

A comparative perspective: social support and life stress in working and non-working women

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Keywords: Life stress, Non-working women, Social support, Working women

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore potential differences in social support and life stress between working and non-working women. A total of 200 participants were recruited purposively from the Dhaka division. The Bangla version of the Perceived Stress Scale and the Bangla version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support were used as measuring instruments. This study used independent sample t-test as inferential statistics along with descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, chi-square) for analyzing data. Analyses revealed a significant difference across social support and life stress in working versus non-working women. The study results indicated that working women experience more social support and life stress compared to non-working women. These findings provide a comparative understanding of social support and life stress indicating the urgency of tailoring community-based interventions for women. Therefore, the divergent perspectives of working and non-working women require to address in the context of Bangladesh.

Introduction

Stress has always been a part of life⁽¹⁾. Life stress refers to strain experienced in daily life that negatively impacts mental health and well-being⁽²⁾. Moreover, it is an inevitable aspect of modern living, varying significantly across different populations^(3,4). Women, in particular, encounter unique stressors shaped by their roles and responsibilities in both personal and professional domains⁽⁵⁾. Working women often grapple with the dual demands of professional obligations and family responsibilities⁽⁶⁾, while non-working women face stressors related to caregiving roles, financial dependence, or societal expectations⁽⁷⁾. The neurobiological basis of stress has been explored that chronic stress triggers neuro inflammation, making women more prone to mood disorders⁽⁸⁾. In the Asian context, middle-aged individuals experience chronic stress from long-term burdens and therefore experience increased physiological stress despite improved coping mechanism⁽⁹⁾. Supporting this, research indicates that women are more sensitive to chronic psychosocial

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stress, and this might raise their proneness to stress-related health disorders such as cardiovascular disease⁽¹⁰⁾.

Social support is a measure of physical and mental health and a buffer that protects people from the harmful effects of stressful life events⁽¹¹⁾. In this regard, the role of social support in stress moderation has been extensively explored in psychological and behavioral research⁽¹²⁾. Notably, social support emerges as a crucial buffer that moderates the effects of life stress, encompassing emotional validation, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, which has been linked to enhanced psychological resilience and well-being^(13,14). A European study highlights the pivotal role of social resources in mediating workplace stress and its effects on cognitive functioning and emotional well-being⁽¹⁵⁾. This underscores the importance of understanding how social support operates, including the stress dynamics faced by working and non-working women⁽¹⁶⁾.

In Bangladesh, women face distinct psychological challenges shaped by their sociocultural roles, whether they are employed or not⁽¹⁷⁾. Working women bear the dual strain of job demands and household responsibilities⁽¹⁸⁾, while non-working women often encounter social isolation, financial dependence, and limited support⁽¹⁹⁾. Despite these realities, there is a lack of empirical research comparing the stress and social support experiences of these two groups. By addressing this gap, it is essential for informing gender-responsive mental health strategies, workplace reforms, and community support initiatives. This study responds to this need by examining whether significant differences exist in perceived stress and social support between working and non-working women in the Bangladeshi context. In China, social support has been proven to help people cope with stressors⁽²⁰⁾, contribute to resilience by providing emotional support, problem-solving resources, and a sense of belonging⁽²¹⁾. In the context of Pakistan, working women have more stress as compared to non-working women, and married working women have generally more stress than those who are married and do not work⁽²²⁾. A similar situation exists in Bangladesh, where women, particularly working women, often carry the dual burden of household chores and professional responsibilities⁽²³⁾. Apart from this, Working women experience numerous difficulties like gender bias, male prejudice, financial reliance, and social insecurity⁽²⁴⁾. This issue is compounded further by the dual role of working two shifts at home and the workplace⁽²⁵⁾, where women require further assistance to strike a balance in their role. Stress-related illnesses are nearly twice as prevalent in women as in men⁽²⁶⁾. Women require support from spouses, friends, and family to cope with stress. Studies show that women who receive more support report greater satisfaction in both their work and family lives, while those who receive less support experience more stress, work-family conflict, and dissatisfaction^(16,27). The socioeconomic transformation and rising female education levels have led to significant changes in women's employment in Bangladesh. Understanding and supporting the role of social support is essential to help women navigate the stressors of modern employment and family life. Despite significant progress being made in Bangladesh in terms of social support for working women, there is

still room for improvement in terms of social support for non-working women. Since working women face more challenges in their dual life, their situation has already been focused on by policy authorities, and it is becoming important to increase awareness about the sources of stress, ways to escape and social support⁽²⁸⁾. On the other hand, the stress of non-working women has come into focus due to cultural and social norms⁽²⁹⁾. However, there is still a gap regarding their social support. Along with awareness of social support of working women, non-working women should also be aware of their social support, because they also experience stress⁽⁷⁾. Another Bangladeshi study illustrates the media portrayals support male prejudice against women, particularly homemakers, by consistently representing women in limited, idealized, and less dominant roles⁽³⁰⁾. This research aims to see how non-working women are getting social support compared to working women. Non-working women can also use social support as a protective factor against their stress or raise awareness. The aims of the study were to investigate:

1. Whether there is a significant difference in perceived stress in working and non-working women in their daily lives; and
2. Whether there is a significant difference in perceived social support between working and non-working women.

