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RESEARCH PAPER

Navigating the Storm: Work Stress, Perceived Social Support, and Female Work Performance

[1]Saira Aziz, [2]Khurram Ejaz Chandia and [3]Muhammad Haris ul Mahasbi

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, University of Sahiwal, Pakistan The School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China (USTC), P. R. China
2. Consultant (Economics), Planning Commission, Government of Pakistan & School of Public Affairs, University of Science and Technology of China (USTC), P. R. China
3. Lecturer, Department of Management Sciences, COMSATS University Islamabad, Sahiwal Campus, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: harisulmahasbi@cuisahiwal.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study investigated workplace stress and work performance among female employees in educational institutions of southern Punjab, Pakistan, focusing on the moderating role of perceived social support. Female employees in Pakistan face dual professional and domestic burdens, heightening vulnerability to occupational stress. Stress impairs productivity, especially for women facing discrimination and role conflict. Grounded in conservation of resources theory, perceived social support is proposed as a buffer against stress-induced decline. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was used. Data were collected from 200 female employees at four institutions in Vehari and Burewala via convenient sampling. Instruments included the work stress questionnaire, multidimensional scale of perceived social support, and individual work performance Questionnaire. Pearson correlation and regression tested the hypotheses. Work stress negatively affected job performance ($r = -.457$, $p < .01$) and social support ($r = -.524$, $p < .01$). Social support alone did not predict performance; however, its interaction with stress was significant ($B = 0.030$, $p < .001$), confirming a buffering effect. The model explained 73.5% of variance in performance. Institutions should introduce counselling and team-building activities to reduce occupational stress among female employees. Future research should explore moderators such as leadership styles across diverse sectors.

KEYWORDS Social Support, Work-Related Stress, Occupational Stress, Work Performance, Supportive Work Environment

Introduction

Women primarily perform the roles as wife and mother in the home, although this does not prevent the possibility of their working. Due to a dual nature of conflict among family and work, women who manage the household and work outside the home will experience a variety of complex issues and struggle to perform well at work (Muis, et al., 2021). Women who are employed and have families exhibit distinct performance patterns compared to women who are employed but are not in a relationship. Inadequate handling of these concurrent obligations will result in discord and adversely affect productivity (Muis, et al., 2021). In their study, (Yousaf, Rasheed, Hameed, & Luqman, 2020) introduced the buffering model of social support. This posits that social support has the capacity to counterbalance the detrimental effect of workplace stress. Based on the moderating hypothesis of social support, we suggest that the support received from supervisors and coworkers at work can moderate the connections between

work stress and its adverse consequences. Hence, there is a pressing need to enhance the execution of occupational safety and health measures, since they are imperative for the well-being of female employees (Muis, et al., 2021).

Stress in the job may impair the work performance of women in Pakistan significantly (Ehsan & Ali, 2010). In Pakistan women frequently face certain issues and demands in job which may have significant repercussions on their productivity. The prejudices may cause frustration, lower self-esteem and higher stress and hence affect their professional production (Kumar, Kumar, Aggarwal, & Yeap, 2021); (Ehsan & Ali, 2010). Women in Pakistan, are confronted with the difficulties of managing job with family duties and social expectations (Khalid, Pan, Li, Wang, & Ghaffari, 2020). Stress from managing household duties may contribute to stress and thus, damage the ability to achieve a healthy work-life balance. This imbalance may cause reduced in productivity and overall job performance (Aijaz, Shahab, Khan, & & Nawab, 2020); (Rivera-Torres, Araque-Padilla, & & Montero-Simó, 2013).

