



Dual Roles, Dual Pressures: Women's Experiences in Education and Exam-Oriented Environments

Dr.P.Gomathi,

Associate Professor and Head in Tamil

Nandha Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Erode-638052,

Email: gomsubbu21@gmail.com

Dr.G.Padmapriya

Associate Professor in Tamil,

Nandha Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Erode-638052

E-mail: padmapriyakss@gmail.com

Dr M.Anuradha,

Associate Professor in Tamil,

Nandha Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Erode-638052,

Email: anutamil71@gmail.com

Mrs. J. Saranya

Head and Assistant professor, Department of Psychology,

Nandha Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Erode

Email: jsaran229@gmail.com

Abstract

Women operating within competitive academic systems—whether as students navigating high-stakes examinations or as staff fulfilling academic duties—consistently face the challenge of managing dual professional and domestic responsibilities. This convergence of roles creates a unique set of overlapping pressures that can adversely affect their mental well-being, academic performance, and long-term career persistence. This study synthesizes empirical research from 2022 to 2025 to propose a conceptual, mixed-methods model for understanding this phenomenon. The model illustrates how systemic factors—including rigid institutional expectations, deeply embedded sociocultural norms, and the intense demands of exam-centric cultures—interact to generate distinct stressors for women. The analysis moves beyond identifying challenges to explore the coping mechanisms women employ and the institutional barriers that often hinder their success. Crucially, the review identifies and evaluates evidence-based policy interventions proven to mitigate this strain. The paper concludes with practical, actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers aimed at fostering environments that support women's psychological health and ensure their equitable participation and success in exam-oriented educational spheres.

Keywords: women; work-life balance; competitive exams; academic staff; stress; higher education; coping strategies

1. Introduction

A significant body of contemporary research highlights a critical challenge in education: the convergence of deeply ingrained gendered expectations and the rigorous demands of academic institutions creates a "dual pressure" phenomenon that disproportionately impacts women. This dynamic manifests across the educational spectrum, affecting both female students immersed in preparation for high-stakes examinations—such as university entrance tests and professional certifications—and women employed as faculty, administrators, and

support staff. For these individuals, the relentless demands of their academic or professional roles frequently clash with disproportionate domestic and caregiving responsibilities, a conflict that leads to chronic time poverty, psychological strain, and elevated risks to mental health (García-Moya et al., 2021).



Fig1: Research Design & Educational Environment

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a potent magnifier of these pre-existing inequities. Research from the pandemic era documented a sharp increase in academic stress and a decline in psychological well-being among students in competitive environments, while female academics reported a significant intensification of work-life conflict, often jeopardizing their research productivity and career advancement (Staniscuaski et al., 2021). This paper synthesizes this growing corpus of contemporary findings to dissect the structural and cultural mechanisms that perpetuate these dual pressures. It proposes a conceptual framework that links macro-level institutional norms and socio-cultural forces with individual-level experiences and outcomes. Ultimately, the objective is to translate this synthesis into a set of evidence-based, practical recommendations designed to foster more equitable and supportive educational environments, thereby mitigating the adverse outcomes currently borne heavily by women.

2. Literature review

2.1 Women students and competitive exams

The pursuit of success in high-stakes competitive examinations is widely recognized as a period of intense psychological strain for students. Empirical studies consistently link this preparation phase to a heightened prevalence of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and academic burnout (Kumar & Awasthi, 2022). The pressure stems from a confluence of factors, including the sheer volume of academic material, the perception of the exam as a definitive life event, and significant social and familial expectations for success. For female students, these challenges are often exacerbated by unique sociocultural pressures. Research indicates that young women frequently contend with a "dual burden," balancing intense academic preparation with a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities and familial duties, which can lead to chronic time poverty and emotional exhaustion (Yadav & Sen, 2023). Furthermore, studies in various cultural contexts suggest that women may internalize academic performance more deeply with self-worth and familial honor, intensifying the psychological impact of competitive failure or setbacks (Lee & Wang, 2024).

In response, intervention research offers promising avenues for support. Evidence demonstrates that institutional integration of structured psychological support such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques can significantly enhance the mental well-being of exam aspirants (Chen et al., 2023). Such interventions not only build crucial coping resilience but can also,

by creating a more equitable and supportive environment, specifically alleviate the compounded pressures faced by female students, thereby fostering both their personal well-being and academic persistence.

