

## Marital Quality in Middle Aged Women: A Qualitative study

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Marital quality is an essential feature of family life that affects one's wellbeing; higher marital quality is linked to less vulnerability to depression, self-rated health, less physical ailments and subjective well-being and happiness. Cross sectional studies have found low marital satisfaction and happiness in middle aged adults compared to the younger or older adults, whereas cohort studies have revealed that marital quality tends to decrease after the initial of marriage years and into the middle adulthood and then either steadies or continue to decrease after midlife. This study explored marital quality in women and the dimensions that contribute to greater marital quality in midlife stage of marriage.

**Methodology:** The sample consisted of 15 middle aged married women. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore their marital quality and the dimensions related to marital quality. The interviews were analysed using content analysis method.

**Results:** The results showed that aspects such as handling problems and disagreements, communication, having an egalitarian approach, making compromises or adjustments, support of extended family were related to better marital quality.

**Conclusion:** The study highlights that marital enrichment programs that focus on communication between partners, problem solving strategies and effective handling of disagreements can increase the marital quality and strengthen the marital relationship.

**Keywords:** Marital quality, Midlife marriage, Women

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### INTRODUCTION

Marriage is considered as one of the most important and highly valued institutions in almost all parts of the world, wherein marital relationships are viewed central to individual and family development. Marriage can help maintain good mental health by giving people a greater sense of emotional support, feeling of being cared and increased psychological and physical well-being [1-2]. Forces of modernization, globalization and education are remodelling the nature and structure of family and marriage giving rise to the notion of nuclear families, women entering workforce, as well as an increasing demand for high quality, stable marriages with empathy, intimacy and affection [3]. Further, the society is also witnessing a growing tendency to terminate unhappy marriages with divorce [1].

Marital quality is an essential feature of family life that affects one's wellbeing, with high marital quality linked to less vulnerability to depression, self-rated health, less physical ailments and subjective well-being and happiness [4-5]. Further marital quality is multi-dimensional concept [6] with both subjective aspects such as satisfaction, happiness, adjustment, love and affection, understanding as well as objective aspects such as communication, disagreements, joint engagement in activities etc. Marital quality includes "satisfaction, happiness, adjustment and other related dimensions and evaluations of the marital relationship" [7].

Allendorf [8] studied Dimensions and Determinants of Marital Quality in Nepal and found that satisfaction, communication and togetherness as three positive dimension and problems and disagreements as two negative dimensions for marital quality. Further a comparative study done by Allendorf and Pandian (2016), [9] found that love and affection, understanding, trust, lack of conflict and good communication were the dimensions of a good marriage that intersected with Western literature. It was also found that balancing marital and parental relationships and strictly adhering to gender norms with husbands as breadwinners and wives as homemakers were dimensions that determine marital quality. These dimensions were found to differ with marital quality's conception in Western countries which considers gender complementarily, spouses enjoying activities together etc as important dimensions. Thus, in India, marital quality can be influenced by culture specific dimensions like extended family [10] along with gender specific role differences [11].

Cross sectional studies have found low marital satisfaction and happiness in middle aged adults compared to the younger or older adults [12]. Longitudinal studies have revealed that marital quality tends to decrease after the newlywed years and into the middle adulthood and then either steadies or continue to decrease after midlife [13]. Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen and Campbell [14] studied the trajectories of change in marital quality over time using a three wave panel survey over 8 years and revealed that marital quality diminished over time with positive marital experiences decreasing and negative marital experiences increasing. There is evidence of high level of burnout with feelings of being tired of marriage and/or feeling trapped in midlife and this in turn can adversely affect one's health status [12]. Moreover, midlife couples are considered as the "sandwiched generation" who have to provide care and support to both their children and elderly in the house, [15] which leads them to focus less on their married lives. Couples also continue to stay in unhealthy marriages without dissolving poor quality marriages.

