



Women's Working Status, Family Environment, and Quality of Life: An Exploratory Study in an Urban Indian Context

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Abstract:

The intersection of women's employment, family environment, and quality of life has emerged as a critical area of inquiry in contemporary psychological and social research. The present study explores how working status influences perceived family environment and quality of life among women in an urban Indian context. A purposive sample of 40 women (20 working and 20 non-working), aged 25–40 years and belonging to middle to upper-middle socioeconomic backgrounds, was selected from suburban Kolkata. The Family Environment Scale (Bhatia & Chadha, 2004) and the WHO Quality of Life-BREF instrument were administered. Independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences between working and non-working women across several dimensions of family environment, particularly expressiveness, independence, active recreational orientation, and control. Non-working women reported higher scores on most family environment dimensions, whereas working women reported better quality of life in the environmental domain. Correlational analyses indicated significant associations between family relationship dimensions and social and psychological domains of quality of life. The findings underscore the crucial role of family support in shaping women's well-being and highlight the structural and cultural challenges faced by working women. Implications for policy, family sensitization, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: working women, family environment, quality of life, gender roles, work–family conflict

INTRODUCTION

The increasing participation of women in the workforce represents a significant socio-economic transformation globally. However, in countries like India, women's workforce participation continues to be shaped by entrenched gender norms, familial expectations, and socio-cultural constraints (World Bank, 2021). Despite educational advancements and expanding employment opportunities, many women withdraw from the workforce due to difficulties in balancing professional responsibilities with domestic expectations. This tension highlights the importance of examining the family environment as a critical determinant of women's well-being.

Family serves as the primary unit of socialization and support, influencing psychological development, emotional regulation, and coping mechanisms (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The concept of family environment encompasses patterns of interaction, emotional climate, communication styles, and organizational structure within the household (Moos & Moos, 1994). For women, particularly in collectivistic societies, family dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping their life experiences, including their ability to engage in paid employment.

Quality of life (QOL), as defined by the World Health Organization, refers to individuals' perceptions of their position in life within their cultural and value systems, in relation to their goals and expectations (WHOQOL Group, 1998). It is a multidimensional construct encompassing physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environmental conditions. For women, QOL is closely intertwined with both family support and occupational engagement.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Previous research has extensively examined family environment in relation to child development, with relatively fewer studies focusing on adult women. Lee et al. (2020) emphasized that family social environments significantly influence health outcomes, suggesting that supportive familial structures contribute to better psychological well-being. Similarly, Binuraj and Chitra (2022) found that family environment varies significantly across socio-economic and demographic variables, impacting emotional and developmental outcomes.

Balda et al. (2019) reported that urban families tend to exhibit higher cohesion, expressiveness, and independence compared to rural families. These findings are particularly relevant in understanding urban women's experiences, where modernization coexists with traditional expectations.

Work–family conflict has been identified as a major stressor among working women. Matsui et al. (1995) demonstrated that spousal support plays a crucial buffering role in mitigating work–family conflict and associated stress. In the Indian context, Shiva (2013) highlighted that prolonged exposure to work-family imbalance can lead to both psychological distress and physical health issues among working women.

Research also indicates that employment can have both positive and negative effects on women's well-being. While employment enhances financial independence and self-esteem (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), it may also increase stress due to role overload, particularly in the absence of supportive family structures (Voydanoff, 2005).

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in understanding how working status interacts with family environment to influence quality of life among women in urban Indian settings. The present study seeks to address this gap by comparing working and non-working women on these variables.

METHOD

Sample

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select 40 women from suburban Kolkata. The sample consisted of 20 working women (engaged in salaried employment) and 20 non-working women (primarily homemakers). Participants were aged between 25 and 40 years, had at least a graduate-level education, and belonged to middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status. All participants resided in urban localities.

Tools

1. Family Environment Scale (FES)

Developed by Bhatia and Chadha (2004), based on Moos and Moos (1994), the scale consists of 69 items measuring three dimensions:

- Relationship (cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, acceptance and caring)
- Personal growth (independence, active recreational orientation)
- System maintenance (organization, control)

Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale.

2. WHO Quality of Life-BREF (WHOQOL-BREF)

This 26-item instrument assesses four domains:

- Physical health
- Psychological health

- Social relationships
- Environment

Domain scores are scaled to reflect higher quality of life with higher scores.

Data Collection

Participants were approached individually and informed consent was obtained. The instruments were administered in a structured format. Participants were instructed to respond based on their experiences over the past two weeks (for QOL) and general perceptions of family life (for FES).

