

Spousal employment tends to better marital quality and increase marital stability among Indian couples

Dr. Akhilesh Pathak*

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Lakshmibai College, (University of Delhi), Delhi – 110052, India

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Abstract

Research shows that at the global level, there has been an increased influx of women into the job market since 1970s, a phenomenon that may be called a kind of gender revolution. Since heterosexual marriage relies a lot on successful negotiation of additional responsibilities shouldered by the wife in a society marked by breadwinner-homemaker model of family, it seems a prudent exercise to study the impact of spousal employment on marital quality. This article tries to investigate the trend from an Indian perspective taking into account the various ways in which marital quality and its constituent dimensions are related to spousal employment. The key findings suggest that wives' employment tends to increase both marital quality and marital stability among Indian couples.

Keywords: Marital Quality, Marital Stability, Spousal Employment, Marital Happiness, Marital Interaction, Marital Disagreement

Introduction

Marital Quality can be defined as the quality of life that married people experience as a consequence of getting married. To be more specific, Fincham and Bradbury (1987) defined marital quality as “spouse’s sentiment with respect to their marriage or their partner as revealed with the help of subjective judgements and overall evaluation of their marriage” (Fincham & Linfield, 1997, p. 489). The definition underpins the importance of “subjective judgements” as well as the “overall evaluation” of the marriage. Marital Quality could also be “simply a matter of how married persons feel about their marriages” or “a characteristic of the relationship between the spouses” (Glenn, 1990, p. 819). What is apparently clear from these definitions is that marital quality has two components – subjective and objective. Looking at it from an Indian perspective, one comes across quite a few studies that throw light on some aspects of marital quality (Shukla & Kapoor, 1990; Singh, Thind, & Jaswal, 2006; Sandhya, 2009; Allendorf, 2012; Bowman & Dollahite, 2013; Joshi, Desai, & Vanneman, 2017). But the problem in hand at this point is to investigate the relationship between marital quality and employment, spousal employment to be precise.

Marital Quality and Employment

In a study it was found that psychological distress resulting from work-family conflict affects marital quality adversely (Matthews, Conger, & Wickrama, 1996). Closely linked is the finding suggesting that role strain among wives, caused because of their employment, bears a negative relationship with the overall quality of married life (Galambos & Silbereisen, 1989; Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). On the other hand, some have also suggested that employment of the wife has a positive effect on marital quality as it leads to better and more open style of marital interaction whereby male dominance within family goes down (Miller & Kanae, 1999). Studies in India have also hinted at similar findings (Shukla & Kapoor, 1990). Other than just the state of being employed, it has also been noticed by scholars that marital quality also seems to be correlated with ‘job satisfaction’ and the relationship is a two-way affair. Studies suggest that marital quality bears a significant impact on job satisfaction (Rogers & May, 2003; Ouyang et al., 2019). In its turn, greater job satisfaction tends to improve marital quality among wives (Thomas, Albrecht, & White, 1984, p. 516). Notwithstanding this finding, it has also been found that no significant gender differential marks the relationship between marital quality and job satisfaction. (Rogers & May, 2003). Some previous studies, taking a cue from the ‘role’ theory developed by Talcott Parsons found that wives’ employment did not bear a significant impact on marital adjustment and

*Corresponding author’s ORCID ID: 0000-0000-0000-0000
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companionship (Locksley, 1980). Differing from it, it has also been reported by some that wives' level of education and employment status show a greater potential to improve marital adjustment, quite independently of other factors (Singh, Thind, & Jaswal, 2006).

Stressing the importance of material economic reasons, it has been found that there is a negative relationship between economic resources and the tendency to get married among women in Japan (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2009). Elsewhere, it was found that as the economic condition of the wife gets better *vis-a-vis* the husband, there ensues discontent and discord on the part of the husband, attributed largely to gender-role attitudes in society (Hood, 1983; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Conger et al., 1990; Voydanoff, 1990; Hernandez, 1993). In contrast, studies also suggest that wives' income shares a part of the expenses of the family, and hence, produces a positive effect on marital quality (Scanlon 1972, 1978; Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Voydanoff 1990). Thus, it's not just about wives' income and her employment status, it is rather the relative income advantage that the spouses have over one another that matters (Winslow, 2011). Winslow (2011) reported a U-shaped relationship between marital conflict and the duration of wives' income advantage that goes to suggest that initially that which causes discord to emerge between husband and wife tends to get mitigated with time. That is also to suggest that if a family seems to experience fluctuation in this regard, marital discord tends to be more frequent and continues to affect the couple for a longer duration (Winslow, 2011).

