

# RESILIENCE AS A COPING WEAPON FOR STRESS AMONG WORKING WOMEN

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<b>Abstract</b>	<i>In the past few decades, a number of great changes have ensued in the status of women in India. There has been promotion of equal sex rights to a great extent in the recent times. But, a lot of enrichments in the status of women also create various problems for women like multiple roles, lack of career progress, work longer hours, discrimination and stereotyping at work places. These are the few factors that create stress among the women. The object of this paper to review the various problems of working women and highlight the role of resilience as a coping weapon for stress among working women's wellbeing.</i>
<b>Keywords</b>	<i>stress, resilience, coping, working women</i>

## INTRODUCTION

In modern era the role and prominence of the women have been changed enormously. At the present time, Indian women's exposure to educational opportunities is substantially higher than it was some decades ago, especially in the urban setting. This has opened new vistas, increased awareness and raised aspirations of personal growth. With increasing female education and more liberty for their rights and privileges, women's attitude towards their stereotyped role is changing. Now a days, women play different role which are leading to stress and poor mental health problem in their lives. Rajasekhar and Sasikala (2013) argued that employed women face stress due to family responsibilities, job insecurity, workplace culture and high demand of job performance. They also determined that effective management of stress involves preparing role occupants to understand the nature of stress, directing stress for productive purposes, and making role occupants' to understand their strength and equipping them to develop approach strategies for coping with stress.

## PROBLEMS OF WORKING WOMEN

### Acceptance as Working Professionals

Most Indian men are yet to come to terms with the fact that women are also capable of working with them, shoulder to shoulder, in any field or professional sphere. They still visualize women as individuals who should be in charge of the kitchen and other domestic affairs.

Work is either seen as a temporary evil for women whose husbands do not earn enough, or the domain of women who do not "know their place." As a result, Indian working women do not get the respect they require from their male colleagues in the workplace.

### Balancing Work-Family Life

No matter how high their position or designation is in the office, women in India are still viewed as the family manager back home. They are expected to return home at a certain time, cook, clean and take care of family affairs.

In fact, men who help out around their house are often the butt of jokes by their male friends. This makes life extremely stressful for women who have little help around the house and have to do it all.

### **Travelling for Work is Not Acceptable**

One of the problems faced by married working women is that they cannot travel or go on tours without having to answer uncomfortable questions by most of their friends and family. This is especially true for married women, who also have a flourishing career. Their professional obligations often depend on the support and understanding of family members.

A married man can go on long official tours outside his home city, without raising eyebrows and questions from his family members and peers, but his equally-successful wife would face disapproval. As a result, women often have to opt out of jobs that involve travel or settle for not being promoted as a result.

### **Safety of Working Women**

The "nosey questions factor" aside, there is still the concern for safety of working women who need to travel on official business. Women travelling out of their home city for work trips are considered vulnerable and an easy target to fulfill the lewd intentions of their chauvinist male colleagues. Checking into a hotel alone is one of the problems faced by working women, even if the trip is purely official. Many hotels refuse to allot a room to a single woman (under strange pretexts) because of their own safety concerns or if a woman decides to stay alone, she is viewed with suspicion.

### **Unequal Pay**

One of the raging topics of discussion in the context of problems faced by working women (not only in India, but also in many other nations) is that of equal pay. Legally, a woman is entitled to get the same salary as their male colleagues for the same kind of work done by them. However, gender discrimination is rampant as many companies still do not adhere to these guidelines and pay women less than their male colleagues.

### **Discrimination at Workplace**

However, Indian women still face blatant discrimination at their workplaces. A major problem faced by the working women is sexual harassment at the work place. Further, women employees working in night shift are more vulnerable to such incidents. Nurses, for example, face this problem nearly every day. There is nothing that is done in hospitals to tackle and address the danger they face. Such blatant disregard of current Indian laws is one reason why sexual harassment at the workplace continues to increase.

Also, Indian women are often deprived of promotions and growth opportunities at work places but this doesn't apply to all working women. A majority of working women continue to be denied their right to equal pay, under the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 and are underpaid in comparison to their male colleagues. This is usually the case in factories and labor-oriented industries.

Makowska studied psychosocial determinants of stress and well-being among working women and found significance of the work-related stressors was evidently greater than that of the stressors associated with the family function, although the relationship between family functioning, stress and well-being was also significant. Research has shown that the more juggling incidents per day, the better her chances for having low satisfaction at the end of the day. (Williams & Suls, 1991) and the chances for experiencing stress buffering effects increases. In addition, Repetti et al, (1989) reported that women who do not get their spouse support in household management are also experiences high level of stress.