Studies reveal that women experience less marital quality compared to men [8, 16-18]. It is suggested that marriage is more vital to women's identities and more consequential to their well-being compared to men as women typically 'specialize' in emotion work and nurturing roles whereas men concentrate on their paid jobs. Women tend to feel more responsible for solving their marital problems and to maintain a good marriage at least for the sake of children [19]. Conformity to traditional roles, interference of extended family tend to impact women compared to men, thus having an effect on her marriage and how she views it. [16] There is thus a clear indication that couples, especially women in their midlife marriage experience low levels of marital quality.

Western literature has largely examined the determinants, dimensions, and associated consequences of marital quality. By comparison, dimensions of marital quality have received less attention in non-Western countries. Most of the studies done in the non-Western countries use measures developed for research on Western countries and assume that dimensions of marital quality in Western context is applicable to non-Western contexts as well. However, marital quality is an inherently subjective concept and can vary across time, place and context and culture [8]. Previous Indian studies have examined this topic predominantly using quantitative methodology [17-18]. Hence, it is important to explore the contributing dimensions leading to greater marital quality and gain insight into the experiences of people to understand what makes up for a good quality marriage. Furthermore, no qualitative study has been done yet, particularly in an urban Indian context.

The current study aims to explore marital quality in women in their midlife marriage as various studies revealed that women experience less marital quality compared to men and much of the literature focuses on younger age group. Further the study aims to look at midlife marriage which has received less attention in a non-Western context and the experiences and expectations of marriage are different when one is in his or her midlife marriage [20]. Moreover, the highest rate of marital dissolution either through separation or divorce is at its peak among women who fall under the age group 35-39 years, [21] yet women who have crossed this phase continue to stay in unhealthy, dissatisfied marriages further leading psychological distresses in them [12]. There is also evidence that staying in an unhappy marriage is more detrimental than divorcing as they are less happy and experience lower levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem and overall health [2]. Hence, it is important to look at dimensions of marital quality to explore what makes healthy, satisfying relationships, thereby contributing to the field of Psychology and Family/Marital Therapy for creating

healthy marriages with increased marital quality. Thus, the purpose of the study is to explore marital quality in midlife marriage from a female perspective.

## METHODOLOGY

The design of the study was explorative and qualitative measure such as a semi structured interview schedule was used. Sample consisted of 15 married women who were residents in city of Kochi, Kerala. The method of sampling was purposive and snowball sampling method. The inclusion criteria for the study was, women who fall under the age group of 39-55 years, who have been married for about 18-25 years, living with their spouse and having at least one child. Women who were staying separately from their spouses and not having any children were excluded. The duration of the study was one year.

### Description of tools:

**Socio demographic sheet:** Socio demographic details such as age, education level, occupation, annual income, religion, place of residence, marital status, marital duration, family size and family type, number and age of children were obtained using socio demographic sheet.

**Semi- structured interview schedule:** A semi- structured interview schedule was developed by the authors for the study. The interview schedule explored aspects of marriage such as satisfaction, communication, togetherness, handling disagreements or problems, impact of extended family members on marital quality, traditional or egalitarian approach and presence of children on marital quality.

### Procedure

In the pilot phase of the study semi structured interview schedule was developed by the author around guiding frameworks based on existing literature and already existing tools of marital quality. The interview schedule was validated by two experts in the field of family and marital therapy. After validation, the semi structured interview schedule was administered on one participant to check for its feasibility.

In the main phase participants who met the criteria were contacted individually in person or by telephone for participation in the study. An appropriate time and place was scheduled according to the convenience of the participant. After obtaining their informed consent the participants were interviewed. After the interview was complete, a debriefing session was done to determine the effect of the interview. Participants who were distressed were referred to mental health professionals or marital therapists.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Christ (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India.

### Data analysis

The verbatim transcript of the interviews was familiarized, followed by categorization of text into different compressed meaning units. The next step was summarization of the compressed meaning units with codes. The codes were sought into categories and sub-categories based on similarities and differences which constitute the manifest content. Finally, latent content or underlying meaning in terms of a theme that describe an aspect of structure of experience was developed.

## RESULTS

The socio-demographic results showed that nine respondents are employed and six respondents are housewives, among the 15 married female participants of the study. All participants have been married for 18-25 years and belong to Kochi, an urban city in the state of Kerala. The average age of the participants is 45 years (Table 1).

