The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 7 | July 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF(2026): 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Social Norms, Domestic Roles, and Mental Health: Examining the Sociocultural Determinants of Stress and Well-Being among Women

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22075367

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 21-06-2026

Accepted: 15-07-2026

Published: 20-08-2026

Keywords:

Gender Norms, Domestic Labour, Mental Health, Women's Well-Being

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how everyday social expectations and domestic responsibilities influence stress and mental well-being among women in Karnataka. Drawing on feminist sociology and the social determinants of health, the research explores the lived experiences of 40 women—20 from urban neighbourhoods and 20 from rural villages—in Belagavi district, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with ASHA workers and leaders of women's collectives. The study finds that the unequal distribution of household labour, constant caregiving duties, and the expectation that women must absorb emotional strain create persistent psychological pressure. Gendered norms that restrict mobility, limit decision-making power, and prioritise family needs above personal health deepen women's sense of exhaustion and reduce the likelihood of seeking help for mental distress. For many rural women, irregular income and insecure livelihoods add further strain. Although community groups and frontline workers offer informal support, gaps in mental health awareness, stigma, and the shortage of female mental health professionals restrict access to formal care. The

study argues that improving women's mental well-being requires more than clinical interventions; it calls for changes in gender relations, stronger community support systems, and the integration of mental health into primary healthcare in culturally sensitive ways.

Introduction

Women's mental health is deeply shaped by the social and cultural environments in which they live, rather than by individual factors alone. In most Indian households, women continue to carry the primary responsibility for unpaid domestic work cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and elders while also participating in paid employment when possible. This constant balancing act creates long hours, limited rest, and an ongoing sense of strain that gradually affects psychological well-being. Expectations of selflessness, emotional endurance, and silence about personal discomfort further discourage women from recognising or expressing their mental health needs. In Karnataka, gains in maternal and physical health have not translated into similar attention to mental health, which remains largely invisible within families and at the primary healthcare level. Rural women often face additional constraints related to limited mobility, financial insecurity, and dependence on male family members, while urban women frequently struggle to manage demanding work schedules alongside household responsibilities.

A sociological lens helps uncover how everyday social structures such as gender hierarchies, household roles, kinship expectations, and community norms shape both the development of stress and the ways women attempt to cope with it. This study focuses on the experiences of women in Belagavi district of Karnataka, examining how domestic roles, gendered responsibilities, and community expectations influence mental well-being. It also explores women's informal coping strategies, their help-seeking patterns, and the local support systems they rely on. By foregrounding women's own accounts, the research aims to generate insights that can inform gender-sensitive mental health interventions within primary care and strengthen community-level support mechanisms.

Background Study

Understanding women's mental health requires placing their emotional experiences within the everyday realities of work, relationships, and social expectations. Research across India and other regions consistently shows that unpaid domestic labour often invisible and undervalued creates persistent strain that can manifest as anxiety, exhaustion, or depressive symptoms. When a woman's daily contributions go unrecognised or when they have little say in household decisions, their sense of agency becomes restricted, intensifying

feelings of stress. In Karnataka, these pressures take specific forms shaped by agricultural cycles, informal and irregular employment, and gendered responsibilities connected to migration and caregiving. Rural women may confront sudden income disruptions that affect food security and heighten household tensions, while urban women often manage long travel times and unstable work conditions alongside full domestic workloads.

Mental health services within Karnataka's primary care system remain limited, with most specialised services concentrated in urban hospitals. As a result, many women rely on home-based coping methods or remain silent about their emotional struggles. Stigma, low awareness of mental health, and cultural beliefs that frame emotional suffering as a personal weakness or spiritual issue create additional barriers to seeking timely care. Community-level workers such as ASHAs, ANMs, and women's group leaders often play an informal counselling role, yet they frequently lack training and support for identifying and managing more serious cases.