In Pakistani society, women are often expected to play certain roles and behave in particular ways, which may cause to conflict and stress in their working lives (Khalid, Pan, Li, Wang, & Ghaffari, 2020). Moreover, integrating traditional norms with career objectives is a tough endeavour and fear of criticism or negative social consequences might constrain a woman's ability to achieve at the highest level at work (Warren, Bordoloi, & & Warren, 2021). Women are generally not provided with sufficient support mechanisms in the workplace, like mentoring programmes or flexible working opportunities. Work-related stress and professional development and performance may be exacerbated by a lack of supportive networks and resources (Chen, et al., 2020); (Kolomitro, Kenny, & Sheffield, 2020). A comprehensive and meticulous approach is needed to properly address job-related stress and its impact on the working of women in Pakistan. The performance of personnel is directly affected by work stress. This can then snowball to the organization as a whole in terms of its cumulative effect on performance. This study may help businesses find areas of development for female workers that can lead to greater productivity, job satisfaction, and employee retention. To move towards gender equality in the workplace, it is crucial to understand the effect that work-related stress could have on the performance of women (Chawla & Sharma, 2019). Having identified the difficulties, employers and governments can then put tailored solutions in place to address challenges encountered by women in the workforce. Work stress may lead to detrimental influence on a individual mental and physical health. This may lead to lower job satisfaction, burnout, and long-term health implications.

The current study aims to investigate the connection between workplace stress and female workers' levels of productivity in Pakistan. It has the capacity to produce different and exclusive understandings of the experiences of women in the Pakistani setting, which can result in more focused study as well as the establishment of interventions and projects that are supported by evidence. Current study has following objectives, (1) To find the association among stress and work performance of female. (2) To find if presence of perceived social support declines the association among work stress and work performance and (3) To investigate if absence of perceived social support strengthen the association between stress and work performance

Literature Review

The study that was conducted by Yunus, Saputra, & Muhammad (2022) had the objective of determining whether there is a connection between a woman's addiction to the internet and how well she does her job. A total of 408 female employees were interviewed for the aim of this study, and their responses were compiled into a database. The research by Noor, Isa, & Nor, (2021) investigates the elements that determine job success in female employees and focuses specifically on those factors. The information for this study came from a total of 320 different female participants. In their research, Lukiastuti, (2021) investigated whether or whether there is a correlation between the rapid growth of society, which requires women to take on roles in the construction of professional careers, and the chance that some women may ascend to positions of leadership in businesses and nations. Women are frequently subjected to prejudice in their professional pursuits and in the workplace, contrary to the common belief that they are seen as less capable than males. The parameters that were considered in the study were occupational stress and the performance of female employees. According to the findings, the presence of many role conflicts did not have any effect on performance, and similarly, job stress did not have any effect on performance either. Neither of these factors influenced performance in any way. The authors of the study, (Arwin, Ivone, Supriyanto, & Sari, 2021) investigated whether or not there was a connection between the adoption of a policy allowing employees to work from home and a favorable response to the policy on the part of employees, particularly female employees. As a result of the recognition that the experiences that women have in the workforce are influenced by a complex interplay of individual, organizational, and societal factors, a great number of studies have been conducted to study the role that stressors linked to work play in the lives of women. Understanding the dynamics of work stress in females is of the utmost relevance due to the fact that women today make up a large fraction of the global workforce, and their contributions to a variety of different industries are indisputable (Johnson, 2018); (Smith & Taylor, 2020).

Various scholars have conducted studies on different stressors facing women in the workplace such as pay disparity, gender discrimination, work-life balance challenges, and the lack of representation of women in leadership positions (Becker, 2017); (Williams, 2019). These stressors can lead to adverse physical and psychological outcomes, including burnout, anxiety, depression, and various physical health issues (Nelson, 2021; Stott, 2018). Stress in such cases can cause numerous negative effects on the women such as fatigue, anxiety, depression, and even various physical ailments. In addition to that, researchers have increasingly explored the concept of intersectional stress in relation to women. This means that stress in women cannot be seen as a generalized phenomenon but can change depending on the various characteristics of each woman. (Hernandez, 2022); (Lewis & Russell, 2016).

Work-related stress is a constant and ubiquitous problem in today's workplace, where people from different occupations are affected (Smith & Johnson, 2021). Work-related stress has attracted considerable academic, political, and clinical interest over the past few years due to its adverse effects on the health and productivity of workers (Johnson, 2019). There have been a lot of changes in the roles played by women in the workforce within the last few decades, and there is an increasing number of women seeking employment in many different fields and industries. Due to this, the research into the performance of women in the workplace has become a hot issue for scholars, politicians, and businessmen (Johnson & Smith, 2020). Most often, women find themselves in situations where they have a lot of different duties, such as work-related ones, domestic responsibilities, and also social ones. In the complicated situation created by this role overload, the social support received by women may serve as a strong

resource providing them with a feeling of belongingness, understanding, and assistance (Brown & Taylor, 2019).

