

COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mediation Study Of Stress, Self-Efficacy, Work Experience, And Maternal Age

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Abstract

Background: The Supermom identity in the context of India's patriarchal households poses several challenges to the physical and psychological health of working mothers. These challenges are exacerbated by non-normative history graded influences.

Materials and Methods: The present study sought to understand the impact of such events, by taking the recent COVID-19 pandemic as a prototype to explore how maternal age, stress, and work experience mediate self-esteem among working mother (N = 148).

Results: Hierarchical regression revealed that maternal age and stress are significant predictors of self-efficacy.

Conclusion: Results indicate the need for tailored interventions in the presence of actual and psychological threat to deteriorating coping resources of the vulnerable population.

Key Word: Working mothers, Self-efficacy, Non-normative history graded influences

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I. COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mediation Study Of Stress, Self-Efficacy, Work Experience, And Maternal Age

The new-age idealized superwoman identity of working mothers in India seems to have generated a host of concerns for health-care providers across the country (Chakraborty, 2023; Travasso et al., 2014). Structural inequalities in gendered parenting have been around for a long time, but they become particularly stark in the face of non-normative history-graded events—unpredictable socio-political and economic crises that disrupt daily life and strain existing support systems (Fielding-Singh et al., 2024). Events such as economic recessions, political upheavals, and public health emergencies often amplify the caregiving burden on working mothers, forcing them to navigate intensified stressors with limited resources (King et al., 2021). In light of this discussion, post COVID-19 studies suggest excessively stretched and strained gendered nature of parenting with mothers being unable to access healthcare (Mazumdar et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2022). Numerous studies describe the ill effects of the pandemic on vulnerable populations. However, research remains scanty in exploring maternal mental health in the landscape of global and economic crises.

It must be understood that the well-established U-shaped relationship between women's education and labour force participation does not only emphasise on educational opportunities but also opportunities at the workplace (Verick, 2014). Apart from an apparent occupational sex-segregation (Chatterjee et al., 2018), there certainly are various factors that influence women while taking up jobs including factors at the job such as perceived gender inequality (Sowmya & Panchanatham, 2023), perceived work-life balance (Agrawal & Amin, 2023), organizational politics (Sowmya et al., 2022) among others. This decision is not devoid of individual psychosocial factors such as prevalent stereotypes, lack of self-confidence, family responsibilities (Michailidis et al., 2012).

The tested "bad parent" assumption is a driving force that steers women away from workplaces and their ladder of success (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012). Keeping in mind the cemented patriarchy, several other variables come into play including concerns about infant fussiness, experiences of identity crisis as a mother opposed to an employee (Maheshwari, 2013), availability of grandparental care in the absence of the mother (Husain & Dutta, 2015), child neglect and health if work is continued after childbirth (Poduval & Poduval, 2009), and flexible work options at workplace that are not limited to breastfeeding-friendly workplaces (Dinour & Szaro, 2017).

The Maternity Benefit Amendment Act, 2017 emerged as a breakthrough that could shatter the possible identified barriers. In addition to paid maternity leaves, employers are required to provide crèche facilities either in office or within 500 metre of the office and allow women employees to make at least four

visits during the work hours (Chatterjee, 2022). Critics suggest the idea of the act merely being a “phantom legislation” considering the population of the country and the existing status of women at workplaces (Aravind, 2020; D’Cunha, 2018).

The sociology of stereotypes associated to womanhood and motherhood in the Indian context are vast and deep. Sarkar’s (2020) paper on an interdisciplinary understanding of mothers in India through the lens of a debatable Amul illustration released during the pandemic for working mothers asks its audience whether women are being seen as superheroes for working two jobs- in households and workplaces? Or, are they being put on a pedestal for merely internalizing the patriarchy when they work 9-5 at their jobs and rest of the hours taking care of their children?

The pandemic brought with itself the shutting down of child care centres, crèches, and playschools along with a complete cut-off from domestic helpers. This meant that the working mother had to not only adjust to the digital realm and the work-from-home schedule but also take care of their child or multiple children. Chau et al. (2023) found that women refrained from taking the initiative to reassign household duties even during periods of extreme stress. The responsibility of unpaid house work and caregiving disproportionately grew for women in India during the lockdown (Chauhan, 2020). Hence, the unwilling decision to quit jobs had to become a reality to prioritize childcare for a lot of mothers.