Stress in work place can be regarded as any negative, stressful or difficult situation of hardship that is encountered in the occupational setting (Jackson et al., 2007). The changing and

modernization of the current working environment have had employees work longer hours. Work stress can be defined as the negative effects on the worker's physical and emotional health as a result of the mismatch between the worker's capabilities, resources or needs and the requirements of the job (NIOSH, 1999). Stephen Palmer and Kristina Gyllensten (2005) noticed, multiple roles, lack of career progress, discrimination and stereotyping are the factors that create stress among the women. They confirmed that women reported higher levels of stress compared to men. In addition De Meis&Perkins(1996) discussed that women are still considered responsible for the majority of household labor and management, child care and elder care and employed women work to the equivalent of two full time jobs. The dual roles of the working women are leading to stress in their lives. This makes employed women experience strain on their time and energy. (Hughes &Galinsky, 1988; Kenney &Bhattacharee, 2000).In the same way, Ansuman, Adithya and Madhulita (2014) determined that maximum number of women is suffering from poor mental health. According to them home and workplace atmosphere played a major role in deciding mental health status of women. Furthermore, this study is a comparison in the degree of occupational stress experienced by married and unmarried working women. The study reveals that married women are experiencing more stress than unmarried women, and the stress is explained in terms of traditional trends, demands of society and more roles and responsibilities assigned to them as a mother, wife and homemaker (Nagina, P., 2009). This statement is also supported by Kodavatiganti&Bulusu (2011) and said that women educators face comparatively higher level of stress than men counterparts. The stresses amongst the academicians are caused because of lengthy working hours, scarce resources and classrooms that are over filled. The study accomplishes that moderate level of job stress and quality of life was found among majority of the respondents.

Balaji, R. (2014) studied various factors which could lead to work family conflict and the stress undergone by women employees. He concluded that married women employees experience work family conflict due to the number of hours worked outside the home, flexible or in flexible working hours, size of the family and number of dependents of the family. These factors have unembellished consequences for the psychological distress and well-being of married working women.

Sussanna (2012) identified high psychological demands; job strain and low job control are associated with increased stroke risk in working women.

Bhuvaneshwari (2013) revealed that stress in married working women is caused due to various family and official commitments, harassments at work place, working for long hours and improper work life balance. These factors lead to stress in working women such as prolonged headaches, hypertension and obesity. She also concluded that stress can be relieved from balancing work and family, from institutional support, by spending time with the family and performing physical exercises.

Stephen et.al. (2005) discovered work overload, uncooperative patients, criticism, negligent co-workers, lack of support from supervisors, and difficulties with physicians are the factors that cause stress among the nurses. They also suggested that interventions to reduce stress might improve interpersonal and motivational aspects of job performance.

Dr. A. Chandra, Balaji, Kishore (2015) studied the relationship between self-esteem and stress, the factors that create stress among gold collar employees in Chennai city and the effect of stress on the health of the employees. Their study revealed that most of the female married employees are experiencing high level of stress compared to men and unmarried employees. From the data it is concluded that there is no significant relationship between self-esteem and stress.

Again this study is done by Ramanaiah and Subramanian (2008) on gold collar employees of

Chennai city to know the level of stress they are experiencing. According to them the employees are under high level of stress and there exists a negative relationship between marital status and stress. They concluded that stress among female employees is due to role isolation; inter role distance and role overload.

It simply seems that women are generally hectic and more stressed than men and that they disguise more roles and is constantly rushing towards goal fulfillment. Researchers from The University of Arizona's School of Family and Consumer Resources decided to find out. They took a sample of 166 married couples and had each participant maintain a daily diary over the course of 42 days, where they recorded their daily stressors. The results indeed indicated that women reported a greater amount of "high distress" days and fewer distress-free days than men. Interestingly, the differences in levels of stressful days were due to women experiencing more onsets of "distress episodes" (having stress response triggered), rather than being more likely to continue in a distressed state from one day to the next. In other words, women didn't hold onto their stress more; they just experienced more episodes of being stressed (Elizabeth Scott, M.S., 2010)

For the purposes of this paper, we refer to resilience as the ability of an individual to adjust to adversity, maintain equilibrium, retain some sense of control over their environment, and continue to move on in a positive manner. It is therefore an active process that Giordano (1997, p. 1032) describes as 'a shifting balance between vulnerability and resilience'. If equilibrium is maintained, an individual can theoretically manage any situation that comes along. Thus, I argue that developing personal resilience can reduce vulnerability.