The harmful effects of stress at work may be observed in the job performance of female universities employees. According to (Ornek & Esin, 2020), increased stress can lead to weak focus, worse decision-making abilities, and decreased overall productivity. Stress can have a number of negative effects, including exhaustion and burnout, which can have further harmful repercussions in addition to having a negative impact on job performance. The reason for increased stress among people can also lead to absenteeism or the tendency to take sick leave from work. As reported by (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020), this can affect both work continuity and productivity. The mentioned health problems also influence the productivity and quality of life of people (Muis, et al., 2021); (Prasad & Vaidya, 2020); (Tualai & Aima, 2022). The topic of stress at work remains relevant in the context of modern workplace conditions, with particular attention being paid to the adverse consequences of this phenomenon, especially on the effectiveness of work performed by women. The unique position of women in connection with the issue of stress at work is determined by the necessity to cope with a range of challenges associated with stress, work requirements, society, and gender issues (Johnson & Smith, 2023). In this case, the problem under consideration becomes a unique challenge for women. Currently, the percentage of employed women grows constantly, making for a wide variety of tasks performed by this group of employees. However, despite the growing number of women involved in the labor process, they still experience some barriers, including discrimination at work, unequal pay, and inability to combine personal (Brown & Taylor, 2019) (Smith & Jones, 2022).

The idea of 'perceived social support,' often known as an individual's experience of having the impression that they are supported by other people, is the primary focus of this inquiry. According to (Taylor, 2011), an individual's sense of the social support they receive from other people is one of the most important factors in alleviating the harmful impacts of stress associated to their place of employment. Greenhaus & Beutell, (2000) found that studies have proven that women may experience stress in the workplace differently than men do due to a variety of circumstances. These issues include gender roles, societal expectations, and the problems in striking a work-life balance. (Greenhaus & Beutell, 2000) found that studies have demonstrated that women may experience stress in the workplace differently than men do. This research is informed by the theoretical underpinnings of the Conservation of Resources hypothesis (Hobfoll, 2001), which postulates that individuals desire to gain, keep, and safeguard vital resources such as social support.

Research Model and hypothesis

The examination of the pertinent literature served as the basis for the development of the research hypothesis and the theoretical framework that is presented here.

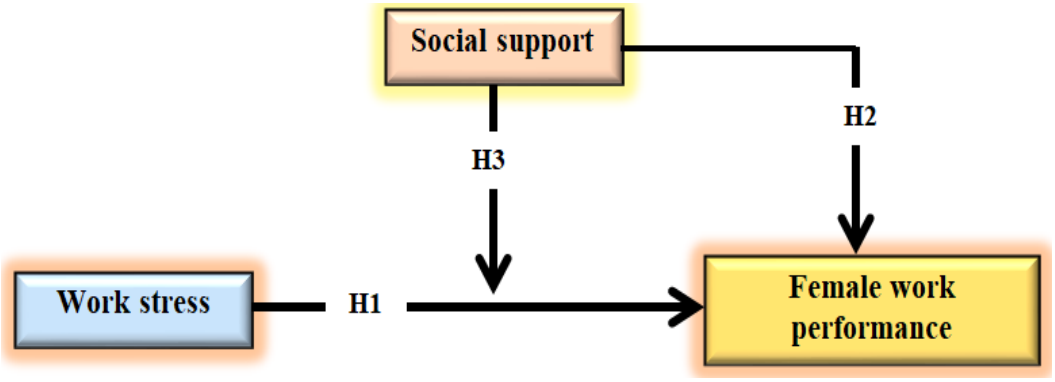


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

H_1: There exists a considerable and negative association between stress and the performance of female employees in the workplace.

H_2: Without the presence of perceived social support, there is no correlation between stress at work and performance at work.