Materials and Methods

Cross-sectional survey design was used to carry out this study. This design indicates that all data were collected a single point in time⁽³¹⁾.

A total of 200 women (working women = 100, non-working women = 100) were purposively recruited for this study. This is because, 200 participants are adequate in psychological and sociological studies to draw valid conclusions, especially where purposive sampling is utilized in choosing the most suitable participants⁽³²⁾. Requiring participants to have lived in Dhaka division for at least one year ensures that they are familiar with the local environment, social networks, and lifestyle factors that may impact stress and social support. In order to maintain the research credibility and the participants' consistency in their responses, German researchers have discovered that the residency requirement aids in this process⁽³³⁾. By minimizing the effects of recent relocation stress and adjustment challenges, this criterion allows the study to focus more accurately on the variables of interest, such as social support and stress, without the confounding factors associated with settling into a new area. The following two instruments were used to measure life stress and social support for this study, while the participant recruitment plan is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of participants

Selected Area	Working Areas of Working Women (n = 100)	Living Areas of Non-Working Women (n = 100)
Dhaka City	2 Higher Secondary Schools (n = 20)	Azimpur, Newmarket and Nilkhet Areas (n = 20)
Gazipur City	Administrative Office (n = 50)	University Residential Areas (n = 50)
Narayanganj City	Banking Sector & 2 Primary Schools (n = 30)	Jalkuri Area (n = 30)

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10): The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) consists of 10-item questionnaire originally developed by Cohen and colleagues in 1983⁽³⁴⁾. The translated and adapted Bangla version of Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10-B) was used to measure participants' perceived stress⁽³⁵⁾. It is a self-report measure of 5-point Likert scale in which scoring ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (very often). The PSS-10 consists of two types of items: negatively phrased 6 item of the scale was (1, 2, 3, 6, 9 and 10) and 4 items were positively phrased (4, 5, 7 and 8). The negatively phrased items in the scale reflect the helplessness behavior of an individual, in which an individual endures repeated painful stimuli which is unable to escape or to avoid. The positively phrased items, on the other hand, reflect an individual's self-efficacy beliefs about their capabilities to influence the stressful events that affect their lives⁽³⁶⁾. There is reverse score for negatively phrased items. The sum of all 10 items indicates an individual's perceived stress score. The higher score indicates an individual's higher level of stress. The Bangla version of PSS-10 generally exhibits good test-retest reliability, meaning the scores tend to be consistent when the test is administered several times to the same individual. Studies have reported test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from 0.96 to 0.94⁽³⁶⁾.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS): Zimet and colleagues originally developed the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support in 1988⁽³⁷⁾. It is a self-report measure, consisting of 12 items, related to three different social support sources (e.g., family, friends and significant others) around the surroundings of individuals. The translated and adapted Bangla version of MSPSS was used to measure participant's perceived social support. The significant test-retest reliability score ($r = .648, p < .001$) was reported for the Bangla version of MSPSS⁽³⁸⁾. It is meant to measure an individual's perception of how much he or she receives outside social support and has been tested on people from different age groups and cultural backgrounds and found to be a reliable and valid instrument.

Procedure

At first the ethical permission was taken from the Research Ethics Committee of the respective department of the University of Dhaka. This research maintain and ensure the quality of data collection by following the guidelines⁽³⁹⁾. In order to ensure their voluntary involvement and adherence to research ethics, participants provided their informed consent after appearing clearly assured about its goal, process, and possible outcomes⁽⁴⁰⁾. They were instructed to fill out every question completely, and their information would be kept confidential and utilized solely for study⁽⁴¹⁾. It took almost 15 minutes to complete the survey. At the end, acknowledgment was given to all participants for their cooperation.

Data Analysis

The acquired data were analyzed with version 20 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to summarize the demographic characteristics and key variables of interest. Independent sample t-tests were used to compare working and non-working women in the areas of life stress and social support. Cohen's d measured effect size. The normality and variance homogeneity assumptions were reviewed.

Results and Discussion

Participant characteristics

In this study, the sociodemographic information of the participants were analyzed by mean and standard deviation in regard to age variable presenting in table 2 and chi-square (X^2) tests presenting in table 3 were employed for marital status, socioeconomic status, brought up place to compare the distributions between working and non-working women⁽⁴²⁾.

