

# The Psychological Impact of Social Expectations on Women's Personal Choices

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### Article Info

#### Article type:

*Original Research*

#### How to cite this article:

Kamyab, & Hoseinzadeh, A. (2023). The Psychological Impact of Social Expectations on Women's Personal Choices. *Psychology of Woman Journal*, 4(2), 169-176.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.pwj.4.2.19>



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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to explore the psychological impact of social expectations on women's personal choices.

**Methods and Materials:** The study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights from 30 diverse women. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent various age groups, socio-economic statuses, educational backgrounds, and cultural contexts. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software, following a systematic coding process to identify key themes and subthemes related to the research questions.

**Findings:** Three major themes emerged from the analysis: Identity and Self-Perception, Interpersonal Relationships, and Mental Health and Well-Being. Participants reported significant pressure from societal beauty standards, gender roles, and traditional social expectations, impacting their self-esteem, career choices, and social roles. Family dynamics, romantic relationships, and peer influences further complicated their decision-making processes. The pressure to meet societal standards also led to considerable stress, anxiety, and challenges in emotional regulation. Women employed various coping strategies, including resilience, support systems, and self-care practices, to manage these pressures.

**Conclusion:** The findings underscore the profound influence of social expectations on women's psychological well-being and personal choices. These expectations create significant internal and external conflicts, affecting women's identities, relationships, and mental health. The study highlights the need for

supportive interventions and societal changes to promote gender equity and empower women to make autonomous decisions. Future research should expand on these findings with larger, more diverse samples and explore the intersectionality of various social identities.

**Keywords:** *Social expectations, gender roles, women's choices, psychological impact, identity, interpersonal relationships, mental health.*

## 1. Introduction

Social expectations often manifest in the form of gender roles and stereotypes, which can significantly shape women's identities and life choices. Research by Cacciari and Padovani (2007) highlights the pervasive nature of gender stereotype priming in language, illustrating how societal norms are embedded in everyday communication and contribute to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles (Cacciari & Padovani, 2007). Similarly, Henderson (2019) discusses the implications of being perceived as the "gender person" within academic environments, underscoring the pressures women face to conform to specific roles and expectations in professional settings (Henderson, 2019).

The influence of social expectations extends into various aspects of women's lives, including their career choices, family dynamics, and interpersonal relationships. Arber and Ginn (2007) examine gender differences in informal caring, revealing how societal expectations often place a disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities on women. This can limit their career opportunities and reinforce traditional gender roles (Arber & Ginn, 2007). Additionally, Koch, D'Mello, and Sackett (2015) provide a meta-analysis of gender stereotypes and bias in employment decision-making, highlighting the systemic barriers women face in achieving professional success (Koch et al., 2015).

Family dynamics and romantic relationships are also heavily influenced by social expectations. Duah and Adisah-Atta (2017) explore the determinants of healthcare decision-making autonomy among mothers in Ghana, finding that cultural norms and family expectations play a significant role in shaping women's decisions. This aligns with findings from Jarska and Ignaciuk (2022), who discuss how marriage and fertility management in state-socialist Poland were influenced by societal expectations and demographic policies (Jarska & Ignaciuk, 2022).

The impact of social expectations on mental health and well-being is another critical area of concern. Research by Scalia et al. (2021) systematically reviews decision aids for

gender-affirming therapy, highlighting the psychological toll of navigating societal pressures related to gender identity (Scalia et al., 2021). Sánchez-López et al. (2012) examine differential personality styles in men and women, shedding light on how societal expectations contribute to gender-specific stressors and mental health outcomes (Sánchez-López et al., 2012).

In the context of reproductive decision-making, several studies illustrate the profound influence of social expectations on women's choices. Clarke et al. (2020) test the emergent fit of social support for preserving self-identity during reproductive decision-making, emphasizing the need for supportive networks to mitigate the pressures women face. Similarly, Graham et al. (2022) investigate who Australian women seek social support from during the reproductive decision-making process, underscoring the role of social networks in shaping women's choices (Graham et al., 2022).

The decision-making process is further complicated by the interplay of social norms and individual agency. Willan et al. (2020) explore young women's reproductive decision-making and agency in South African informal settlements, highlighting the conflict between societal expectations and personal autonomy (Willan et al., 2020). This is echoed by Ouedraogo et al. (2020), who examine abortion decision-making pathways in Burkina Faso, revealing how social norms and perceptions drive women's decisions (Ouedraogo et al., 2020).

Economic and social factors also play a crucial role in shaping women's choices. Al-Sheyab et al. (2021) investigate family planning perspectives in Jordan, focusing on the impact of human rights and gender equity on decision-making processes. Similarly, Ashraf et al. (2022) explore women's roles in sanitation decision-making in India, illustrating how social beliefs and economic constraints influence women's autonomy (Ashraf et al., 2022).

