

Life Stress, Self-esteem and Mental Health of Women

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ABSTRACT: *Stress causes a variety of psychological conditions including anxiety and depression, mental illness alongwith number of physical conditions that may break a person both internally and externally to compel him to live in distress. Life stress is central to women's day to day and every day's life causing poor mental and physical health. Women are accustomed to live with life stress and subsequent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of the deep rooted patriarchal social system and cultural morass which is not only detrimental but also the primary cause of lowering self-esteem. Since there is strong stress impact on self-esteem, the fair sex is further pushed to the vicious cycle of lower self-esteem and higher stress. As a result of which, Women are compelled to live in distress. This paper conceptually analyses the causes of life stress, self-esteem and mental health of Women to provide some suggestions to end this social evil.*

KEY WORDS: *Life Stress, Cultural Morass, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Self Esteem and Mental Health*

Date of Submission: 28-01-2020

Date of Acceptance: 09-02-2020

I. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Stress is becoming inescapable part of modern life. People in today's society suffer from stress in a wide range of situations. Stress eats away people's lives. It is believed to be the cause of psychopathologies, diseases and inability to adapt to any given environment or work (Feldman et al., 2008). The stress response refers to the reactions which can either be physiological, emotional or behavioural reactions to stimuli that cause stress. Stress produces numerous physical and mental conditions. Although stress experiences vary according to each individual's situational factors, it is a common experience to all. Stress experience was first documented by Dr Hans Selye, a pioneer in stress research (Selye, 1974). Stress causes a variety of psychological conditions including anxiety and depression, mental illness but also with a number of physical conditions including heart attack, ulcers and stroke. At the time when a person does not get what he or she actually deserves or when a person thinks the job is beyond his/ her capability but endures to do so then he/ she gets a mental illness known as stress. The World Health Organization (2001) predicts that by 2020, mental illness will be the second leading cause of disability worldwide after heart disease. According to International Labour Organization (ILO, 2000) mental illness affects more human lives and causes a greater waste of human resources than all other forms of disability. Therefore, the significance of stress and stress management has become an ingrained part of our vocabulary and daily existence. With respect to women, the experience of life stress and resulting trauma is a perpetual problem. As a result of which they are constrained to live and die in distress and eventual physical and psychological disorder. Distress refers to the presence of high level of accumulated stress over a longer period of time resulting into burnout (Burke & Greenglass, 2000). This paper conceptually analyses on life stress of women concisely and subsequent physical and mental disorder associated with it. It endeavours to find out the causes of such perennial problems while providing some useful solutions to overcome it.

Life stress is strongly associated with poor mental and physical health (Cohen et al., 2007; Slavich et al., 2010). Theorists now generally appreciate that stress occurring over the lifespan can have a cumulative effect on physical and mental health. However there are fewer studies those have actually measured lifetime stress exposure and assessed the effects of such exposure on mental and physical health. Life stress and trauma is integral part of life of women although the words women describe themselves as nice, loving and nurturing and societal norm, structure and principles expect them to be so. Indian society very hardly nurtures the mind of women unless proven. Therefore, there is existence of huge gap between the intellectual belief women believe and behaviour they exhibit. Women absorb this conditioning because of the fear of stigma related rejection and discrimination as well as the overlay of morality unconsciously compelling them to be good. Furthermore, the paradoxical situation in which they live in sometimes treat them as Goddess and at other times slaves. These conditioning of Indian women compel them to live a life of duality with dissonance at their cognition level. As a result of which they mislay their self-identity in the process. Gender determines the differential power and control men and women have over the socioeconomic determinants of their mental health and lives, their social position, status and treatment in society and their susceptibility and exposure to mental health risks. Women experience various forms of trauma during their lives. Discrimination against women starts at birth. Gender lines

are drawn very early and many times from mothers' womb too. As a result of which exclusions for women continue throughout their adulthood. Discrimination can increase women's exposure to stress. Being fair sex and patriarchy culture in practice, fear of sexual assault is common trauma women of any age group live in. Elderly women are also not free from this trauma. One in four women faces an attempted or completed sexual assault. One in three reports for being abused by a domestic partner including spouse. Most of the time women are being abused by the persons known to her. They are open to sexual violence and discrimination at home, at workplace and on the road too. Trauma is the key factor for a host of mental illnesses amongst women and eventually they tend to live their life with post-traumatic stress disorder. The challenges of gender discrimination, gendered violence, patriarchy, child marriage, forced prostitution, polygamy, female infanticide and mistreatment of women directly contribute to undermine women's mental health. The fair sex gets all sorts of unfair treatment to live in distress which determines their self-conception. People's self-conception is involved in stress process and the magnitude of stressors impact on mental health.

Women receive inadequate and insensitive care in response to their trauma. It compounds the problem in multifold manner resulting in accumulated frustration and subsequent development of mental illness known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). For example, women are being blamed for their own rape or abuse. Street harassment, violence on television and similar cultural issues compound their pain after they encounter a traumatic event. Stress is a significant predictor of mental illness. Research has consistently shown that women do more than their fair share of housework and childcare even when they work full-time. Women also work harder to get the same credit as their male counterpart. But unfortunately the gender pay gap is worrisome. In Spain Women get compensation of Seven hours by working for thirteen Hours. Since last Six years Women of Spain are retaliating this injustice and discrimination and looking forward to end it. Occupations dominated by women have lower status and pay. Sexual harassment and discrimination at work place are common. Each of the above challenges is highly stressful conspiring to tear down women's coping skills and self-esteem.