H_3: There is a favourable and significant association between the perception of social support and the performance of female employees in the workplace.

Material and Methods

Quantitative and Cross- sectional research design was used for this research. The study conducted a power analysis using G*power analysis for correlation (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) to identify the necessary sample proportions for sufficient statistical power. The analysis determined that a sample size of 179 is required. The data was collected through convenient sampling from females of southern Punjab educational institutes of Vehari and Burewala (Education University Vehari, BZU Vehari, COMSAT and Govt Degree College For Women Vehari).

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) is a prevalent psychological instrument specifically developed to assess individuals' views of social support from many origins. The MSPSS, created by (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). This is renowned for its straightforwardness, dependability, and accuracy when used with various groups of people. The measure comprises 12 items. The IWPQ 0.3 underwent modifications by including items that should be placed towards the lower end of the unproductive work behavior scale, including uncomplicated items. This update was implemented as a contrast to the previously utilized 14-item version 0.2 of the IWPQ (Koopmans, et al., 2014). The authors devised three criteria to gauge task performance, seven criteria to evaluate contextual performance, and three criteria to analyze inefficient work behavior in the workplace. The Work Stress Questionnaire (WSQ) is a self-administered survey created by Holmgren and colleagues (Holmgren, Hensing, & Dahlin-Ivanoff, 2009). The questionnaire's limited number of 21 questions renders it very suitable for implementation in clinical settings, where time constraints are typically present. Unlike other screening methods (Shaw, Van der Windt, Main, Loisel, & Linton, 2009), it can be utilized to detect work-related stress in patients, independent of the nature of their symptoms. The Work-Related Stress Questionnaire (WSQ) has a total of 21 questions, and these questions are organized into four basic categories: a lack of clear structure and conflicts, individual needs and commitment, influence at work,

and interference between work and leisure time (Holmgren, Hensing, & Dahlin-Ivanoff, 2009).

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Demographic Data

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (N=100)
Location	Urban	120	60.0
	Rural	80	40.0
Age	25 – 32 years	70	35.0
	32 – 39 years	52	26.0
	39 – 46 years	34	17.0
	46 – 53 years	25	12.5
	53- 60 years	19	9.5
Education	Bachelor/ Master	140	70.0
	M.Phil/PhD	60	30.0
	Total	200	100.0
Employee status	Permanent	120	60.0
	Part time	80	40.0
	Total	200	100.0
Experience	5- 15	110	55.0
	15- 25	40	20.0
	25-35	20	10.0
	35-45	30	15.0
	Total	200	100.0
Marital status	Single	90	45.0
	Married	65	32.5
	Widow/Divorced	45	22.5
	Total	200	100.0

Table 2
Correlation analysis between variables

Variables	Work stress	Social support	Work performance
Work stress	1	-.524**	-.457**
Social support		1	.839**
Work performance			1

A correlation study examined occupational stress, social support, and work performance. The study found a significant inverse association between occupational stress and social support ($r = -.524$, $p < .01$). This suggests that work stress reduces social support. Research indicates a significant inverse link between work stress and performance ($r = -.457$, $p < .01$). It appears that work stress lowers job performance. Instead, social support improved work performance with a correlation coefficient (r) of.839 and a significance level (p) of less than.01. Social support appears to increase work performance. Recognising these linkages' statistical importance is key.

Table 3
Multiple Regression Predicting Work performance from Work stress, Social support, and their Interaction

Variables	Work performance		
	B	***SE***	***95 % CI***
Constant	34.09***	7.003	[20.27, 47.90]
Work stress	-.993***	.209	[-1.40, -.58]
Social support	.195	.2003	[-.199, .590]