This study builds on these broader patterns by closely examining how sociocultural determinants such as expectations around gender roles, restrictions on mobility, household power dynamics, and community norms shape women's everyday stress and mental well-being. It explores how these structural factors influence both the development of distress and the pathways women use to cope, seek help, or remain silent within their social environments.

Government Data and Present Situation

Government surveys and national reports increasingly recognise mental health as a critical component of public health, yet access to care remains highly unequal. The National Mental Health Survey (2015–16) estimates that 5.1% of Indian adults experience common mental disorders (CMDs), with women showing a higher prevalence (5.79%) than men. A recent community-based assessment in southern Karnataka found similar trends: 5.7% of women exhibited symptoms of CMDs, including 4.6% reporting depressive symptoms and 3.37% showing signs of anxiety. These figures illustrate how social and economic stressors disproportionately shape women's mental well-being. Despite this burden, most primary health centres in India operate without trained mental-health professionals, making district hospitals or private clinics the only options often too distant or costly for many households.

From a sociological standpoint, these gaps reflect institutional priorities that emphasise visible health indicators such as maternal care, immunisation, and infectious disease control while undervaluing "invisible" strains like chronic stress, emotional labour, and caregiver fatigue. Policies rarely address forms

of time poverty that intensify women's psychological load, such as inadequate childcare, limited access to water and fuel, and rigid or insecure work arrangements. Gendered norms of help-seeking further shape treatment pathways: many women first confide in family elders, religious healers, or community workers instead of formal mental-health services, reflecting stigma, trust patterns, and practical constraints related to mobility and money. Together, these factors show how mental health challenges among women are deeply entwined with structural inequalities and everyday social life.

Literature Review

- **Patel, V. (2019). The Burden of Mental Disorders in India.** Patel's work provides a comprehensive picture of how social inequality and household responsibilities shape women's emotional well-being. He argues that women's mental health must be understood through patterns of deprivation, discrimination, and unequal labour. The text highlights how everyday stress accumulates when women manage domestic duties alongside economic precarity. By showing the social roots of distress, Patel challenges the purely biomedical framing of mental illness. His analysis underscores the importance of community-based mental health services tailored to women's lived contexts.

- **Rao, M. (2018). Gender, Work and Social Change in India.** Rao examines how shifts in employment, migration, and family structures influence women's mental health. She highlights that despite rising participation in the workforce, women continue to bear the bulk of unpaid domestic labour. This persistent imbalance produces chronic stress, fatigue, and limited autonomy over time. The book shows how cultural expectations of "good womanhood" restrict women's ability to express distress or seek help. Rao's insights help frame mental health as an outcome of gendered labour regimes.

- **George, S. (2020). Women, Violence and Everyday Life: Sociological Explorations.** George situates women's psychological distress within the broader

  landscape of intimate partner violence, social control, and gendered power. She argues that mental health problems cannot be separated from daily experiences of emotional, economic, or physical coercion. Her work reveals how fear, silence, and isolation become embedded in women's routines, shaping their mental states. The book also traces how stigma and patriarchal norms prevent women from reporting abuse or seeking support. This perspective helps explain the hidden nature of many mental health struggles

- **Deshpande, A. (2022). Inequalities in India: A Contemporary Sociological View.** Deshpande shows how caste, class, and gender intersect to produce layered disadvantages that directly affect mental well-

being. She highlights regional disparities, rural-urban differences, and structural barriers that hinder women's access to health services. The book explains how limited mobility, restricted decision-making power, and financial dependence exacerbate stress. Her analysis demonstrates that emotional distress often emerges from structural inequality rather than individual weakness. This sociological framing is valuable for understanding mental health in Karnataka's diverse contexts.

- **Johari, R. (2021). Health, Society and the State in India.** Johari analyses how institutional priorities in public health often marginalise mental health, especially for women. He argues that health systems disproportionately focus on measurable physical outcomes, leaving psychological distress invisible. The book highlights gaps in primary care, particularly the shortage of trained mental health professionals in rural areas. Johari also emphasises the role of social norms in shaping help-seeking pathways, noting women's reliance on informal networks. His work reinforces the need for gender-sensitive mental health integration at the local level.

