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Reducing Psychological Distress through Education: A Study of Women's Mental Health and Gender Inequality

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ABSTRACT

Psychological distress among women has emerged as a critical concern in contemporary social research, particularly in contexts where gender inequality is deeply entrenched in cultural, economic, and institutional systems. This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design. We interviewed 17 women using a semi-structured interview guide and purposive sampling. Data were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal a complex relationship between education, gender inequality, and women's psychological well-being. Education can mitigate distress by enhancing awareness, confidence, and coping abilities, whereas limited education heightens dependency and vulnerability. However, higher education may also introduce stress due to persistent patriarchal norms, role conflicts, and discrimination. Gender inequality remains a primary source of distress through restricted autonomy and unequal responsibilities. Despite these challenges, education fosters agency and resilience—though its positive impact hinges on broader efforts to address structural inequalities.

Keywords: Women, Education, Psychological Distress, Gender Inequality, Mental Health, Well-Being

Introduction

Psychological distress among women has increasingly become a significant area of concern within contemporary social research, particularly in societies where gender inequality remains deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and institutional structures (Mirzaei-Alavijeh et al., 2025; Molarius & Granström, 2018). Women often experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression due to multiple and intersecting pressures, including restricted autonomy, limited access to resources, and persistent gender-based discrimination. In patriarchal contexts, Viertiö et al. (2021) argued that these challenges are further intensified by social expectations that confine

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women to traditional roles, restrict their mobility, and limit their participation in decision-making processes. As a result, Andersson and Harnois (2020) asserted that women's mental health cannot be understood in isolation from the broader social structures that shape their lived experiences. Among the various factors that may mitigate these challenges, education emerges as a critical tool with the potential to reduce psychological distress and promote well-being (Bilodeau, Marchand, & Demers, 2020).

Niolu, Bianciardi, and Siracusano (2024) found that education plays a transformative role in shaping individuals' perceptions, opportunities, and coping capacities. For women, Yu (2018) also noted that access to education is not only a means of acquiring knowledge but also a pathway to empowerment and self-awareness. It provides women with the cognitive and social resources necessary to understand their rights, question oppressive norms, and navigate complex social environments (Ross, 2017; Xue & McMunn, 2021). In contexts marked by gender inequality, Reynolds et al. (2015) added that the level of education attained by women may significantly influence their mental health outcomes. Educated women are more likely to develop problem-solving skills, build social networks, and access information related to health and well-being, all of which can contribute to lower levels of psychological distress (Reynolds et al., 2015; Yu, 2018). Conversely, Zamarro and Prados (2021) explored limited or disrupted education may leave women more vulnerable to feelings of helplessness, dependency, and emotional strain.

Campbell, Bann, and Patalay (2021) analysed the relationship between women's level of education and psychological distress is therefore a crucial area of investigation. They stated that women with higher levels of education may experience reduced stress and anxiety due to increased opportunities for employment, financial independence, and social mobility. These factors enhance their sense of control over their lives and reduce exposure to situations that perpetuate distress, such as economic dependency or forced compliance with restrictive gender norms (Gurvich et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2016). However, Ryu and Fan (2023) contended that to recognize that education alone does not automatically eliminate psychological distress. In some cases, Carli (2020) found that educated women may face new forms of pressure, including role conflict, workplace discrimination, and heightened expectations, which can also impact their mental health. Thus, examining this relationship requires a nuanced understanding of how education interacts with broader structures of gender inequality.

In addition to direct effects on mental health, education plays a vital role in shaping women's ability to cope with and challenge gender-based discrimination (Horesh, Kapel Lev-Ari, & Hasson-Ohayon, 2020). Education fosters critical thinking, self-confidence, and awareness of social injustices, enabling women to resist discriminatory practices and advocate for their rights (McIntyre et al., 2018). Through education, women may develop the capacity to reinterpret their experiences, seek support, and adopt healthier coping strategies when faced with adversity. Gurvich et al. (2021) stated that this process is particularly important in patriarchal societies, where discrimination may be normalized and internalized, leading to chronic psychological distress. By equipping women with the tools to challenge such norms, education can contribute to both individual resilience and broader social change.

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Furthermore, the ability to cope with discrimination is closely linked to overall well-being (Bryant et al., 2017). Women who are able to assert their rights and access supportive networks are more likely to experience improved mental health outcomes. Education can also facilitate access to professional opportunities and social spaces where women's voices are valued, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging and self-worth (Niedzwiedz et al., 2021). At the same time, Xue and McMunn (2021) revealed that it is essential to consider the structural barriers that may limit the effectiveness of education in reducing psychological distress, such as persistent gender biases within institutions and communities.

