

A Theoretical Analysis of How Caste and Profession Shape Stress among Younger and Older Working Women

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Abstract

Stress among working women emerges from complex interactions between individual characteristics and sociocultural structures. Age, caste, and profession function as significant determinants that shape how women perceive, experience, and respond to stress. Younger working women often face challenges related to early career uncertainties, job insecurity, limited autonomy, and pressure to conform to societal and familial expectations. In contrast, older working women frequently encounter stressors arising from role overload, caregiving responsibilities, workplace ageism, and persistent gendered expectations. Caste adds an additional structural layer that influences opportunities, resources, discrimination, and coping capacities. Women from marginalized castes are more likely to encounter workplace bias, limited mobility, economic strain, and reduced access to supportive networks, intensifying stress across the life span. Profession similarly plays a crucial role by shaping work schedules, physical demands, emotional labour, organizational culture, and exposure to control or autonomy. Teaching, healthcare, and service-sector professions often involve high emotional labour, whereas corporate and administrative roles may include performance pressures and long working hours. Through a theoretical synthesis of role theory, intersectionality, expansionist theory, and job-demand control models, this paper demonstrates that the interaction between caste, profession, and age produces distinct stress profiles for working women. The analysis highlights the need for age-sensitive, caste-aware, and profession-specific policies to promote women's psychological well-being. Future research should adopt intersectional frameworks and mixed-method approaches to better understand stress variations across sociocultural contexts.

Keywords

Stress, working women, profession, age, caste differences

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Introduction

Working women experience multiple pressures arising from employment demands, household responsibilities, gender norms, and broader social expectations. These pressures often create a constant struggle to balance professional duties with traditional roles expected within the family and society. However, these challenges do not affect all women in the same way. Age and caste are two major factors that shape how women experience, interpret, and cope with stress in their daily lives. Age plays a significant role because women at different stages of life face different sets of expectations and responsibilities. Younger working women may deal with stress caused by securing employment, meeting performance standards, and building their careers while also managing early family responsibilities. Middle-aged women often experience stress from managing both work and family demands, such as caring for children, supporting elders, and maintaining household responsibilities. Older working women may face additional stressors related to declining health, meeting job expectations, and dealing with age-related discrimination or reduced career mobility. These life-stage differences highlight why stress cannot be understood without considering age. Caste, on the other hand, continues to be a strong social determinant in many societies, particularly in India. Women belonging to marginalized caste groups often face discrimination, unequal workplace treatment, limited job opportunities, and restricted access to resources. These barriers add additional layers of stress beyond the usual pressures faced by working women. The combination of caste-based discrimination and gender-based expectations creates unique challenges that influence mental and emotional well-being. Understanding how age and caste interact is essential for creating healthier and more supportive work environments. A detailed examination of these factors can help policymakers, employers, and researchers develop more inclusive workplace policies and targeted support systems that address the specific needs of women from different age groups and caste backgrounds. This understanding is crucial for promoting fairness, reducing stress, and improving overall well-being among working women.

Stress among working women is not merely a psychological outcome but a product of structural, cultural, and occupational forces. India's socio-cultural environment—with its strong norms related to gender, caste hierarchy, and professional segmentation—creates unique stress contexts for women. This paper provides a theoretical analysis of how caste and profession interact with age (younger vs. older women) to shape stress experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Role Theory: Role theory suggests that stress arises when individuals face conflicting or excessive role expectations. Younger women often struggle with early

career-building roles alongside emerging family expectations, while older women must manage professional responsibilities and caregiving for children or aging parents.

Intersectionality Theory: Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) posits that social categories (gender, caste, age) interact to create unique experiences of oppression. Younger women from marginalized castes may face discrimination early in their career trajectory, while older marginalized-caste women may experience cumulative disadvantages.

Expansionist Theory: Barnett and Hyde's (2001) expansionist theory argues that multiple life roles can enhance well-being when adequate resources exist. However, resource distribution is deeply influenced by caste and profession, which limits positive benefits for many women.