The dependent age group of children was also one of the most vulnerable to COVID-19. Research has been conducted to explore the challenges faced by the different subsets of this age group. Research on maternal-infant attachment (Mirzaki et al., 2022), burnout of mothers with toddlers (Seo & Kim, 2022), home-schooling conflicts (De Jong et al., 2022) and adolescent psychopathology (Lengua et al., 2022) during the pandemic, are suggestive of the psychological picture of working mothers. All of these trials of motherhood when put into the context of holding a job in time of an impending economic crisis can be perceived to be a threat to the “supermom” identity.

Theoretical Framework

Hobfoll’s (1989) conservation of resources theory (COR) emphasises on objective elements of threat or loss to resources of an individual – person, social, material - over individual cognitive appraisals of stress to understand the effects of continuously occurring stressors (Folkman, 2010). The theory adequately helps understand the multi-fold and recurring consequences of the pandemic, including financial strain, health issues, and additional psychosocial stressors (Chaudhary et al., 2020; Srivastava & Agarwal, 2020).

Present Study

In a study conducted by Jasrotia and Meena (2021) a majority of women reported that their efficacy was compromised because of household chores during the pandemic. When non normative influences strike, stress gets elevated and has a ripple effect onto other psychological variables. Literature is suggestive of how people of different ages respond differently to challenges because of difference in knowledge and experience with support from social and emotional theories of aging (Jiang & Fung, 2019). Hence, maternal age is taken as a variable of interest.

Moreover, there are conflicting studies in the literature that point to work experience as contributing positively to self-efficacy (Abun et al., 2021; Ineson et al., 2013). Hence, work experience is studied as a variable of interest to establish its role in the present study.

The dearth of literature in this domain makes it even more important that the identity of a professional is understood in the backdrop of motherhood to ensure gender-fair practices at the workplace. Drawing from the discussion, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between the self-efficacy levels of working women during the pandemic and their stress levels. It further aims to investigate how this relationship between the two variables is mediated by the mother’s age and their work experience.

Hypothesis 1: There would be a significant relationship between stress and self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 2: Maternal Age is a significant predictor of self-efficacy

Hypothesis 3: Work experience is a significant predictor of self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 4: Taken together, stress, maternal age, and work experience are significant predictors of self-efficacy.

II. Material And Methods

Participants

Participants in the study comprised working mothers within the age range of 24 – 43 years. The sample includes mothers with at least one child below the age of 15 years of age and maximum of three children, and at least a year of work experience. The data was collected through the process of random sampling. The original sample of N = 167 was cleaned and coded before the data analyses, with 18 participant responses discarded as

they did not fit the inclusion criteria which led to a sample size of N = 148. Reliability statistics and normality testing were computed to ascertain whether assumptions were met for the computation of the planned analysis.

Table 1
Demographic information

Age range	No. of participants	Average work experience (in years)
<25	3	1.3
25-27	6	1.5
28-30	22	1.5
31-33	42	1.6
34-36	35	2.2
37-39	35	3.0
40-42	4	3
43-45	1	1
Grand Total	148	2.1

Measures

Stress. Perceived Stress Questionnaire (1993), a 30-item self-report scale developed by Levenstein and colleagues was used to obtain data on the stress experienced by the sample. The instrument evaluates stressful life events that might trigger or intensify physical symptoms. The PSQ has an internal consistency ranging from 90 to .92 and a test-retest reliability of .82. Respondents indicate on a scale from 1 (“almost never”) to 4 (“usually”) how frequently they experience stress and related feelings. Higher scores indicate greater stress levels.

Self-efficacy. The General Self-efficacy Scale (1995) developed by Matthias Jerusalem and Ralf Schwarzer was employed to evaluate the level of self-efficacy among the sample. The GSE is correlated to emotion, optimism, and work satisfaction. Cronbach’s alpha has been found to be between 0.76 and 0.90 with 0.83 in particular for women in the Indian context (Waraich & Chechi, 2017). Respondents rate on a scale from 1 (“not at all true”) to 4 (“exactly true”) how true they believe certain statements are for them. Higher scores indicate higher self-efficacy.