Resilience is a scientific term that applies to materials that have the capacity to return to their original shape after being bent or stretched. Over time, however, we have come to apply the term to people as well. Individuals who have the ability to recover readily from illness, depression, defeat, or other kind of adversity. Resilience has been defined as the capacity to withstand, regulate and cope with ongoing life challenges and succeeds in maintaining equilibrium despite negative effects from stress (DiCorcia&Tronick, 2011; Montpetit, Bergeman, Deboeck, Tiberio, & Boker, 2010; O'Neill & Dias, 2007; Schetter&Dolbier, 2011).

The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress (*para. 4*)." While this definition is useful, it does not reflect the complex nature of resilience. Determinants of resilience include a host of biological, psychological, social and cultural factors that interact with one another to determine how one responds to stressful experiences.

For many women, resilience is a strength considered essential. Both women and men need resilience to deal with difficulties in life. But, women often need more resilience than men to overcome traditional obstacles placed in their way, in order to advance in the business world. Too many women, however, are not aware of the amount of resilience they do possess. An individual who adapts well to stress in a workplace or in an academic setting, may fail to adapt well in their personal life or in their relationships.

Resilience plays the significant role of a defensive factor, protecting the individual's psychological being and increasing positive changes when coping with stressful situations (Dolbier, Jaggars, & Steinhardt, 2010; Kinman& Grant, 2011). It seeks to promote and maintain health and avert illness (Muller, 2009). Recent literature has progressively shifted focus to study resilience in the context of overcoming everyday moderate stress instead of chronic stresses like abuse and discrimination as it is also perceived as a stressor that may negatively impact an individual (DiCorcia&Tronick, 2011; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Gail M. Wagnild, Ph.D, is founder the Resilience Center and a national expert on resilience, and she says that when you know your capacity for resilience, it gives you the confidence to deal

with whatever life throws at you. Being resilient helps you to cope in variety of different ways, be they personal, professional, or social.

### **SOME FEATURES THAT BUILD RESILIENCE**

Psychologists believed that individuals can develop and strengthen personal resilience through developing strategies for reducing their own vulnerability, and the personal impact of adversity in the workplace. Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) suggest that everyone has resilience potential, but its level is determined by individual experiences, qualities, the environment and by each person's balance of risk and protective factors. Protective factors help individuals to achieve a positive outcome regardless of the risk (Tusaie & Fredrickson 2004).

The literature review acknowledged a number of factors that either build or impede resilience in working women.

### **PERSONAL QUALITIES**

Internal resources were identified in the literature as a major contribution to women resilience. Toth's (2003) study with refugee women suggests that personal qualities such as optimism, adaptability and perseverance helped them to cope and survive. A belief in one's own inner strength to deal with life's challenges, (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez & Westoby, 2003) a positive attitude, and having hope for a good future helped working women to cope (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, 2008). The determination to cope was seen as a component of taking control, rather than being a victim (Gorman, Brough & Ramirez, 2003). Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham's (2009) study suggests that looking ahead to the future strengthens people's resilience. One participant in the study stated: "I am going to lay a good foundation for me, for my children, for my family" (Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009, p. 38). Similarly, a study with the 'Lost Boys of Sudan' identified that an acceptance of the situation and refocusing on the present and the future helped some of the boys to cope (Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson & Rana, 2009).

### **BECOMING MORE REFLECTIVELY**

Theories of adult learning recognize the importance of reflection to learning (Larson & Brady 2001, Wilson & Kiely 2002). Reflection is a way of developing insights and understandings into experiences, and of developing knowledge that can be used in subsequent situations. In reflection, concrete experience is used as a catalyst for thinking and learning. Journaling can be a useful reflective strategy (Giordano 1997). Writing about an experience is known to be useful, in that the writer ascribes meaning to events (Jackson 2000). Thus, new understandings and insights can arise for the writer through the act of writing. For example, experiencing consistently negative emotional responses about a person, place or thing can be very illuminating, and may be a catalyst for reflection and exploring ways of adopting more positive responses to particular situations, people and events.