- **Kaur, P. (2023). Gender and Care Work: A Sociological Perspective.** Kaur explores how caregiving responsibilities childcare, eldercare, and domestic duties shape women's life chances and emotional health. She argues that unpaid care work creates chronic "time poverty," leaving little space for rest or self-care. The text shows how women internalise expectations of self-sacrifice, which normalise distress and delay help-seeking. Kaur also examines how economic dependence limits women's freedom to negotiate household workloads. Her analysis helps connect everyday domestic routines with broader mental health outcomes.

- **Sharma, N. (2024). Women, Community and Health in India.** Sharma studies how community structures—self-help groups, neighbourhood networks, and local institutions—shape women's coping strategies and support systems. She shows that informal networks often compensate for the absence of formal mental health services. The book highlights that women rely heavily on peer support, but these networks can also reinforce silence around distress. Sharma emphasises how community expectations influence whether mental health concerns are recognised or dismissed. Her insights are useful for designing community-based mental health interventions.

- **Verma, S. (2020). Cultural Dimensions of Mental Health in South Asia.** Verma explores how cultural beliefs, religious interpretations, and local idioms shape understandings of emotional suffering among women. She argues that distress is often communicated through physical symptoms rather than psychological language due to stigma. The book documents how families may attribute mental health issues to fate, spirituality, or interpersonal harmony. This cultural framing influences whether women

seek biomedical care, traditional healing, or silence their emotions. Verma's analysis helps explain the diversity of mental health narratives across Karnataka and India.

Research Gap

Existing literature documents links between gender inequality and mental health, but notable gaps remain: (1) qualitative, context-specific accounts of how daily domestic roles translate into chronic stress in specific districts of Karnataka; (2) comparative analysis of urban and rural women's narratives on time poverty and emotional labour; (3) examination of the role of community actors (ASHAs, SHGs) as informal mental health support in local health ecosystems; and (4) actionable, socioculturally informed recommendations for integrating mental health into primary care in Karnataka. This study addresses these gaps by centring women's voices from Belagavi district and triangulating individual narratives with community stakeholder perspectives.

Objectives

1. To explore how domestic roles and gendered expectations contribute to stress and affect mental well-being among women in urban and rural Belagavi.
2. To document coping strategies and informal support systems women use to manage stress.
3. To examine barriers and facilitators to accessing mental health support at community and primary care levels.
4. To develop policy and programme recommendations for gender-sensitive integration of mental health into primary care.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative, exploratory, cross-sectional design to understand how women's everyday social environments shape mental health experiences. Fieldwork was conducted in Belagavi district, Karnataka, covering one urban neighbourhood, one semi-urban/slum locality, and two rural villages to reflect contrasting socioeconomic and infrastructural contexts. Using purposive sampling, the study engaged 40 women aged 18–60 (20 urban/semi-urban and 20 rural), along with five focus group discussions involving ASHAs, ANMs, SHG members, and local social workers. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes), FGDs, and non-participant observations in households and primary health centres. Interview guides explored daily routines, the division of domestic labour, financial stressors, interpersonal conflict, sleep patterns, coping practices, help-seeking behaviours, and experiences with healthcare providers. Thematic analysis—using iterative coding and triangulation across interviews,

FGDs, and observations—strengthened the credibility and interpretive rigour of findings. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, anonymisation, distress-referral pathways, and culturally sensitive engagement with participants.