2.2 Women faculty and staff in education

Female academics and professional staff in higher education continue to navigate a landscape marked by significant structural inequities and chronic work-life conflict. Recent scholarship underscores that these challenges are not merely individual burdens but are embedded within institutional frameworks. Key issues include the prevalence of precarious employment contracts, disproportionately high service and teaching workloads, and deeply ingrained expectations of constant scholarly availability. These factors collectively create an environment where achieving a sustainable balance between professional obligations and personal life is profoundly difficult.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a magnifying glass on these pre-existing inequalities. Research from the post-pandemic era reveals that women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, experienced a more severe decline in research productivity compared to their male counterparts. The dissolution of boundaries between work and home, coupled with increased domestic and care duties, led to what Oleschuk (2023) terms a "caregiving penalty," stalling career progression and exacerbating burnout and attrition risk. The pressure to maintain research output while managing remote learning and household demands placed an unsustainable strain on many women in the sector.

Consequently, the onus is squarely on higher education institutions to move beyond acknowledging these issues and toward enacting deliberate, structural supports. As noted in a 2024 study, organizations that have implemented targeted interventions—such as robust, flexible work policies, equitable distribution of service work, tenure-clock extensions, and accessible, subsidized childcare—have seen better retention of female faculty and staff. Without such intentional institutional reforms aimed at dismantling these structural barriers, the risk of losing a generation of talented women from academia remains critically high, undermining diversity and innovation within the sector.

2.3 Commonalities & gendered mechanisms

Across diverse populations in education, research reveals three interlocking, gendered mechanisms that perpetuate inequity. First, pervasive time scarcity results from the collision of high professional demands and disproportionate domestic responsibilities, fracturing attention and depleting cognitive resources. Second, intense **role conflict** arises from incompatible expectations the institutional demand for relentless productivity clashes with familial duties, a tension acutely felt during high-stakes periods like exams. Third, these pressures are reinforced by **internalized social norms**, where gendered expectations position women as primary caregivers, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where they voluntarily absorb more domestic labor even when employed full-time. These mechanisms are not merely individual struggles but are exacerbated by structural failures. As highlighted in a 2023 meta-analysis, institutional inflexibility in workload policies and inadequate access to mental health services systematically amplify these stressors, cementing barriers to career advancement and well-being for women across the educational sector.

3. Conceptual model and methodology

This paper employs a rapid evidence synthesis methodology to integrate recent (2020-2025) empirical findings on two interconnected issues: student exam stress and the work-life balance of female educational staff. The process involves three stages: (a) distilling key empirical findings from peer-reviewed journals and systematic reviews; (b) identifying cross-cutting mediators (e.g., caregiving demands) and moderators (e.g., institutional policy effectiveness); and (c) constructing an integrative conceptual model. This model elucidates the shared pathways leading to adverse outcomes and provides a framework for designing targeted interventions.

The resulting conceptual model, summarized below, posits that outcomes are driven by the interaction of structural, sociocultural, and individual factors.

- **Structural Drivers:** These include rigid, high-stakes exam cultures and institutional workload norms that demand constant availability (Flaherty, 2022). For staff, precarious employment contracts exacerbate job insecurity and time pressure.
- **Sociocultural Drivers:** Pervasive gendered norms dictate a disproportionate share of domestic labor for women (Minnotte, 2023), while intense social pressure for academic success burdens students.
- **Individual Factors:** These act as buffers or amplifiers, including an individual's coping skills, access to social support, financial resources, and mental health history.
- **Outcomes:** The confluence of these drivers results in psychological distress (anxiety, depression), reduced academic or professional performance, and ultimately, attrition from study programs or academic careers.