Scoring

Items were scored as per standardized guidelines. Reverse scoring was applied where necessary. Higher scores on the FES indicated a more positive family environment, while higher WHOQOL-BREF scores indicated better quality of life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Comparison of Family Environment Scale Scores

Domain	Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Expressiveness	Non-working	33.55	6.95	-2.446	0.019*
	Working	29.25	3.68		
Independence	Working	36.75	5.21	-6.434	0.000*
	Non-working	26.65	4.70		
Independence	Non-working	36.75	5.21	-6.434	0.000*
	Working	26.65	4.70		
Active Recreation	Non-working	31.05	3.48	-4.270	0.000*
	Working	26.65	3.01		

*Significant at $p < .05$

RESULTS

Significant differences were observed between employed and non-employed women across multiple dimensions of family environment. Non-employed participants reported higher levels of emotional expressiveness ($t = -2.45, p < .05, d \approx 0.75, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.10, 1.40]$) and independence ($t = -6.43, p < .001, d \approx 2.00, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.20, 2.80]$), indicating a substantially more favorable perception of family functioning. Similarly, participation in recreational activities within the family was higher among non-employed women ($d \approx 1.30$), suggesting greater involvement in shared family experiences. The control dimension also differed significantly, with non-employed women perceiving more structured family systems.

In contrast, employed women demonstrated significantly higher scores in the environmental domain of quality of life ($t = 3.15, p < .01, d \approx 0.98, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.30, 1.60]$). This finding likely reflects greater financial autonomy and access to resources.

Correlational analyses revealed that relational aspects of family environment—particularly cohesion and expressiveness—were positively associated with social and psychological domains of quality of life. These results underscore the importance of emotional support in enhancing well-being.

Interpretation

Non-working women reported significantly higher levels of expressiveness, independence, and recreational engagement within family settings. This suggests that non-working women may experience greater emotional openness and autonomy within the household. These findings may reflect traditional family structures where non-working women are more integrated into family interactions.

Interestingly, working women did not differ significantly in cohesion, indicating that emotional bonding remains consistent across groups. However, lower scores in independence among working women may reflect constraints imposed by dual-role expectations.

Table 2: Comparison of Quality of Life Scores

Domain	Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Social Relationships	Non-working	10.70	2.63	-1.992	0.054
	Working	9.20	2.09		
Environment	Working	25.10	2.77	3.151	0.003*
	Non-working	22.00	3.41		

*Significant at $p < .05$

DISCUSSION

Working women reported significantly higher environmental quality of life, likely due to financial independence and better access to resources. This aligns with research suggesting employment enhances material well-being and autonomy (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Non-working women showed marginally higher social relationship scores, indicating stronger perceived social support, possibly due to greater availability for family interactions.

CORRELATIONAL FINDINGS

Significant correlations were found between:

- Social relationships and all relationship dimensions of family environment
- Psychological health with cohesion and conflict
- Environmental QOL with independence

These results reinforce the central role of family dynamics in shaping well-being. Supportive and expressive family environments enhance social satisfaction and psychological health, consistent with earlier studies (Voydanoff, 2005).

The findings highlight a nuanced relationship between working status, family environment, and quality of life. While employment enhances environmental quality of life, it may simultaneously reduce perceived family support and autonomy within the household.

This duality reflects the persistent burden of gendered expectations, where working women continue to shoulder disproportionate domestic responsibilities. The lack of supportive family structures may lead to role strain and reduced well-being.

The study also underscores the importance of emotional climate within families. High levels of expressiveness and acceptance are associated with better social and psychological outcomes, suggesting that interventions should focus on improving communication and support within families.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The findings provide important insights into the complex relationship between employment, family context, and well-being among women. While employment appears to enhance certain aspects of quality of life—particularly those linked to environmental resources—it may simultaneously introduce challenges related to family dynamics.

The observation that non-employed women report more positive family environments may reflect their greater availability for family interactions and alignment with traditional gender expectations. In contrast, employed women may experience constraints due to competing role demands, leading to reduced participation in family processes.



These results align with role strain theory, which posits that occupying multiple roles can lead to stress when expectations are incompatible. At the same time, the benefits observed in the environmental domain support the argument that employment contributes to empowerment and improved living conditions. Importantly, the study highlights that family support acts as a critical moderating factor. In the absence of supportive family systems, the potential benefits of employment may not fully translate into improved well-being.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The present research findings should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. The relatively small sample size restricts generalizability, and the use of purposive sampling limits representativeness. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences.

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine changes over time and include more diverse populations across socio-economic and cultural contexts. Incorporating variables such as work–life balance, coping strategies, and spousal support would provide a more comprehensive understanding.

IMPLICATIONS

The study has important implications for policy and practice:

- **Family Sensitization:** Promoting shared domestic responsibilities
- **Workplace Policies:** Flexible work arrangements and support systems
- **Mental Health Interventions:** Counseling for work–family balance
- **Social Awareness:** Challenging traditional gender roles

Enhancing family support systems is crucial for improving women’s participation in the workforce and overall well-being. The endeavour to do so must come from individual, familial, societal and governmental levels, including but not limited to policy changes.

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