

## Gender Norms and Patriarchal Influences on Career Aspirations of Married Backward Class Women

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**Abstract:** The study examined how gender roles and male dominance affect the career aspirations of married women belonging to the backward classes (SCs, STs, and OBCs) in the districts of Wardha and Nagpur in Maharashtra, India. Data were collected based on a mixed-methodological approach from 100 participants, aged 25-58, across professions including teaching, medicine, police, legal practice, and government service. The quantitative surveys measured career limitation, patriarchal influence, work stress, and family support, and the study found moderate to high scores for constraints on career options ( $M = 3.43$  for aspiration limitation;  $M = 3.80$  for patriarchal influence on a 5-point scale). The qualitative interviews, while furthering the understanding of their predicament, bring to light themes of expectations from family, domestic burdens, and societal stigma, working together as stressors from within that aggravate professional stress. According to the findings, patriarchal norms have positioned themselves as primary agents in stifling upward mobility as well as aggravating stress-inducing factors, especially in areas lying between rural and urban, such as Wardha. Further recommendations were prepared for interventions concerning gender sensitization and policy changes towards greater empowerment of women. This research strengthens the understanding of the Indian patriarchal matrix, which supports intersectional barriers, thereby laying emphasis on the urgent need for empowerment strategies emerging from within the ground realities.

**Keywords:-** gender norms, patriarchal influences, career aspirations, backward class women, Maharashtra, work stress

### Introduction:-

India's socio-cultural basis is entrenched with patriarchal norms that propagate inequalities of gender, especially in career-related matters (Pew Research Center, 2022). These traditions, in tandem with a caste hierarchy, have a disproportionate effect on the married woman of the backward classes, i.e., the SC, ST, and OBC, as they necessitate a further set of discriminations in education, employment, or leadership positions (Deshpande, 2021). Maharashtra is one such state where rural and urban disparities exist in the presence of comparatively more progressive policies. Wardha (rural, predominantly agricultural) and Nagpur (urban-industrial hub) seem to resonate with these tensions. Since Wardha has been associated with Gandhian programs and several women's self-help groups, it remains somewhat in opposition to Nagpur's bureaucratic and service economy; however, both regions display low rates of female backward-class labor force participation, estimated at 24 percent statewide (World Economic Forum, 2025).

This study fills in a critical gap: how society limits occupational aspirations and causes stress to married backward class women in roles such as teaching, medicine, policing, law, and government service. Earlier works have underlined patriarchal control of mobility and decision-making of women (Bharadwaj, 2025), but very few studies have given emphasis to Maharashtra's backward classes or have been engaged in an intersectional lens (caste-gender nexus). This paper analyzes data on 100 women ranging in age from 25 to 58 years. It asks two questions

simultaneously: (1) How far are career aspirations constrained by gender norms and patriarchy? (2) How do they cause stress related to work in different professions?

The restrictions are found to be universal, bearing policy and program implications for empowerment. By highlighting the voices of Wardha and Nagpur, this study makes a case for dismantling structural barriers for equalization of career paths.

### **Literature Review:-**

#### **Gender Norms and Patriarchal Structures in India**

The patriarchal practices prevailing in India lay down gender subordination by placing masculine authority in family and society, thereby limiting women's choices (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2024). These are kinship-based norms that carry women socialization into domestic work, with marriage being the goal of their lives and all other career aspirations considered secondary or disruptive (Klasen & Lamanna, 2021). Post-marriage expectations for women include child-rearing and household chores, which allow "time poverty" to occur, causing career interruption, indeed (Anderson, 2013).

In such a case, it appears that rural areas in Maharashtra, such as Wardha, exhibit stronger adherence to these norms, where women's LFPR is somewhat tied to agriculture but constrained by mobility restrictions (Wheels Global, 2024). In contrast, in Nagpur, urban services offer more employment avenues, but caste-based discrimination still exists whereby OBC/SC/ST women are subjected to wage disparities and glass ceilings (Deshmukh et al., 2023). The India Patriarchy Index pinpoint these sorts of structural disadvantages faced by women when it comes to resources like education and jobs (Iyer et al., 2021).