The psychological impact of social expectations on women is not limited to decision-making processes but extends to their overall sense of self-worth and confidence.

Yangmi and Lee (2019) discuss how social cognitive factors mediate the relationship between gender role personality and career exploration, highlighting the internalized nature of societal expectations (Yangmi & Lee, 2019). Wille et al. (2018) examine personality characteristics of male and female executives, revealing distinct pathways to success shaped by gendered expectations and stereotypes (Wille et al., 2018).

The pressures women face in navigating social expectations are further exacerbated by cultural and environmental factors. Al-Awdat (2023) investigates the sources of social pressures affecting administrative decision-making in Jordanian sports federations, highlighting the cultural constraints on women's autonomy (Al-Awdat, 2023). Mathur (2024) examines women's involvement in decision-making and its association with reproductive health behaviors in Niger, emphasizing the role of cultural norms in shaping women's choices (Mathur, 2024).

The cumulative effect of these social expectations on women's mental health and well-being cannot be overstated. Clayton (2015) explores the impact of social influence pressure on ethical decision-making among professional accountants, illustrating the pervasive nature of societal expectations across different contexts. Similarly, Zheng et al. (2017) investigate gender differences in behavioral and neural responses to unfairness under social pressure, highlighting the psychological toll of navigating societal norms (Zheng et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the psychological impact of social expectations on women's personal choices is a critical area of study that warrants further exploration. By examining the intricate ways in which social expectations influence women's identities, relationships, and mental health, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges women face and inform strategies to support their autonomy and well-being. The findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of literature on gender roles and societal expectations, offering insights into the complex interplay between social norms and individual agency.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the psychological impact of social expectations on women's personal choices. The qualitative approach is selected for its strength in providing in-depth understanding

and rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and perspectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its flexibility in allowing participants to express their thoughts and feelings freely while ensuring that specific topics of interest are covered. Semi-structured interviews provide a balance between structured questions and open-ended responses, facilitating comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of women across different age groups, socio-economic statuses, educational backgrounds, and cultural contexts. Inclusion criteria were adult women aged 18 and above who have experienced social expectations influencing their personal choices. Efforts were made to include participants from various geographical locations to capture a wide range of experiences.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Interviews were conducted in a manner that prioritized participants' comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' preferences and logistical constraints. The interview guide included questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' experiences with social expectations and their impact on personal choices.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software, which facilitates the organization, coding, and thematic analysis of qualitative data. The analysis process involved several stages:

**Familiarization:** Reading and re-reading transcripts to become intimately familiar with the data.

**Coding:** Systematically coding the data to identify key themes and patterns related to the psychological impact of social expectations on women's personal choices.

**Theme Development:** Grouping codes into broader themes that capture the essence of the data.

**Review and Refinement:** Continuously reviewing and refining themes to ensure they accurately represent the data and address the research questions.

### 3. Findings and Results

The study involved 30 participants, representing a diverse range of demographic backgrounds. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 65 years old, with a mean age of 34. Approximately 40% (12 participants) were between the ages of 18 and 30, 33% (10 participants) were between 31 and 45, and 27% (8 participants) were between 46 and 65.

In terms of educational attainment, 50% (15 participants) held a bachelor's degree, 30% (9 participants) had a master's degree, and 20% (6 participants) had a high school diploma or equivalent. The socio-economic status of participants varied, with 40% (12 participants) identifying as middle class, 33% (10 participants) as upper-middle class, and 27% (8 participants) as working class.

**Table 1**

*The Results of Qualitative Analysis*

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Identity and Self-Perception	1.1 Body Image	Beauty standards, self-esteem, media influence, body shaming, fitness culture
	1.2 Career Choices	Gender roles, professional aspirations, work-life balance, peer pressure, mentorship
	1.3 Social Roles	Motherhood, caregiving expectations, marital status, family obligations
	1.4 Personal Values and Beliefs	Cultural norms, religious expectations, personal identity, value conflicts
2. Interpersonal Relationships	2.1 Family Dynamics	Parental expectations, sibling relationships, intergenerational conflict
	2.2 Romantic Relationships	Partner expectations, relationship roles, marriage pressures, dating norms
	2.3 Friendships	Peer influence, social support, competition, loyalty
	2.4 Workplace Interactions	Colleague expectations, workplace dynamics, gender biases, professional networks
3. Mental Health and Well-Being	2.5 Community Involvement	Social participation, community support, volunteer expectations
	3.1 Stress and Anxiety	Performance pressure, societal judgment, coping mechanisms, mental load
	3.2 Self-Worth and Confidence	Achievement standards, self-criticism, validation, self-acceptance
	3.3 Life Satisfaction	Fulfillment, personal achievements, happiness, societal success metrics
	3.4 Coping Strategies	Resilience, support systems, therapy, self-care practices
	3.5 Emotional Regulation	Emotional expression, suppression, conflict resolution, mindfulness

#### 3.1. Identity and Self-Perception

##### 3.1.1. Body Image

Participants frequently discussed the impact of societal beauty standards on their self-esteem and body image. Many expressed feelings of inadequacy and pressure to conform to media portrayals of beauty. One participant noted, "I always feel like I'm not enough because I don't look like the models I see on Instagram." Concepts such as self-esteem, media influence, body shaming, and fitness culture were prevalent in these discussions.