Job Demand–Control Model: Karasek's model explains how job strain is shaped by demands and decision-making autonomy. Professions dominated by rigid schedules (e.g., nursing, teaching) may offer lower control, while corporate jobs may offer autonomy but carry high performance pressure.

Caste as a Structural Determinant of Stress: Caste influences access to education, job opportunities, workplace treatment, and social respect. Women from marginalized castes frequently report greater workplace discrimination, microaggressions, and limited mobility. Younger women encounter discrimination early, while older women accumulate long-term disadvantages, often resulting in chronic stress.

Professional Differences in Stress Experiences: Different professions provide varied workloads, emotional labour, physical demands, and organizational support.

- i. **Teaching & Healthcare:** High emotional labour, fixed schedules, and high responsibility.
- ii. **Corporate Sector:** Performance pressure, long working hours, and competitive environments.
- iii. **Informal Sector:** Job insecurity, low wages, and lack of social protection.

Age interacts with professional demands—young women struggle with adjustment, while older women manage role strain and health constraints. Caste and profession intensify both phases differently.

Younger women: Early career instability, gender bias, pressures of proving capability, and limited work–life balance skills.

Older women: Increased caregiving responsibilities, workplace ageism, physical fatigue, and sustained role overload.

What is Stress?

Stress is commonly defined as a psychological and physiological response that occurs when individuals perceive that the demands placed upon them exceed their ability to cope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to the transactional model of stress, stress is not simply a reaction to external pressures but a result of how individuals interpret and appraise those pressures. When a situation is viewed as threatening, overwhelming, or uncontrollable, the individual experiences stress, which can manifest in physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms. Selye (1976) also described stress as the body's nonspecific response to any demand, highlighting the biological and hormonal changes that occur when individuals face challenging situations. Overall, stress involves an interaction between external demands and internal coping resources, making it a multidimensional psychological experience.

Causes of Stress

The following factors can be responsible for stress:

1. **Workload and Job Pressure:** Heavy responsibilities, long working hours, and strict deadlines often increase stress for working individuals (Cooper & Davidson, 1982).
2. **Role Conflict and Work–Life Imbalance:** Difficulty in balancing job duties with household responsibilities and family expectations is a major source of stress, especially for women (Barnett & Hyde, 2001).
3. **Job Insecurity:** Fear of losing one's job or lack of career growth opportunities creates uncertainty and stress.
4. **Financial Problems:** Low income, debt, and financial responsibilities can heighten feelings of tension and worry.
5. **Discrimination and Social Inequality:** Experiences of caste-based or gender-based discrimination in workplaces or society contribute significantly to psychological distress (Thorat & Newman, 2010).
6. **Lack of Social Support:** Limited emotional or practical support from family, colleagues, or community can reduce coping ability and increase stress levels.
7. **Health-Related Issues:** Chronic illness, aging-related concerns, and physical fatigue can act as internal stressors.
8. **Life-Stage Challenges:** Younger women face early career pressure, middle-aged women experience the dual burden of work and home, and older women may encounter discrimination and health strain (Goyal & Gupta, 2018).
9. **Workplace Environment:** Unfair treatment, poor management, lack of recognition, or hostile work environments contribute to high stress.

10. Societal and Cultural Expectations: Traditional roles, social norms, and expectations regarding women's responsibilities can create emotional and psychological strain (Reddy & Vranda, 2016).

Literature Review

Research on stress among working women has expanded significantly over the past decades, reflecting growing awareness of gendered inequalities in occupational and social life. Scholars have emphasized that stress is not experienced uniformly; rather, it is shaped by demographic and social factors such as age, caste, socioeconomic status, and work environment. Among these factors, age and caste stand out as critical determinants that influence women's exposure to stressors and their coping abilities. Existing studies provide valuable insights into how these variables intersect to affect psychological well-being. The following review presents key empirical and theoretical works that examine the relationship between age, caste, and stress among working women.