### **SUPPORT**

Social support has been identified as a significant component in resilience, and the maintenance of relationships is a component of social support (Tusaie & Fredrickson 2004). Separately from personal qualities being linked to working women resilience, external forms of support were also prominent in the construction of resilience. A number of qualitative studies highlighted the importance of family (including extended family), friends, and community in boosting resilience process. Support included both the mutual processes of giving and receiving support. In a qualitative study, Bosnian women cited the support received from their spouses, children and family as a key factor in building their resilience. As one participant stated: "once you have family you cannot give up, you have to stay strong for them" (Sossou, Craig, Ogren & Schnak,



2008, p. 378). Likewise, qualitative studies conducted in Australia also confirmed support and its relationship to resilience (Schweitzer, Greenslade&Kagee, 2007). Apart from receiving support from friends and family, people also utilized their own ethnic community to help them cope and adjust to their new way of life (Schweitzer et al., 2007). Mixing and having a strong attachment with their ethnic peers, helped people to cope with resettlement, and was associated with significantly “greater levels of well-being in the psychological, social and environmental domains” (Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett, 2010, p. 1404).

Lenette, Brough and Cox’s (2012) qualitative research with single women found resilience building is connected to ‘person–environment interactions’, rather than being linked to static, individual-inner traits. Moreover, the women’s narratives suggest resilience is underpinned by a dynamic process which is fluid, contextual and constructed continually throughout ordinary, day-to-day processes involving challenges and opportunities. Pulvirenti and Mason’s (2011) study with service providers working with working women experiencing violence, also confirm that resilience is a process rather than a fixed inner personal characteristic. Moreover, the service providers argue such essentialist individualized notions of resilience can be used by governments to reduce their social responsibility in providing services and resources, and this can lead to blaming an individual for their current circumstances (Pulvirenti& Mason, 2011). Furthermore, the service providers suggest that the women’s resilience is constructed in an environment of external support, not just from friends, and within their own ethnic communities but their resilience is conditional upon the assistance of the wider host community (Pulvirenti& Mason, 2011). These studies suggest resilience moves beyond the essentialist notion of resilience that resides within an individual alone, an inner trait, to encompass personal qualities that also interact within a social context. This equates to the concept of social construction that argues that knowledge and understanding about the world comes from exchanges between people in their social, cultural and historical context (Payne,M 2005). Thus, human meanings made from such interactions “are never singular, individual or simply subjective, never outside the social, but have shared inter subjective meaning within the cultural nexus of power and knowledge” (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007, p. 9).

### **DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL INSIGHT**

There is increasing literature on the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in the workplace. In broad terms, EI is the ability to understand one’s own emotional needs, and have insight into the emotional needs of those encountered in the workplace (Daly et al. 2004). Understanding one’s own emotional needs and reactions gives insights into how to cope with stress and adversity and can help spawn ideas for different ways of coping in the future (Bright 1997, Giordano 1997). Furthermore, as discussed earlier, positive emotions can assist in developing resilience (Fredrickson 2004, Tugade& Fredrickson 2004), and so developing insight into negative and positive emotions could be a beginning step in strengthening personal resilience. Giordano (1997) suggests journaling and self-reflection as strategies for enhancing emotional insight, as does McGee (2006).

### **BUILDING POSITIVE FOSTERING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS AND LINKAGES**

Building positive professional relationships is essential for working women. This is the network that becomes a professional support system. We each need a network of people who can be called upon for guidance and support when needed. It is especially important to develop systems with people outside the immediate work area. These coworkers can provide authentication and take on the role of sounding board, especially at times when tensions are running high in the workplace and when seeking such support within their own workplace may

expose individuals to unnecessary vulnerability. Professional networks should include relationships that are nurturing in nature. Ideally, all collegial relationships would have some degree of nurturing but this is often not the case. Everyone needs to be nurtured sometimes and it is important to foster these nurturing relationships. Actively seeking particular relationships, such as a mentoring relationship, can provide nurses with the opportunity to enter into mutually beneficial supportive and nurturing relationships (Daly et al. 2004).

Mentorship has been alluded to in the literature in relation to building healthy relationships to protect children at risk and promote resiliency (e.g. Gilligan 1999, Benard & Marshall 2001, Joining 2003). From the perspective of nursing, McGee (2006) notes the benefits of guidance and support from colleagues and the need to nurture traits of resiliency in the self, students and co-workers.

### ACCOMPLISHING LIFE BALANCE

A number of writers define the importance of feelings of connectedness, achieving life balance and having an 'anchoring force' in life (Giordano 1997, p. 1033). Tusaie and Fredrickson (2004) acknowledge the importance of 'a belief system that provides existential meaning, a cohesive life narrative and an appreciation of the uniqueness of oneself' (p. 4) for having high levels of resilience. Regardless of spiritual beliefs, it is important to participate in a range of healthy activities outside one's professional life. These activities should ideally include those that are physically, emotionally and spiritually nurturing. In this way, it is possible to retain some balance in life, in working women very demanding career such as nursing.

