibly inadequate coping mechanisms (Wiegner et al., 2015). Another study conducted among Chinese working women found that work-family conflict negatively affected mental health, leading to stress and exhaustion. The authors suggested that support in managing child-rearing, household responsibilities, and work tasks could improve the mental well-being of these women (Zhou et al., 2018).

In a conservative society like Pakistan, women are often raised to see themselves as subordinate, a belief reinforced by their in-laws and extended family. Managing the responsibilities of home, marriage, and job simultaneously—with limited support and coping strategies—exacerbates perceived stress. This stress leads to burnout and, ultimately, to depression. Moreover, a lack of awareness and access to mental health professionals further deteriorates the psychological well-being of these women.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the association between perceived stress and depression, with burnout as a mediator, among Pakistani working married women aged 25 to 40 years ($M = 30.54$, $SD = 4.77$). The findings revealed that perceived stress significantly predicts depression, and burnout plays a positive mediating role in this relationship within this demographic group. These results underscore the psychological burden faced by working married women and highlight burnout as a key factor in mental health outcomes. The study suggests the need for basic workplace support and awareness programs to help women manage stress and reduce burnout.

Limitations and Recommendations

The first limitation of the study is that the data was collected only from Lahore, which means the results may not be fully applicable to other regions of Pakistan. Therefore, future studies should collect data from different regions of the country. Secondly, the minimum qualification for participants was intermediate, as stated in the inclusion criteria, to ensure they were able to complete the questionnaire. Future studies are encouraged to include less-educated married working women and use translated versions of the questionnaire or conduct interviews, as less-qualified women also work in various underprivileged sectors and may experience higher levels of perceived stress, burnout, and depression. The third limitation of the study is the imbalance in socioeconomic status (i.e., lower, middle, and upper class), qualifications (i.e., intermediate, bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D.), and type of employment sector (public vs. private). Due to this imbalance, mean difference analyses were not conducted. Future studies should aim to include more balanced demographic categories to allow for such analyses.

Implications

There is a need for awareness campaigns by mental health professionals within the Pakistani community to help ease the pressure on working married women. These women should be encouraged to seek mental health support from qualified psychiatrists and psychologists to overcome psychological distress and learn effective coping mechanisms for better functioning. The government also needs to take practical actions against individuals who violate women's rights, even if they are close relatives such as husbands or in-laws. Although legislation grants rights to women, many are not aware of them. Therefore, legal professionals also need to take positive steps in spreading awareness about these rights.

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