In view of these findings, a caveat must be issued at this point that the demolition of the traditional notions about gender-roles resulting in a greater say for wives in decision-making within family cannot be taken as a one-dimensional latent construct in regard to marital quality, especially in the context of India. There could be families where despite the fact that the wife plays a greater role in decision-making, the couple, nevertheless, report more aggregate marital satisfaction if the family is husband-dominated (Shukla & Kapoor, 1990). It may seem anomalous in relation to the traditional notions of gender roles and its impact on marital quality. For, it is assumed that the husband-dominated family is a symptom of traditionality so far as norms regarding gender roles are concerned, a clear sign of patriarchy. However, even in such families, wife's enhanced role in decision-making is an indication of more egalitarian marital relationship, which, in turn, leads to higher marital quality for both men and women (Zammichieli, Gilroy, & Sherman, 1988; Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003). Nonetheless, it must be mentioned in this regard that especially in the case of women, an egalitarian division and sharing of family responsibility enhances their marital quality (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991). The study is based on American society that may not be representative of the conditions prevalent in India. Nevertheless, it may provide a vital insight into the dynamic of relationship that exists between marital quality and marital power.

Another study from China, a country close to us both geographically as well as culturally, suggests that gender ideologies do bear a relationship to marital quality for both genders and more egalitarian marital power is directly and positively related to marital harmony and negatively related to marital discord (Xu & Lai, 2004). However, the research finding might not indicate a general condition with a wider relevance because it is also suggested that though egalitarian behaviour within family might have an impact on marital quality, it may vary based on gender (Pimentel, 2000). Echoing the arguments contained in Jessie Bernard's thesis of "his" and "her" marriage, Pimentel (2000) found that division of household chores that is often considered to be a symptom of egalitarian family setting exerted a significant effect on wife's marital quality but not on that of the husband.

This discussion on gender role attitude seems more complicated now than it would appear before. It is found that a drop in traditional attitudes with regard to gender roles among husbands increases their perceived marital quality (Miller & Kannae, 1990; Amato & Booth, 1995). However, Amato and Booth (1995) also found that for wives the trend turns out to be quite the opposite. Wives with reduced traditional attitude report low marital quality. This study took perceived marital quality as the dependent variable having five dimensions or factors, namely, "happiness, interaction, disagreement, problems, and divorce proneness" (Amato & Booth, 1995, p. 60). The model largely hinges on the previous five-dimensional model of marital quality proposed in an earlier study (Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986). It was found that with less traditional attitude, perceived marital quality for husbands increases while it decreases for wives.

Thus, a vital question of sociological importance can be raised in view of the above finding: Why do more progressive (or, less traditional) wives report poor perceived marital quality when their progressive husbands tend to lead happier married lives? An answer to this question may shed light on the ideological position often taken by progressives and feminists. At the moment, all one can say is that as to the debate of tradition versus modernity in this context, a shift in attitudes to embrace modernity does not come as a panacea causing marriages to be happier and of better quality. There seem to be other factors in play, often in concealed forms, eventually determining this deeply-seated structure of marital life revolving around gender roles and individual attitudes to them.

Data, Method, and Analysis

The inferences drawn and results reported in this article stem from a larger study on marital quality in India that used Structural Equation Modelling to come up with a model of marital quality in India. The study also analysed a set of socioeconomic variables as regards their role as

determinants of marital quality and its dimensions. The five-dimensional model of marital quality proposed by Johnson et al. (1986) was taken as a template to explain various ways in which it is determined by these variables in an Indian setting. A survey method was used that involved snowball sampling conducted in Delhi-NCR. The table 1 below presents vital descriptive statistics for the sample:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Sample Size (N)	303 (159 men, 144 women)
Mean Age (in years)	35.7
Mean Marriage Duration (in years)	8.386
Hindu (by religion)	93.10%
Hindi (mother tongue)	64.40%
Reserved Category (SC, ST, OBC)	21.80%
Annual Income > 10 lakhs	48.50%
Postgraduate and above (Education)	65.30%

As the study looks to investigate the relationship between spousal employment and aspects of marital quality, it seems worthwhile to take a look at the characteristics of the sample in this regard. The frequency table 2 below shows the distribution of the individuals based on their employment status:

