

Community support as predictors of resilience among single women

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ABSTRACT

Background: Single women face many problems in the patriarchal society but receive support from the community. In general, studies on community support showed that belonging to a community and actively participating in communal activities enhanced the quality of life and wellbeing of the individual involved. The present study examines whether the dimensions of community support predict psychological distress, happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience among single women.

Method: A sample of 300 single women (divorced, widows, and separated women) in the age group of 25 to 60 years ($M = 39.82$ years, $SD = 7.83$) were administered self-report measures of perceived community support, psychological distress, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience. The dimensions of community support included in the study are community integration, community participation and community organization.

Results: Multiple regressions were carried out to analyze the data. Community integration negatively predicted psychological resilience. Community participation positively predicted life satisfaction. **Conclusion:** These findings highlight the role of community support as resources that promote the positive adaptation of single women to the challenges of everyday life. The implications of the findings for policy, practice, and research are also discussed.

Keywords: Single women, community support, psychological distress, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

In the present study, the term 'single women' refers to widowed, divorced, or separated women. Many countries including India have witnessed inflation in the single women population in the recent decades [1-2]. Major causes for the marital dissolution include loss of spouse due to various reasons like suicide, accidents, health issues, separation, or divorce due to domestic violence, physical and mental health issues, adultery, substance abuse, and need for financial independence. In countries like India, patriarchal societies exhibit severe disapproval, discrimination, and stigmatic practices to both widowed and divorced women till date [3-4]. Single women living in both rural and urban areas of India face wide range of problems from economic hardship to providing food and safety for children, unemployment to low wages, physical and mental health issues, inheritance of property and/or maintenance issues following marital dissolution, severe discrimination, and exclusion from participating in auspicious events [5-7].

Although single women are facing more challenges in society, some factors known as 'protective factors' that help single women to thrive and face daily challenges. These protective factors include internal factors like coping styles [8], personality [9], virtues [10] and external factors like income [11], support from family, friends, and others [12-16]. Numerous studies have described the role of social support available to single

women, but the role of community as a source of support is less explored in earlier studies. The present study is an attempt to explore how the aspects of perceived community support are related to psychological distress, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and resilience among single women.

Community support is like social support, and it is a central concept in community psychology "that attempts to capture helping transactions that occur between people who share the same households, schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, organizations, and other community settings" [17]. Herrero and Gracia [18] developed an instrument to assess the multidimensional aspects of community support, viz., community integration, community participation, and community organization. Community integration refers to the sense of belongingness and/or identification to a community or a neighbourhood, sense of community, and feelings of attachment to one's own community. Community participation refers to the community involvement, i.e., active participation in community activities or social participation. Community organizations refer to the degree of support that an individual perceives from voluntary groups and organizations, social capital, and use of resources from these organizations.

The concept of community integration is like the sense of community including feelings of belongingness and attachment to one's own community, neighbouring and sense of mutual aid and support [18-19]. The sense of community model by McMillan and Chavis [20] included dimensions of membership (belongingness), fulfilment of needs, influence, and emotional connection that are essential in meeting the needs of the members of a community. Apart from creating relationship between members in a community, community integration also aims to help the individual to optimize their skills by making them actively participate in the activities and to live effectively in the community (CARF International, n. d.). Previous studies portray a negative relationship between community integration and psychological distress [21-23]. Studies showed a positive relationship between community integration and happiness [24-30] and life satisfaction [31-37].

Community participation means active participation in community activities, and community involvement. Social support or support from community is achieved by social capital and the social capital is determined by the community ties and the member's participation in the communal activities which helps to use the opportunities available and to deal with the problems of daily life [38-39]. Furthermore, the opportunities available in the community would help the individual to realize their interest, help gather relevant information and satisfy their needs. Also, the collective norms of the group and trust within members enhance the production and maintenance of well-being in the community [40]. Individuals who involve more in communal activities had more positive attitude towards their community and help from neighbours provide high degree of satisfaction and belongingness to the community [41-42]. Studies report a negative relationship between community participation and psychological distress [43-46]. Studies also showed positive relationship between community participation and happiness [18, 24, 26], life satisfaction [47-50]. Furthermore, studies showed that community participation enhances community resilience [51-54].