In this context, the present study seeks to explore the role of education as a tool for reducing psychological distress among women by focusing on its relationship with mental health and its influence on coping with gender inequality. By examining how educational attainment shapes women's experiences of stress, anxiety, and depression, and how it enables them to navigate and challenge discrimination, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between education, gender, and mental health. Such insights are essential for developing policies and interventions that not only promote educational access but also address the underlying social inequalities that affect women's well-being. This study was guided by the following objectives.

To examine the relationship between women's level of education and their psychological distress (including stress, anxiety, and depression) within contexts of gender inequality

To explore how education influences women's ability to cope with and challenge gender-based discrimination, thereby affecting their mental health and overall well-being.

Literature Review

Psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, and depression, has emerged as a significant global health concern, with women disproportionately affected across diverse socio-cultural contexts. Research consistently shows that women experience higher rates of mental health disorders than men, often linked to structural inequalities and gendered social roles (Kiely, Brady, & Byles, 2019; Simon, 2020). A global study highlights that women are nearly twice as likely to suffer from mental illness, with gender inequality identified as a key determinant shaping these disparities (Guessoum et al., 2020). This indicates that women's mental health cannot be fully understood without examining the broader socio-cultural and economic conditions in which they live. In patriarchal societies, where gender-based discrimination is deeply institutionalized, women are more likely to encounter chronic stressors that negatively affect their psychological well-being (Abdullah & Ullah, 2022; Milner et al., 2021).

Gender inequality manifests in multiple forms, including restricted access to education, limited economic opportunities, and reduced decision-making power within households and communities (Gurvich et al., 2021; Horesh et al., 2020; Kiely et al., 2019). These structural barriers contribute significantly to women's psychological distress. Studies on gendered institutions suggest that adverse socio-economic conditions, particularly during early life, have more severe mental health consequences for women than men (Baños & Miragall, 2024; Yang & Sun, 2023).

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Such findings reinforce the idea that inequality operates cumulatively over the life course, intensifying vulnerability to depression and anxiety among women. Furthermore, cross-national research on adolescents demonstrates that girls consistently report higher levels of psychological distress and lower life satisfaction compared to boys, emphasizing the persistent nature of gendered mental health disparities across different stages of life (Reynolds et al., 2015).

Within this context, education has been widely recognized as a critical determinant of mental health and a potential mechanism for reducing psychological distress (Bryant et al., 2017). Education enhances individuals' cognitive abilities, problem-solving skills, and access to information, all of which contribute to better mental health outcomes (Molarius & Granström, 2018). For women, education is particularly significant as it provides not only knowledge but also opportunities for empowerment and social mobility. Educated women are more likely to access healthcare services, participate in decision-making processes, and develop supportive social networks, which can mitigate stress and anxiety. Empirical evidence suggests that education and employment together contribute to lower levels of anxiety among women, particularly by increasing awareness, financial stability, and social engagement (Horesh et al., 2020; Yu, 2018).

However, the relationship between education and psychological distress is complex and multifaceted. While higher levels of education are generally associated with improved mental health, some studies indicate that education may also increase women's exposure to gender-based discrimination, particularly in professional and public spheres. For instance, research shows that highly educated women are more likely to perceive gender discrimination in the workplace, as they are often employed in male-dominated environments (Niedzwiedz et al., 2021; Zamarro & Prados, 2021). This increased awareness and exposure may contribute to stress and dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, the same study also finds that education reduces the negative health impacts of such discrimination, suggesting that education enhances women's resilience and coping capacity. In this sense, education not only exposes women to inequalities but also equips them with the tools to manage and challenge them.

The role of education in shaping women's coping strategies and agency is particularly important in understanding its impact on mental health. Education fosters critical thinking, self-confidence, and awareness of rights, enabling women to recognize and resist discriminatory practices (Wilson et al., 2016; Xue & McMunn, 2021). Women with higher levels of education are more likely to adopt proactive coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support, accessing professional help, and engaging in problem-solving behaviors. Research on female agency further supports this argument, indicating that women with greater autonomy and decision-making power experience significantly lower levels of mental distress (Bhatia & Goyal, 2020; Heise et al., 2019). This suggests that education contributes to mental well-being by enhancing women's sense of control over their lives.