**Table 1: Socio demographic details of the participants**

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>N=15</b>
<b>Age range</b>	
39-45 years	10

46-50 years	3
51-55 years	2
<b>Education</b>	
Diploma	1
Graduate	7
Post Graduate	7
<b>Occupational Status</b>	
Employed	6
Unemployed	9
<b>Religion</b>	
Christianity	10
Hinduism	4
Islam	1
<b>Type of marriage</b>	
Arranged	4
Love	11
<b>Type of family</b>	
Joint	2
Nuclear	13

### Content analysis

The themes that emerged through content analysis was organised based on the following categories:

#### Concept of marriage

The analysis revealed that women in their midlife marriage consider marriage to be primarily a union two people and having a family of one's own which is sustained on adjustments, changes in lifestyle and accommodation of each other's needs and likes. Four participants reported that they believe marital systems are a necessity for healthy functioning and proper development of societies. Another four participants also stressed on marriage to be a source of lifelong companionship that's necessary, however also considered it as 'work' in terms of taking care of kids, making ends meet, finances for survival and household work. One participant said "marriage is about taking care of husband and children and paying heed to the needs of husband and living". On the other hand, another participant believed in "marriage as a process where both partners should be equal, respected and understood".

Despite varying interpretations of marriage, participants unanimously believed that marriage is a union of two people though adjustments, life style changes as well as accommodation of each other's likes and needs.

#### Notion of their own marriage

Majority of participants considered their marriage to be going fine. Four participants revealed that their marriage is going smooth and good, whereas one participant revealed that she was completely happy and satisfied with her marriage. The participants ones who mentioned their marriage was just going fine/good had marital issues such as problems and disagreements being present, further reported that how efforts with respect to doing chores from their husbands reduced after initial years of marriage and how they had to sacrifice more than their husbands. Moreover, participants who reported their marriage to be going good and happy were found to lead a life of acceptance, love, understanding and respect with both partners adjusting and taking care of each other.

#### Dimensions of marital quality

Aspects of marital satisfaction such as love, understanding, respect, care were considered as primary requirements for a good quality marriage by most of the participants. Paying heed to each other's likes and needs; partner being supportive and protective were also mentioned as important for marital quality. Overall, 13 participants believed that marital satisfaction is a significant factor for marital quality.

Six participants in study were '100% satisfied' with their marriage. They were able to live a life that defined their notion of marital satisfaction. They believed their marriage to be based on mutual love, understanding, commitment and appreciation and support. Two participants reported that they were 'almost satisfied' with marriage and seven participants were 'pretty satisfied' with their marriage. The major aspect found in of those who reported that they were 'almost satisfied' was that they believed disagreements increased after the initial years of marriage. Participant L.K.G reported that

"In the case of my husband, he has a lot of personal need and habits you know like drinking every day and all, those needs become permanent and he may not listen to me like he used to in the initial years of marriage. So, that means they tend to listen to us initially but as marriage and the years pass by, they tend to not pay heed to us and what we say. They will be constant in their needs and requirements, there is no room for adjustments and accommodations, won't sacrifice their habits for us. So we also change".

Further, it was understood participants who said they were 'pretty satisfied' in their marriage were not satisfied in terms of different aspects like marriage becoming mechanical and are merely going with the flow; lack of expressing love, commitment, care, recognition and appreciation; and drinking habit of partner.

Participant M.A. explained that

"That spark is lost after first few years of marriage. Marriage and being together is more like, that is how things are...two people who married stay together. In my case, that feeling of loved, respected is not there". Absence of unnecessary problems and disagreements with willingness to understand mistakes and taking efforts to rectify them was another major dimension of marital quality that was required for four out of the 15 participants. Two participants also laid importance on partners' having no other alliances/ affairs. Handling problems and disagreements were considered as a dimension of marital quality by six participants and believed marriage becomes smooth, open and problem free as a result. These women laid importance to discussing and talking things out freely and openly with their partners as well as being open and transparent for handling problems and disagreements. At least four of the participants also felt immediate resolution of problems was required for peace and harmony; not tending to issues would lead to greater problems. They considered that, problems can be solved if there is understanding and willingness to rectify mistakes within partners. However, as reported what they did to handle problems was in contrast to how they want to handle it. They engaged in avoidance of problems, letting things be most of time, as they feared it will lead to bigger fights. For instance, Participant L.K.G. pointed out that