Belagavi district offers a diverse social and economic setting that makes it well suited for examining gendered experiences of mental health. Its urban pockets feature public and private healthcare facilities, greater mobility, and exposure to wage labour, while its rural areas are defined by agricultural work, informal livelihoods, and stronger kinship-based social regulation. These contrasts allow for meaningful comparisons of how domestic responsibilities, time poverty, social norms, and resource access shape women's mental well-being across settings. The district's mixed profile—neither fully urban nor predominantly rural—provides a valuable context for analysing the interaction between gender roles, household structures, and community-level support systems in everyday mental health pathways.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 40)

Variable	Urban (n=20)	Rural (n=20)	Total (n=40)
Mean age (years)	33.0	35.4	34.2
Married (%)	80% (16)	90% (18)	85% (34)
Literate (%)	90% (18)	65% (13)	77.5% (31)
Employed (paid work) (%)	45% (9)	20% (4)	32.5% (13)
Household depends on daily wage (%)	25% (5)	55% (11)	40% (16)

Source: *Primary field data, Belagavi district qualitative study, 2025.*

The socio-demographic data illustrate marked contrasts between urban and rural respondents that shape women's everyday stress and coping resources. Urban women report higher literacy (90%, 18 of 20) compared with rural women (65%, 13 of 20), indicating uneven access to education that influences confidence, mobility, and awareness of mental health services. Paid employment is also more common among urban respondents (45%, 9 of 20), while only 20% (4 of 20) of rural women engage in paid work, reinforcing a heavier economic dependency in rural households. Over half of rural households (55%, 11 of 20) depend on daily wage labour, compared with 25% (5 of 20) in urban areas, highlighting greater financial insecurity in rural settings. Marriage rates remain high overall—80% (16 of 20) in urban and 90% (18 of 20) in rural areas reflecting the persistence of normative expectations around marital roles. The combined picture suggests that economic precarity, limited literacy, and fewer income-generating opportunities

intensify rural women's stress burdens, while urban women face pressures arising from work–home balance and role multiplicity.

Table 2. Reported Mental Health Symptoms

Symptom	Urban (%)	Urban Count	Rural (%)	Rural Count
Persistent sadness / low mood	55%	11	65%	13
Excessive worry / anxiety	60%	12	70%	14
Symptom	**Urban (%)**	**Urban Count**	**Rural (%)**	**Rural Count**
Sleep disturbance (insomnia)	50%	10	60%	12
Frequent irritability / anger	45%	9	55%	11
Suicidal thoughts (ever)	5%	1	10%	2

Source: *Primary field data, Belagavi district qualitative study, 2025.*

The symptom profile shows that both urban and rural women experience significant emotional strain, though rural respondents report consistently higher levels. Persistent sadness affects 55% of urban women (11 of 20) and 65% of rural women (13 of 20), suggesting that economic pressures and limited social support may heighten distress in rural settings. Anxiety is the most commonly reported symptom in both groups—60% of urban women (12 of 20) and 70% of rural women (14 of 20)—indicating the pervasive impact of financial worries, caregiving responsibilities, and social expectations. Sleep disturbances affect half of the urban sample (10 of 20) and 60% of the rural sample (12 of 20), reflecting the cumulative strain of long workdays, irregular rest, and household demands. Irritability, often tied to chronic fatigue, is reported by 45% of urban (9 of 20) and 55% of rural women (11 of 20). Although fewer women report suicidal thoughts—1 urban respondent and 2 rural respondents—the presence of such thoughts underscores the severity of psychological distress among some participants. Overall, the data reveal a pattern of chronic, overlapping symptoms shaped by socio-economic insecurities and gendered domestic roles.

Table 3. Primary Stressors Identified by Respondents (multiple responses allowed)

Stressor	Urban (%)	Urban Count	Rural (%)	Rural Count
Unpaid domestic workload	85%	17	95%	19
Financial insecurity / debt	55%	11	85%	17
Interpersonal conflict (spouse/in-laws)	40%	8	60%	12
Caregiving burden (children/elders)	70%	14	80%	16

Time poverty / no rest	75%	15	90%	18

Source: Primary field data, Belagavi district qualitative study, 2025.