Community organization means organizing and using the available resources for improving the welfare of the community and its members. Community organization involves elements of both community integration (sense of community) and community participation (participation of members in activities). Absence of such sense of belongingness to community and loneliness is marked by social isolation. Social isolation has a negative impact on one's health, increasing the levels of stress and inability to cope successfully in difficult situations [55-58]. The relationship between members/ sense of community along with participation in the community activities constitutes social capital that facilitates cooperation and use of resources among members [38, 40]. Understanding the values of group, its norms, resources are essential to know about the support processes in the community. The community organization helps individuals to bounce back from stressful situation [59-62]. Studies on community organization showed positive relationship between community organization and life satisfaction [63-64]. Studies also showed that community organization also improved community resilience [51, 65-66].

The research on the lives of single women in India is still not extensive, though the number of single women is increasing drastically. Studies have focused qualitatively and quantitatively on the impact of social support systems on the lives of single women, but how the aspects of community support affect the daily lives of single women are not explored in previous studies. Also, it is not much understood how these community support systems challenge or promote positive adaptations in single women. So, the present study examines

if community support predicts psychological distress, happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience among single women.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A sample of 300 widowed, divorced, or separated single women in the age group 25 to 60 years ($M = 39.82$, $SD = 7.83$) was recruited from a city in South India. The sampling technique used to recruit the participant in the present study is exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling method where the participants who were initially identified provided multiple referrals and these referred participants provide further referrals and this process continued until the desired sample size was achieved. All the single women in the sample were recruited through referrals from individual participants besides referrals from NGOs, religious organizations, and workplaces. Most of the participants were divorced (42.7%), had a high school level of education (37.7%), and were self-employed (58.7%). Many of them were Hindus (81%) and belonging to the backward classes (69.7%).

Instruments

Self-report measures on community support, psychological distress, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience were used to collect data, and all the instruments were translated into the regional language (Tamil) that is convenient for the subjects to comprehend.

Perceived Community Support Questionnaire [18]

Perceived Community Support Questionnaire (PCSQ) is a self-administered inventory that includes three scales that assess the three dimensions of social support. The PCSQ scale consists of 14 items with three subscales. The respondents had to respond to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree). The three dimensions are community integration, community participation, and the use of community organization. Community integration measures the sense of belongingness and/or identification to a community or neighbourhood. A sample item is 'I identify with my community'. Community participation measures the degree to which the respondent is involved in social activities in the community. A sample item is 'I collaborate in organizations and associations in my community'. Community organizations measure the degree of support the respondent perceives from voluntary groups and organizations such as recreational and sports clubs and services, political and civic associations in the community, and the like. A sample item is 'I could find people that would help me feel better'. The scores on community integration, community participation, and community organization subscales were derived by summing up all the scores pertaining to the items relevant to a particular subscale. A high score on the community integration denotes high sense of belongingness and attachment to one's own community. A high score on the community participation denotes more involvement to community and active participation in community activities. A high score on the community organization denotes high sense of perceiving the support from group and organization. The alpha of the subscales of community integration, community participation, and community organization on the present sample are 0.77, 0.80, and 0.90, respectively.

Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) [67].

The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS) is a set of three self-report clinical measures that purport to measure the three related negative emotional states of depression, anxiety, and stress. The questionnaire used for current research is a short version of DASS. It consists of 21 items with seven items for each subscale, viz., depression, anxiety, and stress. The depression scale measures dysphoria, hopelessness, devaluation of life, self-deprecation, lack of interest or involvement, anhedonia and inertia. A sample item is 'I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all'. The anxiety scale measures autonomic arousal, skeletal muscle effects, situational anxiety, and subjective experience of anxious affect. A sample item is 'I was aware of dryness of my mouth'. The stress scale measures difficulty relaxing, nervous arousal, and being easily upset or agitated, irritation, over-reactive and impatient. A sample item is 'I found it hard to wind down'. The respondent has to respond to each item with a 4-point rating scale, ranging from 0 (did not apply

to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time) in terms of three related negative emotional states. The scores on depression, anxiety, and stress are calculated by summing the response to all the items under each subscale. The scores of depression, anxiety, and stress are summed together to arrive at a single score, 'psychological distress'. A high score on the total indicates high level of psychological distress. The alpha of the psychological distress in the present sample is 0.96.

