

Perceived Stress and Psychological Wellbeing Among Married and Unmarried Pakistani Women

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Abstract

There is limited literature on perceived stress and psychological well-being among married and unmarried Pakistani women. The objective of this study is to highlight a growing cultural issue in Pakistan by investigating perceived stress and psychological well-being using a cross-sectional correlational design and purposive sampling technique. The sample consisted of 250 Pakistani women (married=113, unmarried=137), with inclusion criteria requiring participants to be between 25 and 40 years of age and to have at least an Intermediate level of education. The study utilized the Perceived Stress Scale and the Psychological Wellbeing Scale to assess the relevant variables. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant difference in perceived stress and psychological well-being between married and unmarried Pakistani women. An independent samples t-test revealed that unmarried Pakistani women scored significantly higher on perceived stress, while married Pakistani women scored higher on psychological well-being. However, the difference in psychological well-being was not statistically significant. This study provides implications for addressing the challenges faced by women. It emphasizes the importance of raising awareness, encouraging effective government interventions, and recognizing the crucial role of mental health professionals.

Keywords: Perceived Stress, Psychological Wellbeing, Unmarried, Married, Women.

Introduction

Marriage is defined as a legal, consensual, and contractual relationship recognized by law, while being unmarried refers to individuals who have never married, are divorced, or widowed (Imam & Akhouri, 2022; Spanier, 1983). Pakistan is a male-dominated society where women are considered inferior to men and are often deprived of education, employment, and basic human rights—particularly in rural areas but also in general (Naveed & Butt, 2020; Tabassum, 2016). There is a cultural practice of women marrying at early ages, sometimes before 18, and

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substantial literature has documented the psychological distress among these married women (Niaz, 2004; Shaud & Asad, 2020).

Perceived stress refers more to one's feelings about lack of control and unpredictability than to actual stressors (Cohen et al., 1983; Lee et al., 2012). A previous study explored perceived stress and work-life balance among 60 working women (30 married, 30 unmarried) using the PSS and WLB scales. Results showed higher perceived stress in unmarried women compared to married women, with stress significantly predicting work-life balance. These findings highlight marital status as a key factor influencing stress levels and work-life balance (Ajayan, 2021).

Psychological well-being is a positive mental state closely linked to happiness and life satisfaction (Adler, 2017). A previous study revealed no significant difference in psychological well-being between married and unmarried women. This suggests that marital status alone does not determine a woman's psychological health. Factors such as personal coping strategies, social support networks, and individual resilience may play a more critical role. Despite cultural expectations in Pakistan that may favor marriage, unmarried women did not show lower psychological well-being, highlighting the complexity of mental health influences (Tahir, 2012).

A descriptive study was conducted with 200 unmarried women using tools such as the Self-Confidence Scale and Psychological Stress Scale. Findings revealed that 17% of unmarried women exhibited depressive symptoms, including low self-esteem, hopelessness, and social withdrawal. Emotional problems were most prevalent, with older unmarried women experiencing more severe psychological impacts. Employed unmarried women reported higher stress levels (Fekih & Meziane, 2016). A study of 427 women in Punjab found that both divorced and married women are negatively impacted by these factors, though divorced women experience greater mental health burdens (Zafeer et al., 2022). Delayed marriages are also becoming more common in Pakistan, with factors such as financial constraints, dowry demands, and familial expectations contributing to this trend. These delays often lead to increased societal pressure on unmarried women (Ghazal et al., 2022).

Globally, marriage is often associated with mental health benefits; however, early or non-normative marriages can have negative consequences. Married young adults report higher life satisfaction compared to those in other relationship statuses (Uecker et al., 2012). A recent study found that unmarried women in Pakistan experienced significant associations between anxiety and depression (Shami et al., 2025). However, there is still limited research comparing perceived stress and psychological well-being between married and unmarried Pakistani women. Therefore, the objective of this study is to address this gap.

Research Objective

To examine the differences in perceived stress and psychological well-being between married and unmarried women in the cultural context of Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. Is there a significant difference in perceived stress between married and unmarried women in Pakistan?
2. Is there a significant difference in psychological well-being between married and unmarried women in Pakistan?

Hypothesis

1. There is likely a significant mean difference between Pakistani married and unmarried women with respect to perceived stress and psychological well-being.

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional correlational research design and used a purposive sampling technique to collect data from 250 married and unmarried women. The inclusion criteria were: age between 25 to 40 years, Pakistani citizenship, and a minimum educational qualification of intermediate level.

Study Measures

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983)

This scale consists of 10 items, with responses recorded on a Likert scale ranging from "never" (0) to "very often" (4). The reliability of the scale ranges between 0.84 and 0.91.

Psychological Wellbeing Scale

Psychological well-being was assessed using Ryff and Keyes' (1995) 18-item scale, which uses a 7-point Likert scale. The scale has a reported reliability (α) ranging from .87 to .93.