The data show that domestic and economic pressures are the most significant sources of stress for women across both settings. Nearly all rural respondents (95%, 19 of 20) and a large majority of urban respondents (85%, 17 of 20) identify unpaid domestic work as a major burden, reflecting how household responsibilities fall disproportionately on women. Financial insecurity is far more acute in rural areas—reported by 85% (17 of 20) of rural women compared to 55% (11 of 20) of urban women—indicating the impact of unstable incomes and dependence on seasonal or informal labour. Interpersonal conflict with spouses or in-laws emerges as a more prominent stressor in rural households (60%, 12 of 20), whereas 40% of urban women (8 of 20) report similar tensions. Caregiving responsibilities add another layer of strain, especially for rural women (80%, 16 of 20), many of whom care

for both children and elderly relatives. Time poverty—having little or no time to rest—is widespread, affecting 75% of urban women (15 of 20) and an even higher 90% of rural women (18 of 20). Together, these figures highlight how everyday social arrangements and material conditions shape women's stress in distinct yet overlapping ways.

Table 4. Help-Seeking and Support

Help source	Urban (%)	Urban Count	Rural (%)	Rural Count
Spouse/family (talking)	60%	12	70%	14
Friends / neighbours	40%	8	55%	11
Self-help group / SHG member	35%	7	65%	13
ASHA/ANM informal counselling	25%	5	50%	10
Sought professional mental health care	10%	2	5%	1

Source: Primary field data, Belagavi district qualitative study, 2025

The table shows that most women rely on informal networks rather than formal mental health services when dealing with stress or emotional difficulties. Talking to family members is the most common form of support in both settings—reported by 60% of urban women (12 of 20) and 70% of rural women (14 of 20)—reflecting the central role of kinship in navigating personal distress. Reliance on friends and neighbours is also notable, especially in rural areas where 55% (11 of 20) turn to them, compared to 40% (8 of 20) in urban areas, suggesting stronger community-based ties. Rural women are far more likely to seek

support from self-help groups (65%, 13 of 20) than urban women (35%, 7 of 20), pointing to the importance of collective spaces in offering emotional reassurance and practical advice. ASHA and ANM workers also play a meaningful role in rural areas, with half of rural respondents (50%, 10 of 20) mentioning informal counselling, whereas only a quarter of urban women (25%, 5 of 20) reported the same. Very few women in either setting pursue professional mental health care—just 10% in urban areas (2 of 20) and 5% in rural areas (1 of 20)—suggesting that stigma, cost, and limited availability of services remain significant barriers to formal help-seeking.

Table 5. Barriers to Accessing Formal Mental Health Support

Barrier	rban (%)	Urban Count	ural (%)	Rural Count
Stigma / fear of being labelled	70%	14	85%	17
Lack of awareness / mental health literacy	60%	12	75%	15
Cost of care	50%	10	80%	16
Distance / no nearby services	20%	4	70%	14
Preference for informal help / faith healers	25%	5	55%	11

Source: *Primary field data, Belagavi district qualitative study, 2025.*

Stigma and low mental health literacy are the dominant barriers across locations. Rural respondents face additional structural obstacles—cost and distance—that substantially limit access to formal care. Significant fractions prefer informal or faith-based help, reflecting cultural repertoires for managing distress.

Findings

1. **Everyday Domestic Work as Chronic Stressor:** Women described daily workloads cooking, cleaning, child and elder care, ceremonial duties that left little time for rest. Repeated narratives of exhaustion and sleep disruption emerged as central to their distress.
2. **Time Poverty and Emotional Labour:** Many participants reported emotional labour managing household relations, smoothing conflicts, and maintaining family honour that drained psychological resources and limited opportunities to seek support.
3. **Economic Precarity Intensifies Distress:** Rural households' dependence on daily wages, irregular income, and debt cycles heightened worry and reduced capacity to prioritise health. Financial insecurity also constrained choices about treatment.