##### 3.1.2. Career Choices

The influence of gender roles on career decisions was a significant theme. Women described feeling torn between professional aspirations and societal expectations to prioritize family. "I love my job, but there's always this underlying guilt that I should be spending more time at home," one interviewee mentioned. Key concepts included professional aspirations, work-life balance, peer pressure, and the need for mentorship.

##### 3.1.3. Social Roles

Participants highlighted the pressure to fulfill traditional social roles, such as motherhood and caregiving. Many felt that societal expectations constrained their personal choices. "It's like there's this invisible checklist you're supposed to complete—get married, have kids, be a perfect mom," said one participant. Concepts such as motherhood, caregiving expectations, marital status, and family obligations were common.

##### 3.1.4. Personal Values and Beliefs

Cultural and religious expectations often clashed with personal values, leading to internal conflicts. "I'm constantly struggling between my own beliefs and what my family and culture expect of me," one woman shared. Subthemes included cultural norms, religious expectations, personal identity, and value conflicts.

### 3.2. *Interpersonal Relationships*

#### 3.2.1. *Family Dynamics*

Family expectations played a critical role in shaping women's choices. Many reported pressure from parents and conflicts with siblings. "My parents have always had a certain path in mind for me, and it's hard to go against that," noted a participant. The discussions encompassed parental expectations, sibling relationships, and intergenerational conflict.

#### 3.2.2. *Romantic Relationships*

Expectations within romantic relationships were a recurring theme. Women felt pressured to adhere to traditional relationship roles and faced societal pressures regarding marriage. "There's always this pressure to get married by a certain age, and it's exhausting," remarked an interviewee. Concepts included partner expectations, relationship roles, marriage pressures, and dating norms.

#### 3.2.3. *Friendships*

Peer influence and the dynamics of friendships were also significant. Participants discussed the competition and support they experienced in their social circles. One participant stated, "Sometimes it feels like we're all competing to see who has the perfect life." Themes included peer influence, social support, competition, and loyalty.

#### 3.2.4. *Workplace Interactions*

Gender biases and expectations in the workplace affected participants' professional lives. Many described navigating complex workplace dynamics and the need for professional networks. "It's challenging being taken seriously in a male-dominated field," one woman explained. Subthemes covered colleague expectations, workplace dynamics, and gender biases.

#### 3.2.5. *Community Involvement*

Community expectations influenced participants' involvement in social activities and volunteer work. "I feel obligated to volunteer for every community event, even when I'm overwhelmed," a participant mentioned. Concepts included social participation, community support, and volunteer expectations.

### 3.3. *Mental Health and Well-Being*

#### 3.3.1. *Stress and Anxiety*

The pressure to meet societal standards often resulted in significant stress and anxiety. Participants shared how performance pressure and societal judgment affected their mental health. "I'm constantly anxious about not meeting everyone's expectations," one participant revealed. Themes included performance pressure, societal judgment, and coping mechanisms.

#### 3.3.2. *Self-Worth and Confidence*

Participants' self-worth was frequently tied to societal standards of achievement. Many struggled with self-criticism and sought external validation. "I measure my worth by what others think of me," confessed one woman. Concepts included achievement standards, self-criticism, validation, and self-acceptance.

#### 3.3.3. *Life Satisfaction*

Societal success metrics impacted women's perception of life satisfaction. Participants often felt unfulfilled despite achieving personal goals. "I've achieved a lot, but I still feel like I'm missing something because I don't fit the societal mold of success," shared one interviewee. Themes encompassed fulfillment, personal achievements, and happiness.

#### 3.3.4. *Coping Strategies*

Women employed various coping strategies to manage the pressures they faced. Many relied on resilience, support systems, and self-care practices. "Finding time for myself and seeking therapy has been crucial for my mental health," one participant stated. Subthemes included resilience, support systems, therapy, and self-care practices.

#### 3.3.5. *Emotional Regulation*

Participants discussed the challenges of managing their emotions in response to societal pressures. Techniques for emotional regulation varied, with some practicing mindfulness and others struggling with suppression. "Learning to express my emotions healthily has been a journey," remarked one woman. Concepts included emotional expression, suppression, conflict resolution, and mindfulness.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal the profound psychological impact of social expectations on women's personal choices, highlighting three major themes: Identity and Self-Perception, Interpersonal Relationships, and Mental Health and Well-Being. This discussion section aims to interpret these results in the context of existing literature and explore their broader implications.