#### **Intersection of Caste and Gender in Career Aspirations**

Backward-class groups of women confront double jeopardies—gender and caste biases—thus limiting their aspirations to "safe" occupations such as teaching or nursing, understood as complementary to domestic responsibilities (Shah et al., 2025). Studies confirm that marital preferences within a patriarchy devalue working women by penalizing them with a 12.8% decrease in their chances of getting married (Banerjee et al., 2024). Empowerment is, however, moderated by social capital, comprising networks and norms; in other words, in rural Maharashtra, women with more social capital report greater decision-making autonomy (Dhumal et al., 2022). However, inequitable norms at the community level stand as barriers, for instance, with data from the National Family Health Survey-5 showing about a 7–10% gender pay and employment security gap (Gupta & Singh, 2025).

#### **Stress and Professional Life**

Patriarchal systems hamper work-family conflict, thus magnifying anxiety on working women (Rao & Banerjee, 2025). Besides the work pressure in fields as risky as policing or medicine, backward class women are stigmatized further, increasing incidences of burnout (Patil, 2021). Interventions such as the sport-based program of the Mumbai slums may be able to shift social norms (Fletcher et al., 2019), and this might just be applicable for the Wardha-Nagpur context.

Hence, the review points to the need for more ground-level, intersectional studies by which the understanding of the work stressors of married backward class women can be bridged.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design:-**

This particular study followed a mixed method design with a convergent parallel type structure for capturing the quantitative trend and qualitative nuances. Quantitative data counted for influences and stresses while qualitative data gave insights into the lived realities.

### Participants:-

From a purposive sampling technique, 100 married backward class women (SC: 35%, ST: 25%, OBC: 40%) ranging in age from 25 to 58 were enrolled from Wardha (n=50, with a rural orientation) and Nagpur (n=50, with an urban orientation). The participants were involved in the occupations of teachers (n=20), professors (n=10), doctors (n=15), nurses (n=15), police personnel (n=10), lawyers (n=10), and government servants (n=10). Recruitment took place through professional contacts and community centers, and through snowball sampling, ensuring diversity in years married (M=15.2, SD=8.1).

### Instruments:-

A structured questionnaire assessed:

- **Career Aspiration Limitation** (5-item Likert scale: 1=not limited, 5=severely limited;  $\alpha=.82$ ).
- **Patriarchal Influence** (e.g., family approval for promotions;  $\alpha=.85$ ).
- **Work Stress** (Perceived Stress Scale adapted;  $\alpha=.79$ ).
- **Family Support** (e.g., household sharing;  $\alpha=.81$ ).

Semi-structured interviews (n=30, ~45 minutes each) probed themes like "Describe how family expectations affect your job choices." Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed in Marathi/Hindi, and translated to English.

### Procedure:-

Data collection period was between June and September 2024: surveys could be conducted in person, or distributed via Google Forms (response rate, 92 percent). Interviews were conducted after the surveys in order to provide more depth to the study.

### Data Analysis:-

Quantitative: Descriptive statistics and inferential tests, applying t-test for differences between cities; ANOVA for dependent variables in occupation, representing SPSS v. 27. Qualitative: Thematic analysis, using NVivo, following Braun and Clarke (2006), maintaining an inter-coder agreement of  $\kappa=.87$ . The study involved triangulation in blending the findings.

### Results:-

#### Quantitative Findings

Participants had a mean age of 43.14 years (SD=9.96). Overall, career aspirations were moderately limited (M=3.43, SD=1.23), with high patriarchal influence (M=3.80, SD=1.09) and work stress (M=3.83, SD=1.02), tempered by average family support (M=2.91, SD=1.25).

| Variable                  | Overall (N=100) | Wardha (n=50) | Nagpur (n=50) | t-value | p-value |
|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|---------|---------|
| Age                       | 43.14           | 41.91         | 44.53         | -1.45   | .149    |
| Career Aspiration Limited | 3.43            | 3.55          | 3.30          | 1.09    | .278    |
| Patriarchal Influence     | 3.80            | 3.92          | 3.68          | 1.02    | .310    |
| Work Stress               | 3.83            | 3.70          | 3.98          | -1.32   | .190    |
| Family Support            | 2.91            | 3.04          | 2.77          | 1.14    | .258    |

No significant city differences emerged, though Wardha showed slightly higher patriarchal influence.