Procedure

Demographic data was collected by the sample wherein their age, gender, profession, years of experience in the profession, number of children and ages of the children were recorded. Each individual then filled the PSQ for the assessment of their stress levels followed by the GSE for evaluating the levels of their self-efficacy through a Google form.

III. Results

Table 1
Correlation Matrix

Variables	SE	Age	No. of children	Stress	Work ex
SE	—				
Age	0.377**	—			
No. of Children	0.126	0.440***	—		
Stress	-0.419***	0.248**	-0.111	—	
Work Ex	0.319***	0.617***	0.284***	-0.198*	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 1 details Pearson’s correlation coefficients for the variables considered in the study. Self-efficacy is significantly negatively correlated with stress (r = -0.419, p < 0.001), positively correlated with age (r = 0.377, p < 0.01) and work experience (r = 0.319, p < 0.001).

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression

Order of entry		Adjusted R ²	β	SE	t	Sig	Durbin Watson
Predictor Variable	Predicted Variable						
Stress	F = 31.041**	.170	-.41	.030	-5.57**	0.00	2.322
	Self-efficacy						
Maternal Age	F = 22.494**	.226	.25	.108	3.41**	0.01	

	Self-efficacy						

Table 2 reports the hierarchical regression performed on self-efficacy of working mothers as the criterion variable. The adjusted R² for stress is .17 indicating that stress is leading to 17% variance in the scores on self-efficacy with $\beta = -.41$ ($t = -5.7, p < 0.01$). Further, adjusted R² for maternal age is .22 indicating that maternal age is leading to 22% variance in the scores on self-efficacy with $\beta = .25$ ($t = 3.41, p < 0.01$). Thus, the analysis explains that stress and maternal age account for significant variance in explaining self-efficacy and are significant predictors. Further, work experience was excluded from the analysis on SPSS as it was deemed statistically insignificant.

IV. Discussion

The present study examined the meditational role of stress, maternal age, work experience on self-efficacy among working mothers in India, taking into account the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Testing H1 indicated that there is a significant relationship between stress and self-efficacy. Studies conducted across populations indicate the role of self-efficacy as a predictor of well-being and its usefulness in achieving change across situations (Bandura, 2023). Henderson et al. (2015) found that the guilt of not meeting parental expectations among mothers leads to lower self-efficacy, higher levels of stress, and higher levels of anxiety which provides important insights from a post-pandemic lens. The significant negative relationship between self-efficacy and maternal depression among a tested wide network structure of variables is a clinically important finding that could guide interventions (Santos et al., 2018).

Testing H2 and H3 revealed that only maternal age is a significant predictor of self-efficacy as opposed to work experience. Bausch et al. (2014) demonstrated the influence of age and gender on the development of self-efficacy. The moderate relationship between self-efficacy and self-esteem (Solanki, 2022) and the rise of self-esteem till middle adulthood may also provide an explanation for the finding (Orth & Robbins, 2014; Orth et al., 2018). Existing literature is inconclusive of the effect of work experience on self-efficacy with studies presenting conflicting conclusions as tested across different work settings and populations (Abun et al. 2021; Sisco, 2014). In our present study, the insignificant effect of work experience on self-efficacy can be understood through the direct effect of work-related social support on self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2017) which was significantly reduced during and post pandemic (Lai, 2023; Miyoshi et al., 2022).

Testing H4 indicated that taken together only stress and maternal age are significant predictors of self-efficacy. This finding has important implications for the tested population as Graham et al. (2021) found that the impact of compulsory work from home on stress, work-family, and family-work conflict is gendered and regulated by parenting responsibilities. While some studies find telework as a mediator between stress and psychological well-being (Kapoor et al., 2021), others suggest that limited experience in working from home particularly among females has significantly increased their perceived stress (Hayes et al., 2020) and led to the fusion of working and non-working identities (Jasrotia & Meena, 2021) with possible effects on their self-efficacy.

Post-pandemic studies suggest that employment rate recovered for men, however, for women the likelihood dropped 9.5 points lower pointing to gender gaps in paid and unpaid work (Deshpande, 2020). Such findings coupled with the findings of the present study indicate the need for tailored interventions that also work towards building and boosting the available individual resources as suggested by COR theory.

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