Table 2: Frequency table showing employment characteristics of the sample

Employment characteristics					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Unemployed	78	25.7	25.7	25.7
	Employed	225	74.3	74.3	100.0
	Total	303	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: Frequency table showing characteristics of spousal employment

Spousal Employment					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Unemployed	93	30.7	32.6	32.6
	Employed	192	63.4	67.4	100.0
	Total	285	94.1	100.0	
Missing	System	18	5.9		
Total		303	100.0		

Table 4: Frequency distribution of employment (own and spousal) classified by sex

	Are you currently employed?		Is the spouse employed?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Males (N = 159)	135	24	60	84
Females (N = 144)	90	54	132	9

It turned out that 225 out of 303 in the sample were employed at the time of collecting data for the study. Nonetheless, it is also essential in the context of this study that we take a look at the characteristics of the sample as to the employment status of the spouse for the respondents. Shown above is the frequency table 3 disclosing the nature of the sample in this aspect.

What we find here is a sort of equivalence as far as one's own employment and spousal employment is concerned (about three-fourths of the sample are employed and about two-thirds had an employed spouse). However, we must not close our eyes to the effects produced by patriarchy and gender-role attitudes in our society that tilt mostly in favour of men over

women. Thus, we ought to take a look at these characteristics of the sample classified by gender. This is how the distribution looks like in table 4.

One needs to focus on the last column in the table as the gap between men and women seems to be pronouncedly high as far as having an unemployed spouse is concerned. We still find a society here based on the breadwinner-homemaker model because as many as 84 husbands have unemployed wives while only 9 wives have unemployed husbands.

On the whole, for spousal employment as a variable, bivariate analysis shows that marital quality does bear a significant correlation to it, evidence of which can be seen in the table 5 below:

Table 5: Relationship between 'Spousal employment' and Marital Quality

Crosstab					
			Is the spouse employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Marital Quality recode_binomial	Low	Count	51	60	111
		% within Is the spouse employed?	54.8%	31.3%	38.9%
	High	Count	42	132	174
		% within Is the spouse employed?	45.2%	68.8%	61.1%
Total		Count	93	192	285
		% within Is the spouse employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 99% confidence level; p = 0.000 for Pearson chi-square test.

Table 6: Relationship between 'Spousal employment' and Marital Quality for Men

Crosstab					
			Is the spouse employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Marital Quality recode_binomial	Low	Count	48	12	60
		% within Is the spouse employed?	57.1%	20.0%	41.7%
	High	Count	36	48	84
		% within Is the spouse employed?	42.9%	80.0%	58.3%
Total		Count	84	60	144
		% within Is the spouse employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 99% confidence level; p = 0.000 for Pearson chi-square test.

Table 7: Relationship between spousal employment and marital quality with marital quality as the dichotomous variable

Independent Variable	Reference Category	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Is the spouse employed? (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	0 = No	1.744	0.432	0.000	5.720

¹ The result is based on binary logistic regression run with 18 selected socioeconomic variables considered relevant to this study on marital quality.

However, when tested on the basis of gender, it turned out that the relationship is significant for *men only* which goes to suggest that wives' employment is significantly correlated to marital quality in India, the correlation being a positive one. The table 6 above proves the truth of the claim.

As high as 80 per cent of the male respondents who answered the question 'Is the spouse employed?' as 'Yes' also reported 'high' marital quality. *Thus, if the wife is employed, marital quality tends to go up for the sample.* Same was not found to hold true for women in the sample. The relationship gets reinforced by binary logistic regression with marital quality as the dichotomous variable as shown in the table 7.

Those with an employed spouse seem to be 5.7 times more likely to enjoy better marital quality than others with an unemployed spouse.

Having noted the relationship between spousal employment and marital quality, we must also try to understand the relationship between spousal

employment and the five dimensions of marital quality – marital happiness, marital interaction, marital disagreement, marital problems, and marital stability.

Employment of the spouse is significantly related to marital happiness. The table 8 below shows the crosstabulation based on chi-square test.

Quite interestingly, it was found that the *employment of the spouse has a positive impact on marital happiness* thus contributing to better overall marital quality. Wilcox and Nock (2007) argue that a gender revolution in the form of more influx of women into job market is quite a recent phenomenon in human history. Hence, the overall influence of spousal employment on marital happiness needs to be looked from a gender perspective. Unlike marital quality, it was found that the relationship is not significant for men while it is significant at 99 per cent confidence level for women in the sample. The table 9 below shows the result for women only based on chi-square test:

Table 8: Relationship between Marital Happiness and spousal employment

Crosstab					
			Is the spouse employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Happiness Index_binomial	Unhappy	Count	15	12	27
		% within Is the spouse employed?	16.1%	6.3%	9.5%
	Happy	Count	78	180	258
		% within Is the spouse employed?	83.9%	93.8%	90.5%
Total		Count	93	192	285
		% within Is the spouse employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 99% confidence level; $p = 0.008$ for Pearson chi-square test.