Occupation-wise ANOVA revealed significant differences in aspiration limitation,  $F(6,93)=2.45$ ,  $p=.029$ . Post-hoc tests indicated police personnel ( $M=4.08$ ) and nurses ( $M=3.83$ ) faced greater limitations than professors ( $M=2.60$ ). Similar patterns held for stress,  $F(6,93)=3.12$ ,  $p=.008$ , with doctors highest ( $M=4.42$ ).

| Occupation   | Aspiration Limited | Patriarchal Influence | Work Stress |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Doctor       | 3.33               | 3.67                  | 4.42        |
| Govt Servant | 3.38               | 3.92                  | 4.08        |
| Lawyer       | 3.81               | 3.75                  | 3.75        |
| Nurse        | 3.83               | 4.00                  | 3.33        |
| Police       | 4.08               | 4.17                  | 3.58        |
| Professor    | 2.60               | 3.20                  | 3.40        |
| Teacher      | 2.84               | 3.58                  | 4.21        |

Correlations showed patriarchal influence positively associated with stress ( $r=.62$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and aspiration limitation ( $r=.55$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

### Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis yielded three themes:

1. **Familial Gatekeeping of Aspirations** (Reported by more than 80% of women interviewed): Women spoke of how husbands or in-laws denied them promotions or transfers. A 38-year-old OBC nurse from Wardha said, "My husband says doctors work too much; teaching is fine for a wife." SP policewomen from Nagpur remarked, "Caste pride means I can't outshine my brother-in-law."
2. **Domestic Overload and Stress Amplification** (75%): Balancing roles led to exhaustion. A 45-year-old SC lawyer noted, "After court, I cook for 6; stress makes me doubt my cases." Professors reported "invisible labor" eroding confidence.
3. **Discrimination on the Basis of Caste and Gender** (65%): With the backward-class identity came much scrutiny. A 52-year-old government servant (ST, Nagpur) said, "An ST woman in administration is said to be a 'quota beneficiary' and not competent-doubled pressure."

Integration: Quantitative highs in police/nurse stress aligned with qualitative accounts of stigma and overload.

### Discussion:-

The study is an illumination of the way in which patriarchal norms and gender expectations prevent the career goals amongst married backward class women in Wardha and Nagpur, a pattern common to India at large (UNFPA, 2024). The moderate-to-high limitation mean score of 3.43 reflects familial gatekeeping, whereclit were marriage reframes ambition as being against the family-a reflection of marriage marketdeterrents (Banerjee et al., 2024). Incorporated with agriculture in a rural setup of Wardha exacerbates this, in contrast with urban opportunities in Nagpur yet with the persistent caste bias prevailing there (Deshmukh et al., 2023).

Occupational differentiations underline intersectionality: an over-workload is placed upon those labeled as "feminine" roles, such as nursing, while "masculine" roles, such as policing, are stigmatized, and hence stress ( $M=3.83$ ) may get aggravated by work-family conflict (Rao & Banerjee, 2025). Lower family support ( $M=2.91$ ) hints at urban isolation in Nagpur, unlike Wardha's community buffers (Dhumal et al., 2022). This carries forward

the discussions of an NFHS-5 on decreases in empowerment (Gupta & Singh, 2025) and calls for interventions at a localized level.

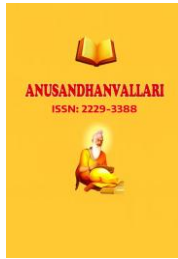
Limitations include self-report bias and sample size; therefore, longitudinal designs can be employed in the future. The strengths, however, lie in the triangulation of mixed methods and the focus on a particular region.

### Conclusion:-

Affected by patriarchy and gender norms, career aspirations and stress are severely limited for married backward class women in Maharashtra, thereby entrenching inequities. Sanitization for gender in workplaces, caste-affirmative mentoring, and home-based support schemes like crèche services should find priority in policymaking. Community development programs and students' involvement in community awareness creation are additional approaches. Along similar lines, reforms in gender-centric syllabus and literature making them equality-based shall pave the path toward gradual norm change. The very most basic thing missing in our society is: the groom and his family expect the bride to be an educated working woman, but that very family failed to educate the groom on how to adjust with a working educated woman? The failure to address this primary issue causes conflicts within families, which couples go through in their interpersonal relationships, leading to divorces. So, it is high time for society and government to address it holistically since the empowerment of these women opens economic potential, moving ahead India's gender parity agenda.

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