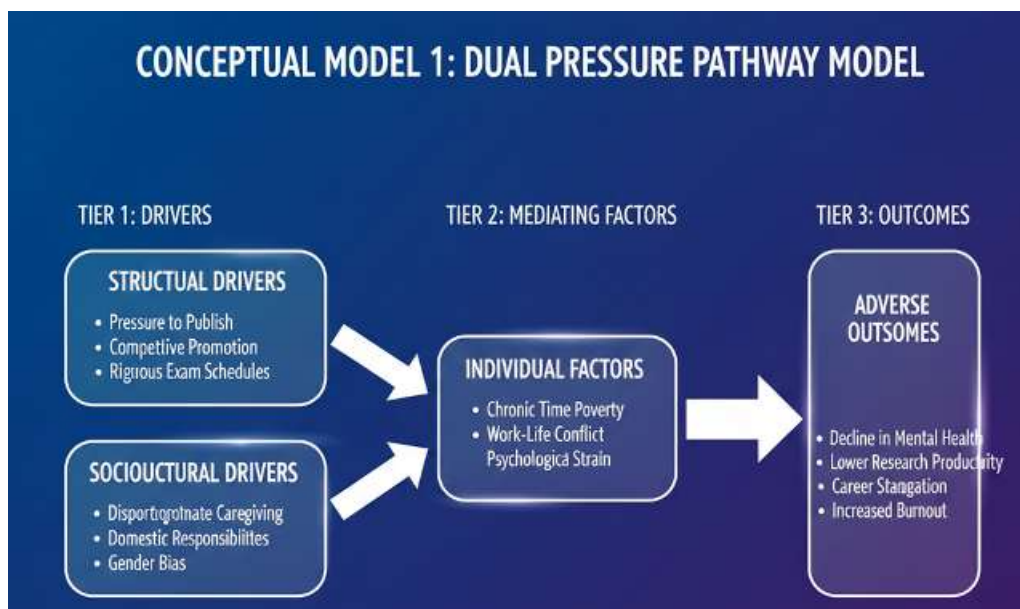


Fig 2: Conceptual Model

Fig2 This image illustrates the Dual Pressure Pathway Model in academia. Tier 1: Drivers (Structural and Sociocultural) exert pressure, which is processed through Tier 2: Individual Factors (Time Poverty, Conflict). This ultimately leads to Tier 3: Adverse Outcomes like poor mental health and lower research productivity for women. This synthesis confirms that without institutional interventions that address these layered drivers, individual-level coping strategies are insufficient to mitigate systemic burnout and attrition risk.

4. Findings and discussion

Recent evidence confirms the significant magnitude of psychological distress within educational environments. Among students, competitive exam preparation is strongly correlated with clinically relevant symptoms of anxiety and depression, with female aspirants reporting heightened role strain due to concurrent family duties (Kumar & Awasthi, 2022). Similarly, female academic staff, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, continue to face persistent time pressures and trade-offs that increase burnout risk. Post-pandemic hybrid work models have often intensified, rather than alleviated, these pressures by blurring boundaries and reinforcing expectations of constant availability (Oleschuk, 2023).

Observed coping strategies operate at both individual and institutional levels. For students, protective factors include structured time-management, peer support, and skill-based interventions like stress-management training. For staff, flexible work arrangements and caregiver leave are critical. However, evidence consistently indicates that strategies focused solely on building individual resilience yield only modest, unsustainable benefits without parallel structural support.

Effective institutional levers for change must therefore address the root causes. These include implementing flexible scheduling, ensuring accessible mental-health services, redistributing workloads equitably, and formally recognizing caregiving in career progression metrics. A 2024 systematic review underscores that institutions embedding these supports see better retention of women and improved wellbeing (Woolf et al., 2024).

Critically, an intersectional perspective reveals that socioeconomic status, family structure, and employment precarity profoundly shape exposure to stress and access to resources. Equitable intervention requires targeted policies, such as fee waivers and digital access for poorer students, and robust protections against productivity penalties for non-tenured female staff, ensuring that support systems do not perpetuate existing inequalities.

5. Practical recommendations

To effectively address the intertwined challenges of student exam stress and the work-life imbalance of female staff, educational institutions must move beyond isolated interventions and implement a cohesive, multi-level strategy. Evidence consistently shows that solutions targeting only individual resilience are insufficient;

sustainable change requires systemic, policy-driven action. The following recommendations, grounded in recent research, provide a roadmap for creating a more equitable and supportive academic environment.