"If disagreements arise, we move on with those disagreements. We don't try to solve them as we may end up fighting. Most of the times, it is like that, we don't come to a solution. Otherwise, we move on, we may forget it but it is more like it will be there in my mind and when a similar situation arises, it shoots up again". Few participants reported that they handle such crisis by being tight-lipped so their partners can realize their mistakes themselves. Another set of women engaged in discussing their needs and concerns with their partners and also, understanding things from their partner's perspective.

Communication with openness, transparency and having no secrets was another dimension of marital quality that was reported by three participants. One noticeable finding from was that there was proper communication between partners' for majority of women. Speaking freely, sharing and confiding with each other, listening to each other, discussing the household and work related aspects, being open and transparent.

Participant N.M. mentioned that

"Oh, there is proper communication regarding everything in our case. The thing is, we are good friends. I remember how earlier and all, if he finds a lady attractive also, he will come and tell me. So that transparency is there. Similarly when it comes to, things regarding home and family and other concerns...we communicate everything with each other. This is also very important for trust, I feel".

However, one participant reported that communication is not necessary for marital quality. Participant S.S further added that

"He goes to office, comes back, watches T.V, drinks and chills. I'm home, taking care of home and children. We don't really discuss all these things. Just the important stuff. There is no much communication between us that way"

Another major dimension brought in by seven of the participants was ability for compromises and adjustments a factor for marital quality. They believed compromises and adjustments are necessary for smooth functioning of marriages and thereby increasing marital quality. Having an egalitarian approach in family as well as support from extended family were regarded as dimensions of marital quality considered by two women each.

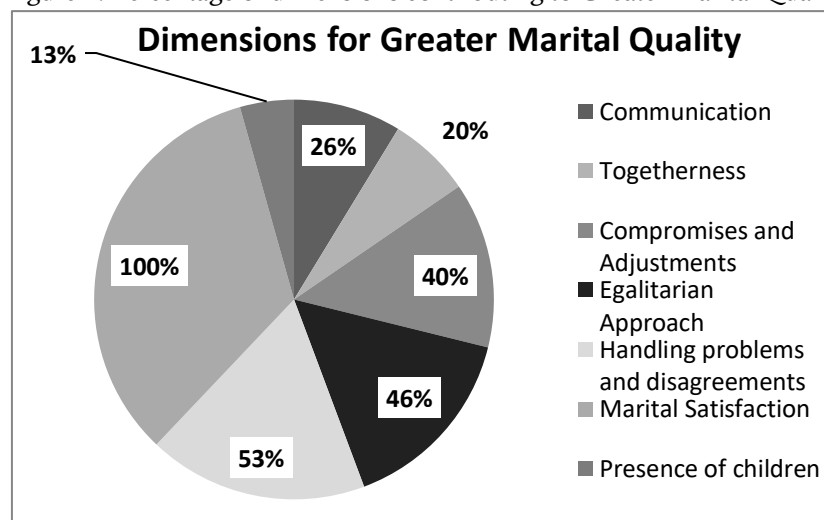
### Dimensions for Greater Marital Quality

In terms of the dimensions that lead to greater marital quality, mutual love and understanding with a combination of other aspects like respect, care were mentioned by all 15 participants. Participant N.K.V reported that

“love is the complete factor for a satisfied marriage. If there is love, there is commitment, respect, and understanding”.

A marriage with effective handling of problems and disagreements and presence of children were also considered as a dimension for greater marital quality by eight and two participants respectively. It was noted that, women who considered presence of children as a dimension for greater marital quality were the one had problems and disagreements with their partners. Further, togetherness was another dimension considered by three participants for greater marital quality. They believed togetherness was important in midlife as well as it would bind the partners together. Women felt it was a source of liveliness and happiness in their married life.