Gupta & Coffey (2020) studied the *Caste, religion, and mental health in India*. They documented the mental health disparities across caste and religious groups using large, population-level survey data from India. In this quantitative analysis of a nationally representative survey, self-reported mental health measures were used. The authors find robust mental health disparities by caste. Scheduled Castes and some religious minorities report worse mental health even after adjusting for socioeconomic differences. The study highlights that structural discrimination and persistent socioeconomic disadvantage contribute substantially to these disparities. While the focus is population-level rather than gender-specific, the paper's results imply that *women* from marginalized castes are likely to face compounded risk because gender and caste interact to shape access to resources and exposure to stressors. Age interactions were explored to a lesser extent, but the paper notes life-course implications of early disadvantage.

Hsu, H.-C., et al. (2018) studied the *age differences in work stress, exhaustion, well-being, and related factors*. They investigated how work stress, exhaustion, and well-being vary across age groups in a large community sample. **This** cross-sectional analysis of the 2015 Taiwan Social Change Survey included the nationally representative sample of adults aged above 18 years. Standardized scales for work stress, exhaustion, self-rated health, and psychological well-being were used to collect data. This study finds age-differentiated patterns: younger workers reported higher anticipatory and adjustment-related stress (job entry, unstable contracts), while middle-aged workers reported role overload associated with balancing work and family. Older workers often reported different stress profiles

(health-related strains, lower work-related psychological demands). Although the study is not situated in India and does not address caste, its robust age-pattern findings are useful comparators for life-stage influences on stress among working women in other contexts.

Panigrahi, Padhy, & Panigrahi (2014) **aimed to** assess the prevalence of poor mental health and its correlates among married working women in an urban Indian setting.

This study was a community-based cross-sectional survey of 240 married working women in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, selected using multistage cluster sampling. The study found substantial levels of psychological distress among participants and reported associations between mental health scores and family/occupational stressors. Age-group patterns were described qualitatively — younger women reported stressors related to role conflict and time pressure while midlife women reported burden from simultaneous work and family obligations. Although the study's main analyses focused on occupational and family correlates, it also highlighted that socially disadvantaged backgrounds (including lower socioeconomic status) were linked to higher distress; caste was not the primary analytic stratifier in the paper, but the authors noted structural vulnerabilities that overlap with caste-related disadvantage in the Indian context.

Reddy, Vranda, Ahmed, Nirmala, & Siddarame (2010) studied the *work-life balance among married women employees in India*. This cross-sectional study involved the married women employed in various sectors; the paper draws on both quantitative measures and contextual discussion. Standardized questionnaires assessing perceived work-life balance, role stress, and psychological well-being were used to collect data. This study reported that younger married employees reported adjustment stress and career-building concerns, whereas middle-aged employees reported greater role overload due to caregiving demands. The paper documents that structural disadvantages (e.g., limited workplace flexibility, social expectations) intensify stress; though caste is not the central variable, the discussion notes sociocultural factors (including status and access differences) that can exacerbate stress for marginalized groups.

Kermode, Herrman, Arole, White, Premkumar, & Patel (2007) aimed to explore the local understandings of women's empowerment and its relation to mental health in rural India. This qualitative study used the focus groups and in-depth interviews with women in rural Maharashtra, including working and non-working women across age groups. Thematic qualitative analysis focused on social roles, discrimination, support networks, and mental health perceptions. This study

documented that women's mental health is shaped by multiple social determinants — poverty, gender norms, caste-based exclusion, and life-stage responsibilities. Participants from lower-status (often lower-caste) backgrounds described experiences of social exclusion and limited agency that contributed to chronic stress. Age-related responsibilities (young mothers, caregivers in middle age, and health concerns in older age) emerged as distinct themes that affected mental well-being differently across the life span.