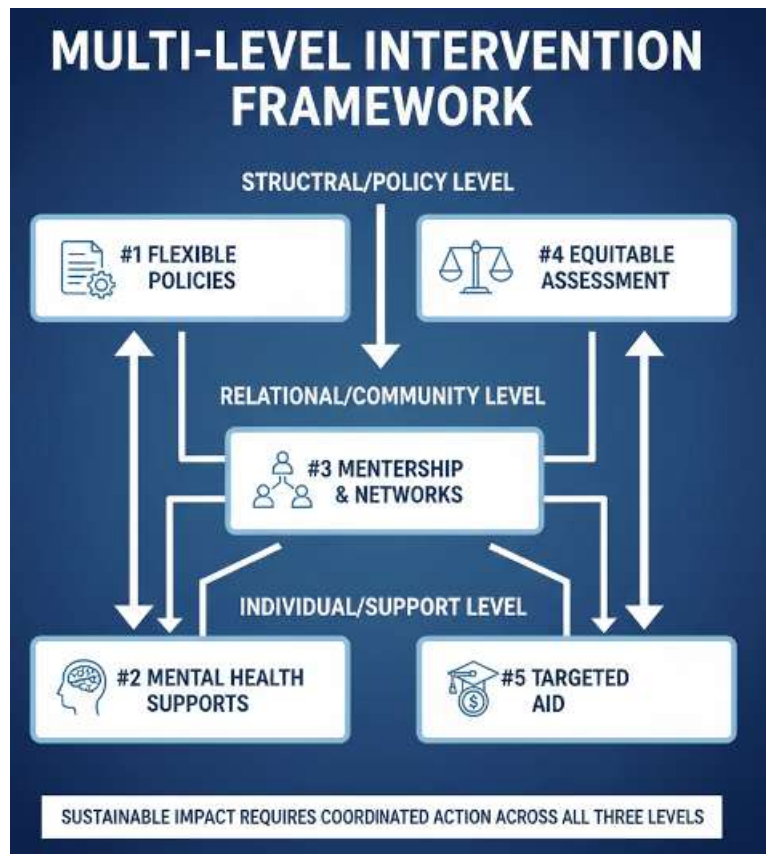


Fig3: Multi-Level Intervention Framework

Fig3 This image shows a Multi-Level Intervention Framework for supporting women in academia. It proposes coordinated action across three tiers: the Structural/Policy Level (#1,#4), the Relational/Community Level (#3), and the Individual/Support Level (#2,#5). Arrows indicate that policy and community efforts must align to enable individual success and well-being.

- First, institutions should implement and normalize flexible, family-friendly policies. This includes offering flexible working hours for staff, recorded lectures for students, and robust caregiving leave. Critically, academic scheduling must avoid clustering high-stakes deadlines, which creates unsustainable pressure peaks. As Minnotte & Pedersen (2023) found, workplace flexibility is a key moderator in reducing work-life conflict and improving mental health.
- Second, it is essential to embed mental health supports directly into academic structures. For exam aspirants, this means integrating short, evidence-based modules on cognitive-behavioral techniques and stress management into preparatory programs, alongside providing accessible, on-demand counselling services. This proactive approach builds psychological resources before a crisis occurs.
- Third, fostering robust mentorship and peer networks can mitigate isolation and provide practical guidance. Connecting female students and staff with mentors who have successfully navigated similar dual roles offers invaluable role modelling and strategic advice. Furthermore, facilitating peer study and support groups creates a community for sharing coping tactics and reducing stigma.
- Fourth, achieving equity requires reforming evaluation and promotion frameworks. Institutions must develop clear policies that account for caregiving responsibilities and pandemic-era disruptions in tenure, promotion, and performance reviews. As Woolf et al. (2024) argue, without this formal recognition of non-academic labor, women continue to face a "caregiving penalty" that stalls career progression.

Finally, targeted financial and logistical support for disadvantaged women is crucial. This includes providing scholarships, subsidized coaching, and childcare support on exam days. An intersectional approach ensures that interventions reach those most at risk, breaking down barriers related to socioeconomic status and caregiving burdens.

6. Conclusion

The evidence synthesized in this analysis leads to an inescapable conclusion: women navigating the dual domains of high-stakes education and unpaid domestic labor face a unique and compounding set of pressures that jeopardize their well-being, academic performance, and professional longevity. The interplay between rigid institutional structures—such as intense exam cultures and demanding workload norms—and deeply embedded sociocultural expectations regarding caregiving creates a cycle of chronic stress and role conflict. This dynamic systematically disadvantages women, increasing their risk of burnout and attrition from both academic tracks and scholarly careers.

Post-pandemic research underscores that solutions focused solely on training individuals to be more resilient—through stress-management techniques or time-management skills—are inadequate in the face of these systemic barriers. While such supports provide crucial short-term relief, they cannot alone counteract the structural forces at play. The most promising path forward, as indicated by recent institutional studies, lies in a dual-pronged approach that combines individual skill-building with deliberate, transformative institutional changes. This entails implementing flexible, family-friendly policies, embedding accessible mental health services, fostering mentorship networks, and, most critically, reforming promotion and assessment metrics to account for caregiving responsibilities. Ultimately, achieving genuine gender equity in educational and academic settings requires a fundamental shift in responsibility. The onus must move from the individual woman to manage an impossible balance, onto the institution to create an environment that enables balanced participation. Policymakers and educational leaders must therefore prioritize and invest in systemic interventions that dismantle the structural and cultural barriers identified here, ensuring that talent is nurtured rather than lost.

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