Self-esteem is a psychological trait related to a person's image of self-value and self-confidence in total aspects of human activity (Rosenberg, 1965). Studies all over the world have associated self-esteem with human health and psychological well-being. This effect may be interpreted through the scope of resources increase and active coping against life's problems. Moreover there seems to be a strong stress impact on self-esteem regardless of the circumstances (Pruessner, Hellhammer, & Kirschbaum, 1999). High self-esteem is considered a fundamental aspect of personal well-being, happiness and adjustment (Brown et al, 2006). Individuals with higher self-esteem are more satisfied with their lives, have fewer interpersonal problems, achieve at a higher and more consistent level and are less susceptible to psychological problems such as anxiety and depression and physical illness (Brown et al, 2006) than those with lower self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to the positive or negative way people feel about themselves as a whole which is also often called global self-esteem or global self-worth (Brown, Dutton, & Cook, 2001). Many studies show the relationship of stress and self-esteem at multiple levels. Self-esteem is included in psychological resources that help people manage stressful events and their responses to them (Taylor et al, 2010). Self-esteem affects people's respond and reaction to stressful events and the way individuals cope with it. At the same time, stressful events negatively affect self-esteem contributing to psychological disorders. The purpose of this literature review is to study the life stress and self-esteem of women and their mental health and use this knowledge in order to reduce stress, improve their self-esteem that can eliminate psychological disorders and ameliorate the quality of their life.

1.2 Research Objectives

- To recognise the concept stress and life stress of women
- To analyse societal awareness of Life Stress of women
- To analyse the relation between self-esteem, life stress and mental health of women
- To offer useful solutions to improve women's self-esteem and quality of life

1.3. Research Methodology and Data Analysis

The paper is conceptual in nature. It endeavours to study and critically analyse the life stress and the associated trauma and its impact on self-esteem and the subsequent mental and psychological disorder of the women folk of India in their everyday and entire life. It provides needful solutions to empower women to help them out from rejection discrimination trauma that can build and add to their self-esteem and subsequent quality of life. The data used in this paper is secondary in nature. All the data sources are acknowledged at the end of the paper as references.

1.4. Findings and Interpretation

From the above literature review, it is evident that, there are several limitations that can be attributed for life stress in women and their subsequent low self-esteem. Social norms and family structure in countries like us manifests and perpetuates the subordinate status of women. The society is more biased in favour of male

child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities because of the belief that male child inherits the clan. Education is the primary reason that creates the huge gap between women and men. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias in higher education, specialized professional trainings hit women very hard in getting employment and attaining top leadership in any field. Poverty is also one of the rudimentary reason for which women are exploited as domestic helps. More women are poor than men. Their exploitation is more acute and of longer duration. They are the most frequent and direct recipients of hidden violence in society and in the economy because of poverty. Health and safety concerns of women are precarious too. There are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned. Professional inequality is the reality in employment and promotions. Due to gender bias in health and nutrition there is unusually high mortality rate in women than men. Household inequality with respect to division of work shows significant gender biasness. Women share all the burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called gender role and social and moral conditioning. Property rights of women in India remained largely an ignored and unaddressed issue although Honorable Supreme Court of India on 3rd February, 2018, made it fully clear that those Women born before 2005 too have right to ancestral assets. Because of all these above factors women of India suffer from lower self-esteem which is the primary reason of psychological illness.

Damaging impact of stressors can be buffered by extending social support to women that can boost their self-esteem. People with high self esteem tend to use problem focused strategies which are effective in reducing distress. The first and foremost priority should be given to the education of girl child at grass root level which includes technical, professional, vocational as well as health education that can inculcate an ability to bring socio economic changes in women. Educating Women will make them aware of their constitutional rights. Once they are protected by their rights, the society will assure of their sustainability. Secondly, awareness programmes can also be helpful in creating awareness both amongst women and men regarding the rights of women as equal counterpart of men of the society to perpetuate and progress. *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* is a social campaign of the Government of India that aims to generate awareness and improve the efficiency of welfare services intended for girls. Thirdly, workplace safety and security can be helpful in providing support for women to exhibit their potentiality at par with their male counterpart. They should be remunerated appropriately with respect to their contributions to uphold their social and economic status in the society. Strict implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes and Acts in political, economic and societal spheres should be there to curb all these social menace in the society so that the Nation can move in the direction of achieving the Goal of UN of gender equality.

Mothers across the world spent entire life by doing the thankless job of household activities without complaining. Though *Miss World 2017-Manushi Chhillar* contends by saying that mothers deserve the highest salary in the world, the reality is that the household tasks done by women are neither acknowledged as work nor do they get paid off. Rather women folk silently swallow all sorts of gender inequality, gender violence and gender injustice including domestic violence, physical and sexual assaults in everyday and entire life. Gender bias and the mental illness associated with it know no class with respect to educated and uneducated, rich and poor and rural and urban and younger and older. It revolves round the deep seated cultural issues of gender. Therefore, the concern for women empowerment has become the buzzword not only at national level but also at the international level. The greatest need of the hour is change of social attitude towards women. The morbidity associated with mental illness of women ought to receive substantial attention by all the stakeholders of the society that can promote and protect their mental health and foster resilience to stress and adversity which will positively contribute towards self-esteem building process and subsequently will be the fundamental step towards women empowerment. Moreover, it will be a small step towards more equitable world that can offer equal opportunity for everyone to direct their own identity, uniqueness and potentiality irrespective of gender.

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Dr Jyotirmayee Choudhury."Life Stress, Self-esteem and Mental Health of Women" *International Journal of Business and Management Invention (IJBMI)*, vol. 09(02), 2020, pp 18-21.