Moreover, education plays a transformative role in challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equality. By increasing awareness and fostering empowerment, education enables women to question traditional gender roles and advocate for their rights (Ross, 2017; Yang & Sun, 2023). This process of resistance is crucial in reducing the psychological burden associated with discrimination and

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marginalization. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that challenging entrenched social norms can also lead to conflict and stress, particularly in conservative societies. Educated women who challenge patriarchal expectations may face backlash, social isolation, or increased pressure to conform, which can affect their mental health (Srivastava & Anand, 2020). Therefore, the relationship between education, empowerment, and psychological well-being must be understood within the broader socio-cultural context.

In addition, institutional and structural factors play a significant role in mediating the relationship between education and mental health. Societies with more gender-equal policies and supportive institutional frameworks tend to exhibit lower levels of gender disparities in mental health outcomes. Research indicates that "female-friendly" institutional contexts can reduce the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantages on women's mental health, highlighting the importance of structural support in enhancing the benefits of education (Guessoum et al., 2020; Gurvich et al., 2021; Heise et al., 2019). This underscores the need for policies that not only promote educational access but also address systemic gender inequalities.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an exploratory approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The exploratory method is particularly appropriate as it allows the researcher to investigate complex social issues where limited prior research exists, and to capture participants lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings in their natural context. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and direct experience related to the research topic. A total of 17 participants were intentionally chosen based on predefined criteria to ensure richness and relevance of data. Demographic details of participants is provide in Table 1. This sampling technique enabled the inclusion of information-rich cases that could provide detailed insights into the research problem. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing flexibility for participants to express their views while ensuring alignment with the study objectives. The interviews were conducted in a confidential and comfortable setting, recorded with consent, and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. This involved a systematic process of coding, categorizing, and identifying recurring patterns and themes within the data. The analysis followed key steps, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and defining themes, and presenting the findings in a coherent narrative. Ethical considerations were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were preserved, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Additionally, the study adhered to principles of respect, integrity, and responsible data handling.

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Table 1
Demographic information of participants.

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Education Level	Employment Status	Residence (Urban/Rural)
P1	22	Single	Intermediate	Student	Rural
P2	28	Married	Bachelor's	Employed	Urban
P3	35	Married	Primary	Unemployed	Rural
P4	24	Single	Bachelor's	Student	Urban
P5	30	Married	Master's	Employed	Urban
P6	27	Married	Intermediate	Unemployed	Rural
P7	40	Married	No Formal Education	Unemployed	Rural
P8	23	Single	Bachelor's	Student	Urban
P9	32	Married	Secondary	Self-employed	Rural
P10	29	Married	Master's	Employed	Urban
P11	26	Single	Bachelor's	Employed	Urban
P12	38	Married	Primary	Unemployed	Rural
P13	21	Single	Intermediate	Student	Rural
P14	34	Married	Bachelor's	Employed	Urban
P15	31	Married	Secondary	Unemployed	Rural
P16	25	Single	Master's	Student	Urban
P17	36	Married	Intermediate	Self-employed	Rural

Source; Field data.

Key Findings

Thematic analysis of the 17 interviews yielded education as a double-edged sword for psychological well-being, patriarchal constraints on autonomy and agency, and resilience amid structural inequalities.

Educational Attainment and Experiences of Psychological Distress

This reveals a complex and often contradictory relationship between women's level of education and their mental health. Participants' narratives suggest that education can function both as a protective factor and, at times, a source of additional psychological pressure. Women with limited or interrupted education frequently described feelings of dependency, low self-esteem, and emotional vulnerability, often linked to their restricted life choices and lack of autonomy. One participant reflected, "I could not continue my studies after school, and sometimes I feel I have no control over my life. This makes me anxious and frustrated." Such accounts indicate that lower educational attainment may intensify psychological distress by reinforcing dependence on family members and limiting access to opportunities for personal and economic growth.

In contrast, women with higher levels of education often reported greater confidence,

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awareness, and ability to articulate their emotions, which contributed to improved coping with stress and anxiety. Education appeared to provide not only knowledge but also a sense of identity and self-worth. As one respondent explained, “Because I am educated, I can understand my problems better and try to find solutions instead of just (enduring them).” This highlights how education fosters cognitive and emotional resources that help women manage psychological challenges more effectively. Additionally, educated women were more likely to seek support from peers, mentors, or professional services, suggesting that education broadens access to supportive networks.