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) [68]

The Subjective Happiness Scale was designed to measure global subjective happiness. It consists of 4 items out of which two items ask the respondents to respond with seven options that describe themselves using both absolute ratings ranging from 1 (not a very happy person) to 7 (a very happy person) and also rating relative to peers ranging from 1 (less happy) to 7 (happier). The other two items provide brief descriptions of happy and unhappy individuals and ask the respondents to rate the extent to which each characterization describes them by responding 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal). A sample item is 'In general, I consider myself'. The scale is uni-dimensional and so the responses of all four items are summed to form subjective happiness score. The higher score indicates greater happiness. The alpha of the happiness scale on the present sample is 0.72.

Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale (RLSS) [69]

The Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale (RLSS) focuses on individuals' evaluation of life contentment. The RLSS was developed as an improved measure of life satisfaction by increasing the bandwidth of the measure and reducing the acquiescence bias noticed in the earlier scale by introducing the indirect (negative) items and balancing the items. The scale consists of 6 items, and the respondents are required to respond to each item using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item is 'I am content with my life'. The total score was derived by summing the response to all six items. A high score indicates a high level of life satisfaction/contentment. The alpha of the life satisfaction scale on the present sample is 0.78.

Bharathiar University Resilience Scale (BURS) [70]

The Bharathiar University Resilience Scale purports to measure the resilience of an individual. It has 30-items with a 5-point rating option, ranging from 1 (not at all appropriate) to 5 (most appropriate). The scale measures resilience in terms of duration to get back to normalcy, reaction to negative events, response to risk factors (specifically, disadvantaged environment) in life, perception of the effect of past negative events, defining problems, hope/confidence in coping with future and openness to experience and flexibility. A sample item is 'I usually get back to my cheerful self pretty soon no matter what failures occur in my life'. The total score was derived by summing the response to all the items. A high score indicates a high level of resilience. The alpha of the resilience scale on the present sample is 0.94.

Procedure

The participants were invited to participate in the study using flyers that were shared via social media. Before collecting the data, they were briefed about the purpose of the research and assured of privacy and confidentiality of data collected. They were further informed about their right to withdraw or decline from research at any point of time and written informed consent was obtained from them. All the instruments were self-administered, and each participant took 45 minutes on an average to complete the survey.

RESULTS

Multiple regressions were carried out to examine the unique contributions of the independent variables of community support over the dependent variables of psychological distress, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience, and the results are presented below.

The multiple regression analysis for overall predictor variables of community integration, community participation and community organization produced $R^2 = .02$, $F(3,296) = 2.55$, $p = ns$ and the model is not significant. Community integration ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$) had significantly and positively predicted psychological

distress, but since the model is not significant, the variable will not be considered a significant predictor of psychological distress.

The multiple regression analysis for overall predictor variables of community integration, community participation and community organization produced $R^2 = .01$, $F(3,296) = .70$, $p = ns$ and the model is not significant. None of the variables included in the model predicted subjective happiness.

Table 1: Multiple regression analysis of dimensions of community support as predictors of life satisfaction in single women

	Unstd. Coeff.		Std. Coeff.	T
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant)	28.18	2.42		11.66 ***
Community Integration	-.28	.19	-.13	-1.46 ns
Community Participation	.37	.11	.25	3.44 **
Community Organization	-.05	.13	-.03	-.36 ns

Note: $R^2 = .04$, $Adj R^2 = .03$, $F(3,296) = 4.23$, $p < .01$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; ns = not sig

The multiple regression analysis for overall predictor variables produced $R^2 = .04$, $F(3,296) = 4.23$, $p < .01$. Community participation ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) significantly and positively predicted life satisfaction. Community participation explains 4% of the variance in life satisfaction.