4. **Interpersonal and Household Power Dynamics:** Decision-making authority often rested with husbands or elders; disclosure of mental distress could provoke blame or minimisation. Women in joint families reported more surveillance and less privacy.
5. **Informal Networks and Community Actors as Primary Supports:** SHGs, ASHAs, and neighbours provided practical and emotional help, offering a first line of support. However, they lacked training to respond to severe cases and formal referral pathways were weak.
6. **Stigma and Low Mental Health Literacy:** Many women normalised symptoms as "tension" or "pressure," and feared social consequences of a mental health label. This reduced professional help-seeking.
7. **Limited Access to Formal Mental Health Services:** Service gaps few female providers, distance to facilities, and cost kept professional mental healthcare out of reach for most respondents.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Mental Health Support at the Primary Level:** Primary Health Centres (PHCs) should be developed as accessible first points for mental health care, not only physical health. Equipping PHC staff, ASHAs, and ANMs with training in detecting common mental health conditions, offering basic psychological support, and following structured referral pathways to district mental health specialists can ensure timely intervention. This approach helps reduce the burden of travel, cost, and stigma for women who might otherwise delay or avoid seeking care. Embedding mental health within routine primary care normalises emotional well-being as a public health priority.
2. **Promote Gender-sensitive Community Awareness:** Community-based platforms such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs), women's collectives, and neighbourhood groups can act as safe spaces for open dialogue on stress, emotional challenges, and coping strategies. Regular workshops or group discussions can help normalise conversations around mental health, dismantle stigma, and validate women's lived experiences.

3. Community awareness initiatives also encourage women to seek support early and strengthen social networks, which serve as an important buffer against chronic stress.

4. **Reduce Domestic Burdens through Local Infrastructure:** Investment in essential infrastructure like clean water, fuel access, sanitation, and community childcare can significantly reduce the time and energy women spend on unpaid domestic work. When women are relieved of the double burden of household chores and caregiving, they gain time for rest, self-care, and engagement in economic or community activities. These structural supports directly impact mental health by decreasing chronic

stress and enhancing autonomy over daily schedules.

5. **Expand Social and Economic Security for Low-income Women:** Financial insecurity is a major driver of psychological distress. Expanding cash-transfer programmes, livelihood opportunities, and social protection schemes specifically for women in households dependent on daily wages can mitigate economic stressors. Economic support not only reduces anxiety but also empowers women to make decisions about health, nutrition, and well-being without relying solely on male household members.
6. **Support and Train Community Health Workers:** ASHAs, ANMs, and other frontline workers are often the first contact for women experiencing mental health challenges. Providing these workers with training in psychological first aid, stress management, and referral procedures ensures better service delivery. Regular supervision and mental health support for these workers also prevent burnout, enabling them to respond empathetically and sustainably to women in need.
7. **Engage Men in Changing Household Norms:** Gendered divisions of labour are a central source of women's stress. Interventions that involve men encouraging shared household responsibilities, childcare, and emotional support can reduce women's workload and improve family dynamics. Promoting positive masculinity and equitable domestic roles can challenge entrenched patriarchal norms, fostering healthier relationships and contributing to improved mental well-being for women.
8. **Increase Availability of Female Mental Health Providers:** Cultural norms and privacy concerns often prevent women from accessing mental health services provided by male staff. Recruiting and deploying female counsellors or mental health professionals at PHCs, particularly in rural areas, can address these barriers. Female providers not only improve comfort and trust but also enhance the likelihood that women will seek help for sensitive issues such as domestic stress, anxiety, or depression.

Conclusion

Women's mental health in Belagavi, Karnataka, is shaped by the intimate interplay of domestic roles, economic insecurity, and social norms. Chronic time poverty, unpaid labour, and limited decision-making power erode psychological well-being and limit help-seeking. Community actors provide important support but cannot substitute for accessible, affordable, and culturally attuned mental health services integrated into primary care. Addressing women's mental health therefore requires broad interventions: strengthening primary care mental health capacity, investing in infrastructure that reduces unpaid burdens, supporting women's economic security, and conducting gender-transformative community outreach that reduces stigma and redistributes domestic labour. Policies that treat mental health as a social as well as a clinical issue will be better placed to improve women's well-being.

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