Ethical Consideration

The study strictly adhered to APA 7 ethical guidelines. Permission was obtained from the relevant institution prior to data collection. Participants were provided with an informed consent form, which stated that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any adverse consequences. After signing the consent form, participants completed the demographic and study-related questionnaires. It was ensured that participants did not experience any psychological or physical harm during the process. Upon completion of the questionnaires, participants were thanked for their contribution. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27.

Results

Table 1: Socio demographic characteristic of participants (N=250)

Participants' Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marital Status				
Married Women	113	45		
Unmarried Women	137	55		
Age			33.91	5.36
Qualification				
Intermediate	99	37		
Bachelor	73	29		
Master	53	21		
PhD	25	10		

The table above shows that 113 participants (45%) are married women, while 137 participants (55%) are unmarried. The mean age of the participants is 33.91 years, with a standard deviation of 5.36. Most of the women have an intermediate level of education (99 participants, 37%), followed by bachelor's degree holders (73 participants, 29%), master's degree holders (53 participants, 21%), and a minority with a PhD (25 participants, 10%).

Table 2: Correlation matrix between Study Variables among Married Women (N=113)

Variables	1	2
1. Perceived Stress	-	.007
2. Psychological Wellbeing		-

The table above shows a non-significant positive association between perceived stress and psychological wellbeing among married women.

Table 3: Correlation matrix between Study Variables among Unmarried Women (N=137)

Variables	1	2
1. Perceived Stress	-	-.06
2. Psychological Wellbeing		-

The table above shows a non-significant negative association between perceived stress and psychological wellbeing among married women.

Table 4: Mean differences between Married and Unmarried Women (N=250)

	MPW (n=113)		UPW (n=137)		<i>t</i> (248)	<i>P</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
PS	14.74	6.17	17.54	5.73	-3.71	<.001	.47
PW	79.35	17.23	75.56	20.48	1.56	.12	.19

Note: ***p* < .01, *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation, MW = Married Pakistani Women, UPW = Unmarried Pakistani Women, PS = Perceive Stress, PW = Psychological Wellbeing

The above table depicts that perceived stress is significantly higher among unmarried Pakistani women as compared to married Pakistani women while psychological wellbeing among married Pakistani women is non-significantly higher than counterpart unmarried Pakistani women.

Discussion

This study aimed to address the limited literature on how marital status influences perceived stress and psychological well-being among Pakistani women. The findings partially supported the hypothesis: unmarried women reported significantly higher levels of perceived stress compared to married women, while the difference in psychological well-being was not statistically significant.

These results align with previous research indicating that unmarried women may face more stress due to societal expectations and pressures, particularly in conservative settings like Pakistan (Tekwani & Imran, 2024). In such contexts, unmarried women are often subjected to social scrutiny, stigma, and a lack of social support, all of which can contribute to elevated stress levels. In contrast, married women may benefit from spousal support, which can serve as a buffer against stress.

However, contradictory findings in other studies suggest a more complex relationship i.e. Parveen (2009) reported that married women experienced more stress due to the dual burden of work and family responsibilities. Similarly, Anwar et al. (2025) found that unmarried women had better psychological well-being than their married counterparts. These inconsistencies highlight the need to consider other moderating factors such as employment status, family support, economic independence, and societal norms.

The current findings suggest that while marriage may offer some protective benefits against stress in Pakistani society, it does not necessarily guarantee higher psychological well-being. The stress experienced by unmarried women may be rooted more in cultural stigma and lack of support than in their marital status per se.

Conclusion

The quantitative correlational comparative study concluded that unmarried Pakistani women scored significantly higher on the study variable *perceived stress*, whereas married Pakistani women scored higher—though not statistically significantly—on psychological well-being. This suggests that being married may not be associated with higher perceived stress, but it also does not guarantee significantly higher psychological well-being among married Pakistani women. The study's key finding of a significant difference between married and unmarried Pakistani women in terms of perceived stress and psychological well-being is only partially supported by the results, indicating that further implications and interventions are still needed for Pakistani women.

Implications

The study's findings suggest several practical and policy-oriented implications:

1. **Mental Health Awareness Campaigns:** There is a need for targeted awareness campaigns that address the mental health challenges faced by unmarried women. These campaigns should focus on reducing societal stigma and promoting acceptance of diverse life choices.
2. **Support Systems for Unmarried Women:** Community centers and NGOs should create safe spaces and support networks for unmarried women, where they can access counseling and mental health services without fear of judgment.
3. **Policy Interventions:** Policymakers should consider the unique stressors faced by unmarried women when designing mental health and social welfare programs. These could include subsidized therapy sessions, legal protections, and public education initiatives to challenge harmful stereotypes.
4. **Government Role:** The government should implement strict laws against individuals who violate women's rights, including both perpetrators and complicit relatives. Enforcement mechanisms and legal accountability are essential for meaningful protection.
5. **Role of Media:** Media platforms can be powerful tools for changing public perceptions. Positive representations of unmarried women can help shift societal attitudes and reduce the pressures that contribute to stress and lower psychological well-being.
6. **Further Research:** Future studies should explore the intersection of marital status with other variables such as age, employment status, urban versus rural residence, and family support, to better understand the nuanced impacts on women's mental health.

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