The data indicate that societal beauty standards, gender roles, and social expectations significantly influence women's body image, career choices, and social roles. Participants reported feeling pressured to conform to media portrayals of beauty, which negatively affected their self-esteem. This finding aligns with Cacciari and Padovani (2007), who demonstrated how gender stereotypes in language reinforce societal norms about beauty and femininity (Cacciari & Padovani, 2007). Furthermore, the conflict between professional aspirations and societal expectations to prioritize family underscores the systemic barriers women face in achieving career success (Koch et al., 2015).

The pressure to fulfill traditional social roles, such as motherhood and caregiving, was another critical theme. This aligns with Arber and Ginn (2007), who found that women often bear a disproportionate burden of informal caring responsibilities, limiting their career opportunities and reinforcing traditional gender roles (Arber & Ginn, 2007). Participants' struggles with cultural and religious expectations further highlight the internal conflicts between personal values and societal norms, resonating with the findings of Henderson (2019) regarding the pressures women face to conform to specific roles in professional settings (Henderson, 2019).

Family dynamics, romantic relationships, and friendships were significantly influenced by social expectations. The pressure from parents and conflicts with siblings regarding life choices were common themes. Duah and Adisah-Atta (2017) similarly found that cultural norms and family expectations significantly shape women's healthcare decisions, emphasizing the pervasive influence of familial expectations (Duah & Adisah-Atta, 2017).

In romantic relationships, women felt pressured to adhere to traditional roles and faced societal pressures regarding marriage. Jarska and Ignaciuk (2022) discuss similar dynamics in the context of marriage and fertility management in state-socialist Poland, where societal expectations heavily influenced personal decisions. Peer

influence and the dynamics of friendships also played a significant role, with participants discussing the competition and support they experienced within their social circles (Jarska & Ignaciuk, 2022). This finding is consistent with Sánchez-López et al. (2012), who explored how societal expectations contribute to gender-specific stressors and mental health outcomes.

Workplace interactions were another area where gender biases and expectations affected women's professional lives. Participants described navigating complex workplace dynamics and the need for professional networks. These experiences resonate with Henderson (2019) and Koch, D'Mello, and Sackett (2015), who highlighted the systemic barriers and biases women face in professional settings (Henderson, 2019; Koch et al., 2015).

The pressure to meet societal standards resulted in significant stress and anxiety for many participants. The psychological toll of navigating societal pressures related to gender identity is well-documented, as Scalia et al. (2021) highlighted in their review of decision aids for gender-affirming therapy (Scalia et al., 2021). Participants' struggles with self-worth and confidence, often tied to societal standards of achievement, align with findings from Yangmi and Lee (2019), who discussed the mediation role of social cognitive factors between gender role personality and career exploration (Yangmi & Lee, 2019).

The impact of societal success metrics on life satisfaction was evident, with participants often feeling unfulfilled despite achieving personal goals. This underscores the importance of supportive networks in mitigating the pressures women face, as highlighted by Clarke et al. (2020) and Graham et al. (2022), who emphasized the role of social support in reproductive decision-making (Clarke et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2022).

Women employed various coping strategies to manage the pressures they faced, including resilience, support systems, and self-care practices. The need for emotional regulation techniques, such as mindfulness, was also discussed. This finding resonates with Wille et al. (2018), who explored personality characteristics of male and female executives, revealing distinct pathways to success shaped by gendered expectations and stereotypes (Wille et al., 2018).

#### 5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, with only 30 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. While efforts were

made to include a diverse range of participants, the study's qualitative nature means that the experiences shared may not fully represent the broader population of women. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews could introduce bias, as participants may have presented socially desirable responses or might not recall past experiences accurately. The use of NVivo software for data analysis, while systematic, also involves subjective interpretation by the researchers, which could affect the identification and categorization of themes.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how social expectations impact women's personal choices over time, capturing changes and continuities in experiences. Furthermore, employing mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the issues. Studies could also explore the intersectionality of various social categories, such as race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, to understand better how multiple identities influence the impact of social expectations.

Practitioners, including mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers, should be aware of the significant influence of social expectations on women's psychological well-being and personal choices. Interventions aimed at empowering women and promoting autonomy should focus on building self-esteem, fostering supportive networks, and challenging societal norms that perpetuate gender biases. In educational and workplace settings, initiatives to promote gender equity and inclusivity can help mitigate the pressures women face to conform to traditional roles. Additionally, providing accessible mental health resources and creating environments where women

can openly discuss and navigate societal expectations without judgment is crucial for fostering resilience and well-being.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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