Table 2: Multiple regression analysis of dimensions of community support as predictors of psychological resilience in single women

	Unstd. Coeff.		Std. Coeff.	T
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant)	137.50	5.88		23.39 ***
Community Integration	-1.69	.46	-.31	-3.63 ***
Community Participation	-.17	.26	-.05	-.66 ns
Community Organization	.63	.32	.14	1.95 ns

Note: $R^2 = .08$, $Adj R^2 = .07$, $F(3,296) = 8.53$, $p < .001$; *** $p < .001$; ns = not sig.

The multiple regression analysis for overall predictor variables produced $R^2 = .08$, $F(3, 296) = 8.53$, $p < .001$. Community integration ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$) significantly and negatively predicted psychological resilience. Community integration explains 8% of the variance in psychological resilience.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine if community support predicts positive adaptation in single women. Positive adaptation, in this study, was operationalized in terms of psychological distress, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience among single women. The present study showed interesting findings that are discussed below.

Community integration is significantly associated with psychological distress, but since the model is not significant, community integration was not considered to be a significant predictor of psychological distress. We hypothesised that community integration will be negatively predict psychological distress, since community integration helps the individual to develop belongingness to the community and also help to optimize their skills to deal with their stressful situations and live effectively. The previous studies [21-23] on community integration also showed a negative association with psychological distress. However, the results of the present study were unable to demonstrate the relationship between community integration and psychological distress. In the same lines, community integration was not found to significantly predict subjective happiness and life satisfaction in the present study. This may be because single women may be hesitant to involve themselves in community-based gatherings and to initiate interaction because of the fear of existing stigma and discrimination within the members of the community. So, single women may not

have a chance to interact with the members of the community, thereby may not have a chance to receive help from the community. It is also possible that single women count and focus more on their internal resources than prioritising community activity. The present study, however, found that community integration negatively predicted psychological resilience. The community integration describes how the individual identify the community as their own and how their opinions are valued in their community and how other members of the community identify with the individuals. Community integration is similar to the feeling of belongingness and attachment to one's community, and studies showed that this belonging to a community enhances active relationship between its members and provides an opportunity to take effective actions during adversity, thereby increasing community resilience [71-73]. Surprisingly, community integration is found to have negative association with psychological resilience in the present study. Single women who scored high on community integration may find that belonging to a community is not effective in bouncing back from distressful events; rather they may find internal resources like personality, self-esteem to be useful in developing resilience among them. Also, when the community's goals and its elements are not congruent or aligned to single women's goals, community integration may not be meaningful to them. Further studies may be needed to explore the significance of community involvement in lives of single women.

Community participation is not significantly associated with psychological distress, subjective happiness, and psychological resilience in the present study. It is essential to note that participating in communal activities may actually benefit individuals by helping them have their essential needs like increased social networks and whole community, reducing stereotypes, provide better physical and mental well-being, improving attitude of people, boosting self-confidence and personality, helps to set goals and improve their skills, enhances social support, improving their financial status, improving their sense of belongingness [74-75] are met. These needs are essential for the single women to thrive; however, single women face severe discrimination particularly divorced women are prone to more stigmatisation than widowed women [7] which could deter them from actively involving themselves in community activities. Also, it is possible that the needs of single women are distinctly different from others in the community leaving little scope for them to integrate with the community on common interests and needs. When the needs are not met active participation in communal activities and the support that the community provides to single women may not be effective in bringing a positive change in the well-being of single women. Examining the role of similar types of support from other sources, other internal and external factors would give a deeper insight into what role different sources of support play in lives of single women to help them adapt positively to challenging life experiences. The present study also exhibited that community participation positively predicted life satisfaction in the present study. Community participation means active participation of an individual in community activities, having community involvement and studies have shown a positive relationship with life satisfaction [47-50]. The results of the present study are in line with previous researches. Participating and involving in communal activities [76-77] and quality and quantity of the social interaction between the members are considered as essential to increase the sense of community within the members [48, 78]. Particularly, the quality of social interaction is very significant in providing emotional support, thereby increasing the self-esteem [79-80], and it contributes to the life satisfaction of the individual. Single women who participate in communal activities may have more social interaction and have increased chances of getting help and support from other members of the community which may contribute to develop and lead a satisfying life.