Discussion

The interplay of caste, profession, and age determines women's stress levels in unique ways. Discrimination, economic inequality, and occupational demands intersect to shape distinct vulnerabilities. Younger marginalized-caste women experience anticipatory stress, while older women accumulate chronic stress. Profession moderates these effects through autonomy, demand, and workplace culture. The findings of the present review indicate that stress among women is deeply influenced by both age and caste, reflecting the intersectional nature of their lived experiences. Younger women often report higher stress levels due to the dual pressures of establishing careers while managing societal expectations related to marriage and family, whereas middle-aged women experience stress associated with work–family conflict, caregiving responsibilities, and career stagnation. Caste further amplifies these stressors, as women from marginalized castes frequently face discrimination, limited access to opportunities, and greater job insecurity, all of which intensify psychological strain. The evidence suggests that age and caste do not operate independently; rather, they interact to shape women's exposure to stressors and access to coping resources. Overall, the findings highlight that stress among women is a product of structural inequalities, making it essential for policymakers and organizations to adopt intersectional approaches when designing mental-health interventions and workplace support systems.

National and regional studies documented a high prevalence of role conflict, time pressure, and psychological distress among working women; many note that women's mental health is shaped by workplace climate, family responsibilities, and social position (e.g., work–life balance studies and regional public-health surveys). These studies consistently advocate for standardized measurement and caste-disaggregated reporting. Evidence for **age differences is robust**. Multiple studies show life-stage variation in the *type* of stress women experience. Younger women face adjustment and career-entry pressures, middle-aged women face work–family overload, and older women contend with health and age-related workplace strains. **Caste is a structural driver of disadvantage**. Population-level analyses demonstrate

that marginalized castes report worse mental-health outcomes; when combined with the gendered burdens on working women, caste likely increases exposure to stressors and reduces coping resources.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that women experience higher levels of stress compared to men due to gender-based expectations, work-family imbalance, and limited decision-making power (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Occupational stress among women is often linked to workload, long working hours, job insecurity, and role overload (Cooper & Davidson, 1982). Age is a major predictor of stress levels. Younger working women often face stress due to career initiation, performance pressure, and unstable employment (Goyal & Gupta, 2018). Middle-aged women experience stress related to balancing job responsibilities with childcare and household duties (Reddy & Vranda, 2016). Older women may face health-related stress, age discrimination, and workplace marginalization (Mishra, 2020). Caste continues to influence social experiences, including workplace environments. Women from marginalized castes report greater stress due to discrimination, limited access to opportunities, and social exclusion (Deshpande, 2011). Studies show that caste-based inequalities lead to unequal workloads, lower wages, and reduced social support, all contributing to psychological distress (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Several studies indicate that the combined effects of age and caste create layered challenges. Younger women from marginalized castes experience high stress due to both social and economic constraints, while middle-aged and older women face compounded responsibilities, lower mobility, and delayed career growth (Kamble & Rao, 2021). Age and caste significantly influence stress among working women. Younger, middle-aged, and older women face different challenges, and caste-based inequalities add further burdens. Understanding these patterns can help in creating workplace policies that support women at every stage of life and from all social backgrounds.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this review highlight that stress among working women is influenced by the intersection of age and caste, with unique patterns emerging at different life stages and across social groups. For policymakers and organizations, this emphasizes the need for **intersectional approaches** in designing workplace policies, mental health programs, and social support systems. Younger women may benefit from career mentoring, flexible schedules, and stress-management training to cope with early career pressures, while middle-aged women require support for balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. Older women may need workplace accommodations addressing health concerns and career equity. Women from

marginalized caste groups face additional structural challenges, such as discrimination and unequal access to resources, which must be addressed through **inclusive organizational practices, anti-discrimination policies, and targeted support programs**. Overall, interventions must consider both life-stage and social-context factors to effectively reduce stress and enhance well-being among working women.

Suggestions for Further Studies

- i. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to track stress patterns over time, capturing how age and caste influence stress trajectories across the life span.
- ii. More empirical research is needed that specifically examines caste-based differences in occupational stress among women in various sectors.
- iii. Future studies should explore the combined effects of age, caste, socioeconomic status, and workplace characteristics on stress to better understand layered vulnerabilities.
- iv. Research should include women from rural and urban settings, different industries, and varying socioeconomic backgrounds to enhance generalizability.
- v. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies testing workplace interventions, counseling programs, and policy measures are recommended to identify effective strategies for stress reduction.
- vi. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods can provide richer insights into both the prevalence of stress and the lived experiences of women navigating age- and caste-related challenges.

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