However, the findings also reveal that higher education does not entirely eliminate psychological distress. Instead, it may introduce new forms of stress, particularly in contexts where gender inequality persists. Educated women often experience role conflict as they attempt to balance professional aspirations with traditional expectations of caregiving and domestic responsibilities. One participant shared, “Even after getting a degree, I am expected to prioritize home over my career. It creates constant pressure and stress.” Furthermore, exposure to gender discrimination in academic or professional settings can heighten frustration and emotional strain. Some women expressed that increased awareness of inequality made them more sensitive to unfair treatment, which, while empowering, also contributed to stress.

Overall, this theme underscores that educational attainment shapes women’s psychological experiences in nuanced ways. While education generally enhances resilience, autonomy, and mental well-being, its benefits are mediated by persistent gender norms and structural inequalities. Thus, education alone is not sufficient; its positive impact on mental health depends on the broader social environment in which women live and operate.

Gender Inequality as a Source of Mental Health Challenges

This theme highlights how patriarchal norms, discriminatory practices, and unequal power relations significantly contribute to women’s psychological distress. Across participants’ narratives, gender inequality emerges as a persistent structural condition that shapes daily experiences and directly influences mental health outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Women frequently described feeling constrained by social expectations that prioritize male authority and limit female autonomy, particularly in decision-making related to education, mobility, marriage, and employment. One participant expressed this experience clearly, stating, “Everything in my life is decided by my father and brothers. Sometimes I feel like I do not even have a voice, and this makes me very depressed.” Such accounts illustrate how lack of agency becomes a continuous source of emotional strain.

Another significant aspect of this theme is the emotional burden created by unequal domestic responsibilities. Many participants reported that they were expected to manage household chores regardless of their educational or professional status, leading to physical exhaustion and psychological stress. As one respondent noted, “Even after coming back from university or work, I have to do all the housework. There is no rest, and it affects my mental health.” This double burden reinforces feelings of frustration and fatigue, contributing to long-term psychological distress. Gender inequality, therefore, operates not only at the institutional level but also within

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the private sphere of the household, where traditional gender roles remain deeply entrenched.

Participants also highlighted experiences of discrimination and lack of support within educational and workplace settings. Some women reported being undervalued, ignored, or treated differently because of their gender, which negatively affected their self-esteem and emotional well-being. One participant shared, “In my workplace, male colleagues are taken more seriously even when we have the same qualifications. It makes me feel anxious and less confident.” Such experiences demonstrate how gender inequality extends into professional environments, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and stress.

Furthermore, early marriage and restrictions on mobility were identified as key contributors to psychological distress. Women who were married early or had limited freedom to move outside their homes described feelings of isolation and loss of identity. A participant explained, “After marriage, I left my studies and friends. I feel trapped and lonely most of the time.” These narratives reflect how structural inequalities restrict life opportunities and contribute to emotional suffering.

Overall, this theme underscores that gender inequality is not merely a social issue but a significant determinant of women’s mental health. It operates through multiple dimensions—familial control, social norms, institutional discrimination, and restricted autonomy—creating an environment where psychological distress becomes a common experience.

Challenging Patriarchy: Education and Transformative Resistance

This theme illustrates how education empowers women to critically question, resist, and negotiate patriarchal norms, while also shaping their psychological well-being in complex ways. Participants’ narratives reveal that education often serves as a turning point in enabling women to recognize gender inequality not as a natural condition, but as a socially constructed system that can be challenged. Many educated women described an increased sense of awareness and confidence in expressing their opinions within family and social settings. One participant shared, “Before education, I used to accept everything silently, but now I question unfair treatment and try to explain my point of view.” This reflects how education fosters critical consciousness, which becomes the foundation for transformative resistance against patriarchal control.

However, this process of resistance is not without emotional and social challenges. Women who actively challenge traditional gender roles often face resistance from family members and community members, which can create psychological tension. Some participants reported experiencing criticism, emotional pressure, or even social isolation as a result of asserting their independence. As one respondent explained, “When I speak about my rights, my family says I have become too modern. It creates stress, but I still feel I should not stay silent.” Such experiences highlight the emotional cost of resistance, where empowerment is accompanied by interpersonal conflict and stress. Nevertheless, many women viewed this struggle as necessary for long-term change and personal growth.