Figure 1: Percentage of dimensions contributing to Greater Marital Quality



### DISCUSSION

The current study explored the marital quality of midlife marriage in women. Women who participated in the study believed marriage to be a union of two people as well as two families for the healthy functioning and development of societies. The whole notion of ‘union of two families’ can be attributed to the cultural influences in terms of Indian marriages being the responsibility of parents or relatives, even in the educated class as well as the importance laid on social, emotional and/or financial support of extended family [22]. Various themes emerged as the marital quality in midlife marriage from women’s perspective was explored. Dimensions such as marital satisfaction, communication, togetherness, handling problems and disagreements were the individual specific dimensions that were identified. Cultural specific dimensions such as role of extended family, preference in terms of traditional or egalitarian approach, presence of children were also discovered as dimensions of marital quality in midlife marriage.

### **Marital Satisfaction**

Marital satisfaction can be associated with the person's subjective evaluation of aspects such as understanding, love, respect, care, that is, marital interactions and individual wellbeing [23]. Participants thought 'love' as a major factor required for greater marital satisfaction. This was corroborated in a study conducted by Allendorf [8] who also found that 'love' was a requirement for good marriage. Another aspect that came up for marital satisfaction was meeting one's needs and requirements. Moreover, another sub-theme that emerged would be understanding and commitment to marriage as a factor of marital satisfaction which may be the internal or innate compatibility between spouses. Participants believed that understanding combined with mutual respect and love where one is appreciated and supported, is what is important for marital satisfaction. Understanding, mutual respect and love are aspects of marital satisfaction that were operationalized in previous studies as well [23]. Egalitarian approach between partners as a factor of marital satisfaction, that was not regularly identified in other studies was explored in this study. Previous studies such as a quantitative study by Cetinkaya and Gencdogan [23] revealed that an egalitarian role leads to greater marital quality than couple who maintain traditional roles with females having less egalitarian role attitudes than men.

### **Communication**

Communication in marriage can be attributed to the quality of spouses' interaction with each other in terms of discussing difficulties, household matters and personal problems [8]. Participant in the study considered communication as an important dimension for marital quality. Studies by Allendorf, Litzinger and Gordon, and Sandhya [8, 25,17] also confirmed that communication is a significant factor of marital quality. It can also be corroborated that most participants have good communication with their spouses. Discussing about household aspects, kids, to jointly take decisions are some reasons that were considered important. Having no secrets and being open and transparent; helping in creating strong bond and having fewer problems were the sub themes that made communication important for most. Also, research by Litzinger and Gordon [25] states that inability to communicate effectively contributes to marital dissatisfaction.

### **Togetherness**

Togetherness in marriage is a dimension that assesses the quality of spouses' interaction with each other in terms of spending time together, eating, visiting places and similar such things [8]. Participants expressed mixed opinions regarding togetherness as a dimension of marital quality in midlife marriage. Most participants considered togetherness as an important dimension of marital quality for various reasons such as making the relationship lively, its importance in maintaining a stable, loving relationship. The sub theme that emerged was that togetherness was an important dimension in midlife as it would bind the partners together. Another sub theme is that they felt it is a source of liveliness and happiness in their married life. Marriages can be characterized by dyadically coordinated activities and aims like raising children together, literary pursuits, religious observance, community activism which in turn helps in reaching goals such as intimacy, friendship and teamwork. Pursuing these aims involves togetherness, which binds couple together, deepens the experiences of their efforts, increases the probability of success in achieving their goals and thus enhances their individual flourishing [26]. However, a few of the participants felt that togetherness does not impact marital quality directly as doing things together is a part and parcel of marriage and not necessarily a dimension of marital quality. The other few felt that the concept of togetherness was required for couples in their initial years of marriage. Cross sectional studies on positive dimensions of marital quality have found a U-shaped trend across the spousal life cycle with low marital satisfaction and happiness in middle aged adults compared to the younger or older adults [12]. This could be because of lack of importance given to togetherness among couples. Moreover, there is also a situation in women's lives where they feel togetherness is required however is absent in their married lives as their partners don't engage in doing things that build ones' togetherness. Also, spending quality time with partners got difficult in this phase of marriage as they tended to focus more on children, family, work and the like. Children's presence tended to be there in such situations and spending time alone with partners is not possible.