Table 9: Relationship between 'spousal employment' and 'marital happiness' with respect to women in the sample

Happiness Index_binomial * Is the spouse employed? Crosstabulation					
			Is the spouse employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Happiness Index_binomial	Unhappy	Count	3	6	9
		% within Is the spouse employed?	33.3%	4.5%	6.4%
	Happy	Count	6	126	132
		% within Is the spouse employed?	66.7%	95.5%	93.6%
Total		Count	9	132	141
		% within Is the spouse employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 99% confidence level; $p = 0.001$ for Pearson chi-square test.

Table 10: Relationship between employment with Marital Happiness as the dichotomous dependent variable in binary logistic regression

Independent Variable	Reference Category	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Are you currently employed? (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	0 = No	5.834	1.983	0.003	341.87
Is the spouse employed? (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	0 = No	5.857	1.696	0.001	349.71

¹ The result is based on binary logistic regression run with 18 selected socioeconomic variables considered relevant to this study on marital quality.

The relationship was not found to be significant in the case of men in the sample. More confirmation for the relationship was obtained from a binary logistic regression analysis that considered marital happiness as a dichotomous variable.

It is noteworthy that employment (both one's own and that of the spouse) seem to bear a large positive impact on marital happiness with both types of employment increasing one's likelihood of being happy more than 300 times.

Besides marital happiness, spousal employment also seemed to be correlated to another dimension of marital quality called marital interaction. Falling in line with the previous finding noted in the case of marital happiness, spousal employment may be said to improve the quality of interaction between couples as suggested by the figures in the table 11 below.

Moving further, employment seems to play a key role in determining marital disagreement. As a fact, it seems to be of no mean importance that *marital disagreement* is the only dimension of marital quality which is affected by employment of both members of the marital dyad. While in the case of other dimensions, one's own employment seems to be bearing no significant impact, marital disagreement is not independent of its effects. Marital disagreement seems to be mitigated if one is 'employed'. The relationship is summarized in the table 12 below.

A similar case was observed for employment of the spouse. Spousal employment seems to better one's marital experience as far as marital disagreement is concerned, that is to say, *spousal employment probably reduces marital disagreement (It must be noted that while relationship with one's own employment is significant at 95% confidence level, the relation with employment of the spouse is highly significant at 99% confidence level.)*. The table 13 below shows the vital numbers:

Table 11: Relationship between Marital Interaction and spousal employment

Interaction Index_binomial * Is the spouse employed? Crosstabulation					
			Is the spouse employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Interaction Index_binomial	Low	Count	18	12	30
		% within Is the spouse employed?	19.4%	6.3%	10.5%
	High	Count	75	180	255
		% within Is the spouse employed?	80.6%	93.8%	89.5%
Total		Count	93	192	285
		% within Is the spouse employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 99% confidence level; p = 0.001 for Pearson chi-square test.

Table 12: Relationship between Employment and Marital Disagreement

Marital Disagreement_binomial * Are you currently employed? Crosstabulation					
			Are you currently employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Marital Disagreement_binomial	Worse	Count	30	57	87
		% within Are you currently employed?	38.5%	25.3%	28.7%
	Better	Count	48	168	216
		% within Are you currently employed?	61.5%	74.7%	71.3%
Total		Count	78	225	303
		% within Are you currently employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 95% confidence level; p = 0.027 for Pearson chi-square test.

Table 13: Relationship between 'Spousal employment' and Marital Disagreement

Marital Disagreement_binomial * Is the spouse employed? Crosstabulation					
			Is the spouse employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Marital Disagreement_binomial	Worse	Count	48	36	84
		% within Is the spouse employed?	51.6%	18.8%	29.5%
	Better	Count	45	156	201
		% within Is the spouse employed?	48.4%	81.3%	70.5%
Total		Count	93	192	285
		% within Is the spouse employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 99% confidence level; p = 0.000 for Pearson chi-square test.