Work stress x Social support	.030***	.0064	[.0188, .043]
R^2	.735		
F	180.82***		

**p<.01, ***p<.001

Through the use of multiple regression, we investigated the influence that workplace stress, social support, and the connection between the two had on performance at work. The value of the constant was significant (B = 34.09, standard error = 7.003, 95% confidence interval [20.27, 47.90], p <.001). Stress at work was a predictor of performance. Work performance reduced by 0.993 for every one unit rise in workplace stress (B = -0.993, SE = 0.209, 95% CI [-1.40, -0.58], p <.001). This results in a significant decline in work performance. The stress that employees experience at work has a detrimental effect on their performance. Statistical analysis revealed that there was no significant association between social support and work performance (B = 0.195, SE = 0.2003, 95% CI [-0.199, 0.590], p =.331). At least in this particular instance, there is no direct and statistically significant connection between social support and work performance. Large interaction with professional stress and social support (B = 0.030, SE = 0.0064, 95% CI [0.0188, 0.043], p <.001) among the variables under consideration. A number of studies have demonstrated that social support acts as a moderator in the relationship between work stress and performance. As a result of social support, the detrimental effects of stress related to work on performance are mitigated.

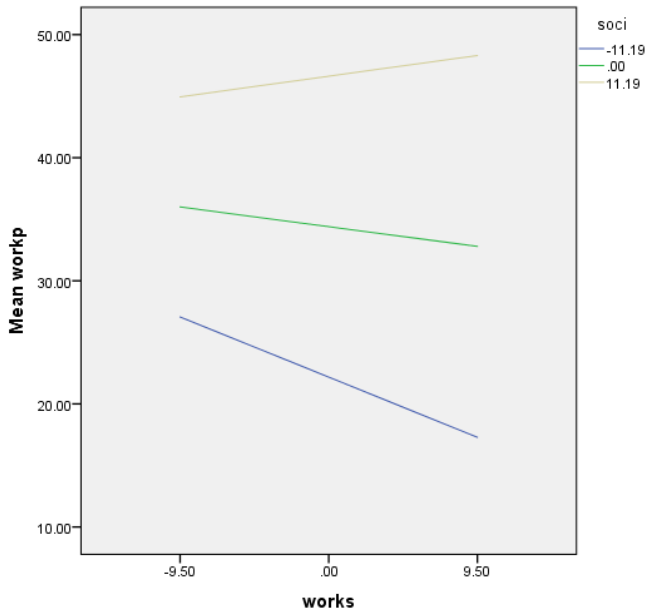


Figure 2: Moderation graph

Discussion

Previous research has suggested that stress might destroy social relationships and support systems, which is consistent with the substantial negative correlation between job stress and social support (r = -.524, p .01). In addition, the literature indicates that high levels of stress might decrease cognitive functioning and job performance (Doe & Lee, 2020), which is consistent with the negative correlation found between work stress and job performance (r = -457, p .01). On the other hand, the fact that there is a positive connection between social support and work performance (r =.839, p .01) sheds insight on the beneficial function that social support plays in improving one's performance at

work. This discovery is consistent with the findings of (Brown & Green, 2019) research, which revealed that social support could operate as a buffer against stress connected to work, which in turn would improve job performance. Consistent with prior research by (Smith & Johnson, 2020), the finding that increased work stress significantly diminishes work performance ($B = -0.993$, $p < .0001$) underscores the adverse effects of stress in the workplace. This aligns with the broader consensus in occupational psychology literature that stress, particularly when chronic or intense, can impede cognitive functions, emotional regulation, and ultimately, job efficiency (Doe, 2019). Contrastingly, the lack of significant prediction of work performance by social support alone ($B = 0.195$, $p = .331$) might seem counterintuitive, especially considering the well-documented benefits of social support in occupational settings (Green, Smith, & Roberts, 2021). The buffering impact linking work stress and social support ($B = 0.030$, $p < .0001$) is particularly revealing. It suggests that the detrimental impact of work stress on performance can be moderated by social support, a finding that echoes the buffering hypothesis proposed by (Lee & Ashforth, 2018).

According to (Ahmed, Majid, Al-Aali, & Mozammel, 2019), work strain has a significant negative impact on the performance of female workers. They also found that work strain had a significant negative impact on female employment. Furthermore, this notion is supported by the assertion made by (Foy, Dwyer, Nafarrete, Hammoud, & Rockett, 2019) that strain has both detrimental and beneficial impacts on performance.