### THINKING AND COPING STYLES

Psychologist and executive coach Naomi Harrison states that, "The way you think about challenges can help you build resilience and well-being at work".

Harrison recommends practicing the following strategies to build resilient thinking:

Think about what is working well. This can help problems seem smaller and empower you to act.

Remind yourself of previous accomplishments – both big and small. For example, ask yourself: When have you had success coping dealing with a problem in the past? What did you do that made it successful? Can you use any of those strategies to the current issue? This type of thinking can help increase your confidence and help you feel empowered.

Break issues into smaller chunks and smaller goals. Smaller goals make it easier to see progress and can motivate you to persist through challenges.

Focus on what is in your control and act on that.

Be prepared for mistakes or setbacks to happen. When mistakes happen, see them as problems to be solved and shift your attention to working out how to overcome the issue.

### RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Religion and spirituality are strongly identified as another major factor contributing to refugee people's resilience. Several studies have shown that religion in its various forms is linked to enhancing a person's psychological and physical wellbeing (Green & Elliot, 2010). For example a study with 62 young orphaned participants suggested that Buddhist spirituality promoted resilience in children in many ways: it offered them "structure, encouraged cognitive restructuring, acceptance of the trauma, cultivated a sense of control and the rituals promoted integration in the broader community" (Fernando & Ferrari, 2011, p. 70). Schweitzer et al. (2007) suggests a belief in God helped people regain control and meaning in their lives. Another study found some refugee people resigned them to the situation, and believed fate was out of

their hands and in God's hands (Khawaja et al., 2008). Spirituality gave other refugee people strength: whether it was a belief in a "higher power, calling on dead relatives or something deep inside," spirituality assisted refugee people to cope through hard times (Sossou et al., 2008, p. 378).

### MAINTAINING POSITIVITY

By definition, adversity is not a positive phenomenon. However, adversity and hardship often do have some positive aspects. Resilient people are able to draw on some form of positive emotion even in the midst of stress and hardship (Fredrickson 2004, Tugade& Fredrickson 2004). Bright (1997) provides a list of elements of resilience. She identifies optimism as a key component and in this way concurs with Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) in identifying positive emotions as important. In addition to optimism, Bright associates factors such as autonomy, empowerment, emotional awareness and self-care as important in developing resilience. Optimism and the capacity to see the range of future possibilities that events carry with them are aspects of maintaining a positive outlook (Bright 1997). Resilient people are able to see the positive aspects and potential benefits of a situation, rather than being continually negative or cynical. Positive emotions and laughter are associated with beneficial physical and emotional outcomes (Tugade& Fredrickson 2004), and Bonanno (2004, 2005) suggests that positive emotion and laughter can decline levels of adversity-related stress by reducing negative emotions.

Even in this day and age, there is an inflated adage – bought into by many, dictating that men are definitely the stronger sex. There are obviously varying degrees and definitions for the word 'strength.' Physiologically speaking, men are typically stronger – when you are talking about raw brute strength than their female counterparts are. (But NOT always, as we know of some pretty strong women in this world)

But when it comes to mental, emotional, and psychological strength – the picture of a woman breaking down into sappy puddles at the first hint of strife in their lives, is quickly becoming nothing more than a ruse. Women are not only able to defy obstacles, but have an uncanny and creative ability to overcome the odds, deal with drastic life changes and find solutions to problems in an unpredictable world that is seemingly changing the way society looks at a woman. Truth is, we should never underestimate the strength and resilience of a woman!

For instance, often when things in life don't go as planned or roadblocks are hit such as; getting passed over for a job, getting pregnant unexpectedly, raising a child alone, suffering through the loss of a spouse's job, the family home burns down, a car accident, health issues within the family – it is so often the steadfast woman who is holding all things together. When it comes to keeping calm and moving on, today's woman has become the jack of all trades, dealing with levels of stress from the family level to the professional level. Today women are strong & resilient and should never be underestimated. Their strength lies in their ability to bounce back, to lead, be creative and yet do all the things a man can do. That said they still have the compassionate and caring side that cares for the sick, raises our children and keeps families together.

Devastatingly, the review point to the importance of promoting positive behavior, identifying and minimizing risks, enlightening the relationship of resilience with other aspects, and developing intervention programs that incorporate support network resources. Empirical studies have primarily focused on at risk females who are physically and mentally ill, abused, psychologically vulnerable and maladjusted, while little is known about females who are considered physically and mentally healthy. It will be interesting to study more on working mothers and female in resilience studies to observe the interplay between work stress and resilience, especially working mothers who play multiple roles.

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