Community organization did not predict psychological distress, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience in the present study. Previous studies on community organization showed a negative relationship between community organization and psychological distress [61-62]. Also, studies show positive relationships between community organization and life-satisfaction [63-64] and community resilience [51, 65]. Community organization refers to the degree to which individuals perceive being supported by the voluntary groups and organizations. It is interesting to find that the community organization is not significantly associated with any of the variables in the present study. In India, groups like Self Help Groups (SHG) are led by women creating a social and economic change in women for past four decades. The SHGs mainly focused on women empowerment, improving the socio-economic status of women by providing micro-finance, addressing, and protecting women from inequalities in the society [81].

Even though SHGs are functioning well, and they focus on the issues of women like domestic violence, there is a strong need for collective action of women to increase the incidence of addressing more inequalities and to provide more support services to women [82-84]. Though women are benefitting by this collective action, it is uncertain that the needs of the single widowed or divorced women would be targeted in this collective action. Recently, online support groups are emerging in social media like Facebook, Instagram, and Meetups that provide legal support, counselling to single women, but they are being restricted to some locality/region (Bangalore Parents, Bangalore) or as community/ destitute homes (Kalgidhar Society) and many single women do not have any knowledge about its existence. Studies on widows highlight the importance of family and friends [85-86], particularly to deal with the loss in the early years of death/loss of spouse. Family and friends, particularly single friends directly help the single women to deal with their problems and needs, and also support them to deal with the financial and household responsibilities [87], to take care of children, provide food and shelter to single women and their children [88], which other formal and informal groups in the community may fail to do. Perhaps, the non-availability of formal community networks and/or ignorance about social groups available to single women is why there was no significant relationship between community organization and psychological distress, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological resilience in the present study.

CONCLUSION

The support from the community plays a less prominent role in the positive adaptation of single women, but it needs further exploration. Participating in community activities increases life satisfaction among single women, but the feeling of belonging to a community does not seem to contribute to resilience among single women. However, belonging to the community and active participation in communal activities are not associated with psychological distress and subjective happiness, and it shows that the organizations or clubs in the community may not be able to help the single women deal with distress and improve their wellbeing. The present study showed some interesting findings which can be taken as preliminary findings and require further studies to understand the deeper dynamics and mechanism involved in the connection between single women and community in our society.

Limitations: It is essential to duly consider the limitations of the study while drawing inferences from the findings of this study. The participants recruited for the present study are smaller representations of single women population because they are hidden and unreachable. To reach 'this hard to reach' population, social networking sites, mass media, and existing secondary sources of data might help the researchers. The participants identified for this study were residing in a single city of South India and further research may include participants from other geographic locations to make comparisons between single women from two different locations. Respondent-driven sampling procedure may be used to reduce the sampling bias caused by the non-random sampling used in this present study. The present study was restricted only to focus on the challenges and responses of single women and no comparative group like single men or married women was used. Using such comparison may provide better insight into the unique challenges and responses of single women who are in intersections compared to married women and single men.

Implications

Future research may focus on having in-depth investigation on the experiences of single women using mixed methods approach rather than relying only on findings of correlational study. Also, the future researchers must include the socio-demographic factors to have a holistic picture on how these factors contribute and promote positive adaptation and new opportunities to single women. For the past three decades in India, many schemes and benefits concerning pension (IGNWPS), employment (NREGA), temporary shelter (STEP) are made available only to single women belonging to Below Poverty Line (BPL), and single women belonging to other classes in the country do not have access to such schemes. Many single women in rural areas are not aware of such governmental and non-governmental schemes, and they also face severe disapproval from their family, community, and their society in which they live. The present study highlighted how communal support systems contribute to the life satisfaction and resilience of single women. The single women must be provided with the knowledge of how and in what ways the community can help

them to face the challenges, how to interact with community members, and how to actively participate in activities and effectively use community as a resource to draw help from when needed. Counselling and training may be given to single women on how to prioritize their needs and how to fulfil them by the resources available in their community. Public awareness on how the community support helps to refine the daily lives of single women and steps to be taken to reduce the discrimination and stigma towards single women in the society must be provided to all.

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