In this research, *the age of the participants* was ranged from 25 to 50 years old. Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of participants' age. Analysis indicates that the non-working women are older than their counterparts, with the mean age varying by 1.32 years.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of the age variable of study participants

Variable	Working Women (n = 100)		Non-Working Women (n = 100)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	32.41	6.35	33.73	6.93

Considering *marital status*, chi-square (X^2) analysis revealed no significant difference ($X^2 = 1.293, p = .731$) between working and non-working women (Table 3). Approximately similar number of working and non-working women were belonged married and unmarried status whereas more non-working women were divorced and separated in compare to their counterparts. A significant association ($X^2 = 10.102, p = .039$) was observed between employment status and *socioeconomic status*. Participants were belonged from lower to higher-class families with around half of them were belonged to middle class families (Table 3). Regarding *place of upbringing*, no significant group differences were found ($X^2 = 1.046, p = .593$). Both category of women had similar distributions, with the majority being raised in rural settings (Table 3).

Table 3. Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants

Characteristics	Working Women (n = 100)		Non-Working Women (n = 100)		X^2	df	p
	f	%	f	%			
Marital status							
Married	67	33.5	68	34	1.29	3	0.73
Unmarried	30	15	26	13			
Divorced	2	1	4	2			
Separated	1	0.5	2	1			
Socio-economic status							
Lower-class	-	-	5	2.5	10.10	4	0.04
Lower-middle-class	13	6.5	16	8			
Middle-class	49	24.5	51	25.5			
Higher-middle-class	14	7	16	8			
Higher-class	24	12	12	6			
Brought up place							
Urban	40	20	41	20.5	1.05	2	0.59
Rural	60	30	58	29			

Note. f = Frequency, % = Percentage, X^2 = Chi-square test, df = Degrees of Freedom and $p = .005$

Difference in life stress

Working women experience noticeably more life stress compared to those who don't work outside the home. (Table 4). The Cohen's d value was 0.37 (< 0.50), indicating a small effect size⁽⁴³⁾. This finding suggests that working and non-working women do not perceive stress at the same level. The result aligns with previous research⁽⁴⁾, which reported that working women experience significantly higher stress levels compared to non-working

women. Similarly, another study found that the total stress score of working women is higher compared to non-working women⁽¹⁹⁾.

Table 4. Mean difference in life stress between working and non-working women

Variable	Working Women (n = 100)		Non-Working Women (n = 100)		t	p	d
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Life Stress	31.26	7.25	28.71	6.19	2.67	.008	0.37

Note. d = Effect size

Difference in social support

Working women get more social support than non-working women and the result also shows that there was a significant mean difference in social support from parents, friends, neighbors, family members, or others between working and non-working women. The value of Cohen's *d* was 0.32 (< 0.50), indicating a small effect size. That recommended working and non-working women do not get the same level of social support. This finding is consistent with other Indian literature that found working females scored higher in the social support dimension compared to non-working females⁽³²⁾. Another study underlines the importance of social support in mitigating work-life challenges for Bangladeshi working women. Due to the survey, families provide both emotional and instrumental support, such as childcare and assistance with household tasks, allowing women to combine their career and personal responsibilities. Furthermore, the study reveals that cultural norms that appreciate women's economic contributions result in more support from families, coworkers and organizations⁽³³⁾.

Table 5. Mean difference in social support between working and non-working women

Variable	Working Women (n = 100)		Non-Working Women (n = 100)		t	p	d
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Social Support	39.83	6.48	37.52	7.71	2.295	.023	0.32

Note. d = Effect size

This study sought to explore life stress and perceived social support from a comparative perspective between working and non-working women. The results highlight that working women experience higher levels of stress compared to their counterparts consisting with existing literature⁽⁴⁴⁾, the underline reasons for this kind of findings could be due to their dual demands of professional and domestic responsibilities. Interestingly, working women experience greater social support that is supported by previous study, indicating greater exposure to diverse support networks in society in terms of families, coworkers and organizations⁽⁴⁴⁾. Therefore, such findings underscore the complex

connection among work, stress, and social support in women's lives. Further research might consider personal resilience, self-efficacy, cultural attitudes, economic stability and family dynamics as moderators providing a wider perspective of stress for working and non-working women.

The research work does not behind its limitations. The sample size of the study was not large due to resource and time constraints. This study did not examine the correlation between social support and stress levels, which could have provided deeper insights into the interplay of these variables. Future studies can be conducted exploring this relationship to enhance the understanding of factors influencing stress in working and non-working women. Therefore, limited demographic variety, including age, socioeconomic level and cultural background could impact the findings generalizability. Additionally, tailored to self-reported measures of stress and social support can give rise to response bias or mistakes based on subjective perceptions⁽³³⁾. Therefore, large scale future studies can contribute more for exploring the issues of working and non-working women.

As the practitioners in the field of psychology, the research emphasis on the importance of social support both working and non-working women. Working women are getting expanded network which might help them. In the contrary, non-working women tend to depend more on family and close social support for their stress management. The findings of this study as well as the existing literature indicate that working women have more stress in their life whereas non-working women solely their home management. This research finding can contribute to large-scale stress management by organizing psychoeducational workshops and collaborating with organizations and policymakers to create supportive environments addressing the unique needs of both working and non-working women.

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(Manuscript Received on 17 April, 2025; Accepted on 19 January, 2026)