Table 14: Relationship between spousal employment and marital quality with marital quality as the dichotomous variable¹

Independent Variable	Reference Category	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Are you currently employed? (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	0 = No	1.086	0.424	0.010	2.962
Is the spouse employed? (0 = No; 1 = Yes)	0 = No	2.636	0.529	0.000	13.964

¹ The result is based on binary logistic regression run with 18 selected socioeconomic variables considered relevant to this study on marital quality.

The relationship comes out more strongly if one runs binary logistic regression with marital disagreement as the dichotomous variable as seen in the table 14.

Thus, employment (both own and spousal) seems to be having a mitigating role as far as marital disagreement is concerned. An employed person seems to be 2.9 times more likely to report low marital disagreement than an unemployed person while one with an employed spouse

is about 14 times more likely to report low marital disagreement than respondents with an unemployed spouse.

Other than these dimensions of marital quality, spousal employment seems to be bearing a considerable impact on marital stability. The crosstabulation is shown in table 15.

Table 15: Relationship between 'Spousal employment' and Marital Stability

Stability Index_binomial * Is the spouse employed? Crosstabulation					
			Is the spouse employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Stability Index_binomial	Unstable	Count	15	15	30
		% within Is the spouse employed?	16.1%	7.8%	10.5%
	Stable	Count	78	177	255
		% within Is the spouse employed?	83.9%	92.2%	89.5%
Total		Count	93	192	285
		% within Is the spouse employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 95% confidence level; $p = 0.032$ for Pearson chi-square test.

Table 16: Relationship between 'Spousal employment' and 'marital stability' with respect to women in the sample

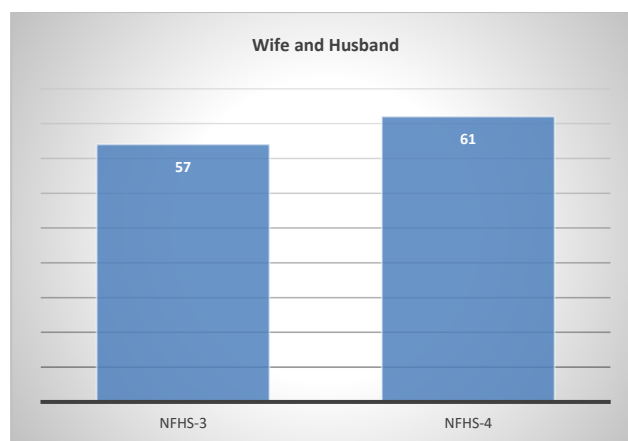
Stability Index_binomial * Is the spouse employed? Crosstabulation					
			Is the spouse employed?		Total
			No	Yes	
Stability Index_binomial	Unstable	Count	3	12	15
		% within Is the spouse employed?	33.3%	9.1%	10.6%
	Stable	Count	6	120	126
		% within Is the spouse employed?	66.7%	90.9%	89.4%
Total		Count	9	132	141
		% within Is the spouse employed?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The relationship was found to be significant at 95% confidence level; $p = 0.022$ for Pearson chi-square test.

From the above result, one might conclude that those with an employed spouse seem to be enjoying greater marital stability. However, it must be added here that when looked at from a gender perspective, it was found that the relationship is significant for women, and not men, in the sample. The result is as shown in table 16.

Discussion and Conclusion

One of the key results of the study turned out to be the positive correlation between spousal employment and marital quality. It was found that employment of the spouse seems to decrease marital disagreement and increase marital stability. What's more, the results are more pronounced if the *wife* is employed. From a gender perspective, it may be seen as reflecting a change in societal values in India which has seemingly moved from a concept of marriage based on division of gender roles to one based on 'companionship' (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2008).



It may also indicate a restructuring of marital power among Indian couples. It may be a deviation from the findings reported by Shukla and Kapoor (1990) who suggest that marital satisfaction tends to be better in

husband-dominated families or 'syncratic' families. This deviation may also be seen in light of some attitudinal changes recent times have seen at the level of culture in India.

Here a comparison of data between NFHS – 3 (2005-06) and NFHS – 4 (2015-16) about how decision over wife's earning is made shows that probably there is a movement towards more egalitarian norms within marital relations in India. The proportion of couples who accepted joint decision-making norms as characterizing their marital dynamics has been reported to go up from 57% to 61% between NFHS – 3 and NFHS – 4. Hence, this shift could be seen as marking a vital cultural change in our society where wives' employment has acquired greater acceptance and tends to contribute to better and healthier marital quality.

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