### **Problems and Disagreements**

Handling problems and managing disagreements was considered as one of the factors contributing to marital quality by the participants. These women felt resolutions of problems and disagreements is 'ideally' required for greater marital quality and excellent married life. This finding was corroborated by studies done by John, Smem, Roro & Tsui and Allendorf. [3,8] The participants reported that by immediate resolution of problems, peace and harmony is maintained in the marriage. Prerequisite for handling problems and disagreements were found to be understanding and willingness to rectify mistakes between partners. Participants felt that problems or disagreements that rise in marriage impact their marital quality as it creates disharmony and discomfort in the family. Previous studies also considered conflicts and problems as a negative dimension that affected marital quality [8,17]. However, in contrast to the previous studies, in this study we found that these women found having conflicts and problems as a dimension that strengthened the bond and their marital quality. The whole concept of 'only where there are conflicts, there is love' was the notion these women upheld. It was also understood that all women experienced problems and disagreements with their partners. This may be because women's marital expectations are more negative than those of women and tend to be more vocal about their expectations [28]. Moreover, aspects like husband's habits, expectations from husband on sharing of household tasks, inability to meet her needs and expectations had created differences in opinions that affected their marital quality adversely.

### **Egalitarian approach**

Participants felt that having an egalitarian approach contributed to greater marital quality. However, half of the participants expressed that they would prefer an egalitarian approach but did not have it in their marriage. They expressed that there is no division of work with respect to household chores and also felt there is a power disparity in taking decisions in the family. Studies done by Cetinkya and Gencdogan, Amato and Booth, [23, 29] support that egalitarian approach leads to greater marital quality than a traditional or an elitist approach. Further, one person pointed out that she prefers a mix of both approaches, as it is better to be a little traditional. Dasgupta and Basu [16] found a preference for traditional pattern as masculinity for men and femininity for women were correlated with greater marital quality indicating that gender typical roles were needed to promote marital quality.

Apart from being mother and wife in the family, participants also felt they are the 'doers' of the family. Even though money was earned by the male counterpart in most of the families, women took care of the family in terms of household aspects, taking care of children and their studies. A few participants expressed that decisions were majorly taken by their husbands and power disparity existed within the family between the partners. Thus, we can conclude, even though there is a preference for egalitarian approach, there is a disparity with respect to doing household chores and decision making.

### **Presence of children**

Women jointly believed that a family becomes complete with the presence of children and are considered an integral part of marriage. Taking care of their needs, education and schooling have kept them engaged and more committed and considered it as a positive aspect about their marriage. However, they do not feel it has affected their marital quality by increasing or decreasing it. This can be attributed to how our society lays great importance on having children as an integral part of marriage and somewhere one fails to understand how their presence would have affected one's marriage or not. Interestingly, one person mentioned that their presence has kept the couple together when they problems they faced in the past. This indirectly means that presence of children given couple a sense of commitment to marriage.

## **CONCLUSION**

Marital quality is a multidimensional concept with various individual and culture specific factors such as marital satisfaction, communication, togetherness, handling problems and disagreements, role of extended family, egalitarian approach and presence of children. These dimensions can be focused on, for Marital/Family counselling and thereby aid in creating healthy satisfying relationships. Early interventions,



psycho-education and counselling programs can be developed based on the individuals' expectations of marriage and the various dimensions of marital quality.

### Implications for future research

The study brings light to the women's conception on marital quality and the multi-dimensional nature of it, from a qualitative perspective. Only handful of studies provides examination of marital quality in a non-Western setting. However, confining the sample to one city of Kerala limits the analysis. Moreover, further studies can examine the interactions between the various dimensions of marital quality. Moreover, the study looks at marital quality from a female perspective. Thus, a gendered analysis of dimensions of marital quality will give a full picture of the situation. Future studies can also aim at looking for how these different dimensions of marital quality are tied to well-being and health outcomes in this context.

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