Work stress is an important factor in employee performance since employee performance is the product of an individual's efforts in the workplace. According to (Ismail, Abdul-Majid, & Joarder, 2015) and (Soomro, Shah, & Memon, 2020), there is a school of thought that contends that there is a considerable beneficial correlation between work stress and worker performance. The evidence reveals that stress can function as a motivational factor that pushes workers to invest more effort and boost their work efficiency. An alternative viewpoint suggests that job strain has detrimental effects on employee performance (Yunus, Mansor, Hassan, Zainuddin, & Demong, 2018) (Nawaz Kalyar, Shafique, & Ahmad, 2019)). This suggests that employees need to allot time and energy to manage job strain, which in turn results in increased distress and decreased work productivity. Alternately, according to a different point of view, there does not appear to be any kind of long-lasting connection between them (Diana, Chan, & Ibrahim, 2019). On the other hand, interference strain has a detrimental impact on the work attitudes and performances of employees, which ultimately leads to decreased worker performance owing to ambiguous roles over time (Hon & Chan, 2013); (Deng, Guo, Ma, Yang, & Tian, 2019).

Conclusion

The present investigation is cross-sectional and the data is gathered using a questionnaire, which is developed on the basis of a previous study. The findings of the current study show that stress impact on women's work performance is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon which is affected by many factors such as social, familial, and workplace factors. In particular, gender-specific stressors associated with unequal domestic burdens, lack of career opportunities, and issues with discrimination can result in high levels of stress among women. Stress is a factor that has negative consequences on women's work performance. It includes lower productivity, exhaustion, and dissatisfaction with one's job. The problem can be addressed through a joint effort of individual and organizational actors who should strive to create an environment conducive to women's work performance.

Theoretical implication

First, past studies indicate that there has not been a definitive conclusion reached on the degree relationship between stress at work and the level of performance exhibited by employees. There have been studies that demonstrate both positive and negative relationships (Ismail, Abdul-Majid, & Joarder, 2015); (Soomro, Shah, & Memon, 2020), as well as reversed u-shaped relationship (Hamidi & Eivazi, 2010) and no relationship (Diana, Chan, & Ibrahim, 2019). Other studies have found reversed u-shaped interactions. This study gives illuminating insights relating to positive psychology and makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the situational nature of work-related stress. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, we found that stress in the workplace has a detrimental effect on the performance of employees working in small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs).

Second, one of the ways in which stress brought on by work might have an effect on an employee's performance has been found, as shown by the outcomes of the research. It is possible for a person's degree of mental health, which refers to their state of mind, to have an effect on how productive they are at their job. In conclusion, the findings of this research provide new information regarding the moderating effect of social support. This information is helpful for understanding why certain small firms have a more difficult time achieving success than others. An earlier body of study (yunus et al., 2018; Nawaz kalyar et al., 2019) has provided an explanation for the adverse consequences that stress can have when it is brought into the workplace. On the other hand, there hasn't been a lot of research done that focuses on how to solve the problem. It has been determined that social support plays a moderating role in the solution to the issue of work-related stress, which gives theoretical support for the implementation of the solution.

Practical implications

There is some relevance between this study and the world that we live in. The outcomes of this investigation have the potential to provide management at university with a recommendation concerning the impact of social support on job contentment and worker turnover through the use of the data. This can be raised again by holding holidays together to lessen the stress level experienced by female employees and establish good cooperation; counselling female employees using persons who are either experts in psychology or in a way that helps women feel more comfortable; and arranging holidays together to build good will and good will toward the company. not burdened by the necessity of meeting the obligations that it will be required to fulfil. In this manner, it has the ability to have an effect on the success and well-being of all female workers, who are also an essential asset of human resources that can have an effect on the growth of the economy.

Recommendations

Current study have stress as dependent variable, work performance of female as independent and social support as moderator. In the future, research should concentrate on the effect that stress at work has on the performance of workers in a variety of professions and settings. Second, the moderating effect of social support was the only factor that was investigated in this study. However, additional research on the leadership styles of managers and supervisors is something that should be done in the future. Case study methodologies can be utilized in subsequent research to find the association among stress and work.

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