Education also enables women to develop coping strategies that support their resistance to patriarchal norms. Participants emphasized that educated women are more likely to seek information, engage in dialogue, and access supportive networks

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such as friends, teachers, or online communities. One participant noted, "Education gave me the courage to stand for myself. I now talk to people who understand my situation, which helps me stay mentally strong." This suggests that education not only raises awareness but also provides practical tools for emotional resilience and collective support, reducing feelings of isolation.

At the same time, the theme reveals that transformative resistance is closely linked to changes in mental health. While challenging patriarchy can initially increase stress due to social pressure, many women reported a gradual improvement in self-esteem, autonomy, and psychological well-being over time. The process of asserting independence, even in small ways, contributed to a stronger sense of identity and purpose. As one participant reflected, "It is difficult at first, but now I feel more confident and less dependent on others for decisions."

Overall, this theme demonstrates that education plays a crucial role in enabling women to challenge patriarchal structures through awareness, agency, and resistance. Although this process may involve emotional struggle, it ultimately contributes to empowerment and improved psychological well-being by transforming women's relationship with oppressive social norms.

Education as a Source of Awareness, Agency, and Coping

This theme highlights how education functions as a crucial resource in enhancing women's understanding of their rights, strengthening their decision-making power, and improving their ability to manage psychological distress in contexts shaped by gender inequality. Participants consistently emphasized that education broadens their awareness of social structures and enables them to interpret their experiences of inequality in more critical and informed ways. Many women reported that before education, they tended to accept restrictive norms as natural, but education helped them recognize these norms as unjust and changeable. One participant explained, "Earlier I thought this is how life is for women, but after studying, I realized many things are not fair and can be questioned." This shift in perception reflects the role of education in developing critical consciousness.

A significant aspect of this theme is the enhancement of agency among educated women. Education was described as a key factor that increases confidence, independence, and participation in decision-making processes within both household and social contexts. Women with higher educational attainment reported greater involvement in decisions related to their studies, careers, and personal lives. One participant shared, "Because I am educated, I can speak for myself in family matters and I am not easily ignored." This sense of agency contributes positively to psychological well-being by reducing feelings of helplessness and dependency, which are often associated with anxiety and depression in patriarchal settings.

In addition to awareness and agency, education plays an important role in shaping coping strategies that help women deal with stress and emotional challenges. Participants highlighted that educated women are more likely to adopt problem-focused coping mechanisms, such as seeking information, communicating their concerns, and accessing social or institutional support. One respondent noted, "When I face stress, I try to understand the situation and talk to someone who can guide me. Education helped me think in a more practical way." This demonstrates that education

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not only improves cognitive skills but also enhances emotional regulation and resilience.

Moreover, education was seen as a protective factor against psychological distress by providing women with alternative perspectives and aspirations. It enables them to set personal goals beyond traditional gender roles, which contributes to a stronger sense of purpose and motivation. However, some participants also acknowledged that increased awareness sometimes leads to emotional discomfort, as recognizing inequality can initially intensify feelings of frustration. Despite this, most women agreed that the long-term benefits of education in improving coping abilities and mental well-being outweigh the initial psychological challenges.

Overall, this theme underscores that education serves as a powerful tool in fostering awareness, strengthening agency, and enhancing coping mechanisms, ultimately contributing to improved mental health among women living in gender-unequal contexts.

Conclusion

Findings of this study highlight the complex and multidimensional relationship between education, gender inequality, and women's psychological well-being. Education emerges as a critical factor that both alleviates and, in certain contexts, intensifies psychological distress. Women with lower educational attainment often experience dependency, limited autonomy, and reduced self-esteem, which contribute to heightened emotional vulnerability. In contrast, higher education enhances awareness, confidence, and access to support systems, enabling women to better understand and manage their psychological challenges. However, education alone does not eliminate distress, as persistent patriarchal norms continue to impose role conflicts, discrimination, and unequal expectations. The study further underscores that gender inequality remains a central source of mental health challenges, operating through familial control, restricted mobility, and unequal domestic and professional responsibilities. At the same time, education plays a transformative role by fostering critical consciousness, agency, and resistance against these structural constraints. Although challenging patriarchal norms can generate emotional strain, it ultimately contributes to empowerment, improved self-worth, and long-term psychological resilience. Overall, the findings suggest that while education is a powerful tool for enhancing women's mental health, its positive impact is contingent upon broader social change. Addressing gender inequality alongside promoting education is essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable improvements in women's psychological well-being.

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