

Parental Burnout and Marital Satisfaction of Married Individuals during COVID-19: Role of Gender and Family System

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: With the pervasive spread of COVID-19, parental burnout has alarmingly increased owing to the conflicting parental responsibilities accompanied by deteriorating intimate relationship of married individuals. Thus, considering an increased possibility of negative evaluation of marital union among married individuals, the present study aimed to investigate the association between parental burnout and marital satisfaction. The study further examined the role of gender and family system across the proposed association.

Methodology: To achieve the objectives of the study, married individuals ($N = 350$) with age ranging between 25-65 ($M = 35.42$, $SD = 9.29$) were approached through convenient sampling method in this cross-sectional study.

Results: Results yielded negative association between parental burnout and marital satisfaction. Further, females reported higher parental burnout and marital satisfaction as compared to males. Additionally, parental burnout was higher among married individuals living in nuclear family systems and who were laid off from their jobs during the pandemic.

Conclusion: Taken together, the findings provide a thorough insight into deteriorating marital satisfaction which ultimately severs mental health of married individuals. This association is pertinent to understand as wellbeing and function of a family unit is at stake. Findings provide an insight to family therapists and policy makers. Results further indicated that family structure needs to be studied with coping strategies so that a comprehensive plan can be devised.

Keywords: Parental Burnout, Marital Satisfaction, COVID-19 Pandemic.

Article History

Received:
December 11, 2022

Revised:
March 06, 2023

Accepted:
March 07, 2023

Published:
March 09, 2023

Introduction

Past pandemics and their unprecedented changes had detrimental effects on marital satisfaction of individuals (Fisher et al., 2020; Coyne et al., 2020). In view of this, COVID-19 pandemic, a viral outbreak with millions of deaths in its early phases lead to severe repercussions including imposed lockdowns, social

distancing, economic recession, and increased workload on individuals (Lebow, 2020). Due to imposed lockdowns, people were confined to their homes and organizations along with educational institutes shifted to virtual mode of working (DAWN Editorial, 2020). Families had to bear the expenses of internet packages and technological gadgets as students started taking online classes. Managing additional responsibilities of household, childcare, and work induced burnout among parents (Alamgir, 2020; Nazaroff, 2021; Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2021). In addition to the responsibilities, most of the individuals faced layoff from their jobs due to the economic recession caused by the COVID-19. These crisis and unprecedented changes evoked fear and declined mental health of parents (Prihidko et al., 2020) which further lead to exhaustion and conflict within families (Mikolajczak et al., 2022). Although, vaccinations provided a relief in the outbreak of pandemic, the uncertainty of lockdowns and sudden surge in the COVID-19 cases continued the strain on people (Weibel, 2021) and their marital union. The Pandemic has affected families across the world, however, in Pakistan, 20.63 million lost their jobs, and 6.7 million had faced reduced wages. It can be concluded that rather 20.63 million families were affected by the pandemic in a developing country with limited resources. These unprecedented challenges and new financial expenses (electronic gadget and internet bills) strained family life of an average Pakistani. Therefore, it is pertinent to address, how the pandemic has affected married individuals (gender) keeping in view family system (nuclear and joint) of Pakistan.

In addition to the financial challenges, remote work policies further blurred the lines of work and family life of parents. The on and off closure posited novel changes in their lives, as they had to handle full-time child responsibilities with the new work arrangements (Restubog et al., 2020). Islam and colleagues (2020) defined these situations as mentally challenging and physically exhausting for parents, and indicated that; hampered school schedules, conflicted work routines, and financial difficulties are the major reasons for burnout. Bradbury and colleagues (2000) illustrated that parenthood perceived as a positive event and readily welcomed, it adds on several new responsibilities and changes in the lives of married individuals, including health care and financial expenses in the form of education and living. This new responsibility (Epifanio et al., 2015), paired with any external stressor such as pandemic can have severe aversive effects on married individuals; including parental burnout (Prime et al., 2020). Emotionally exhausted parents feel distanced and drained up, leading to declined marital satisfaction (Carroll et al., 2013; Costigan et al., 2003; Fellows et al., 2015) and higher divorce rates (Agarwal, 2020; Borrg et al., 2020). These challenges ultimately affect children in the form of harsh parenting (Mikolajczak et al., 2018).

Burnout and parental exhaustion can be explained through work-home resource model (Hobfoll, 2002) vulnerability stress adaptation model (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). The models provided that conflicting work and family demands utilize individual's mental, emotional, and physical resources (such as attention, time, energy etc.) resulting in disastrous mental effects and work efficacy (Brough et al., 2020). Keeping in view, the above-mentioned perspective, it is pertinent to address parental burnout and marital satisfaction of married individuals as it has its dire consequences on the whole family.

When observed within different cultural contexts, the effect of pandemic on parental burnout and marital satisfaction varies across family system (Sorkkila & Aunola, 2019) and gender (Cox, 2021; Monroe, 2021; Leonhardt, 2020; Polizzi et al., 2022). Literature (Berry & Jones, 1995; Roskam et al., 2021; Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018) indicated higher parental burnout across women due to their role as primary care givers. This could be generalized to Pakistani context, as women are considered as primary caregiver of household and children. However, men are responsible for financial expenses. The society perceived them as an economic utility (Nasrullah & Bhatti, 2012), terming them as sole bread earner of the family and exposed them to financial strain (Ayub & Iqbal, 2012). Thus, accounting for an uneven division of labor induce conflicts among married couple making them prone to marital dissatisfaction (Grover, 2018; Mousavi, 2020; Paula et al., 2022). On contrary, within the cultural contexts of Pakistan, women are solely responsible for childcare responsibilities, these responsibilities when paired with additional job responsibilities makes them prone to higher parental burnout and lower marital satisfaction (Iqbal, 2013).

Meanwhile, married individuals living with their extended family (joint family system of Pakistan), can divide their work, financial expenses, and resources with other family members (Lodhi et al., 2019). This sharing of responsibility and financial expenses help in reducing parenting stress which ultimately provide a buffering layer to their relationship. The current study will indicate the variation of parental burnout and marital satisfaction across gender and family system and explore the impact of parental burnout on marital satisfaction. By combining the aversive alterations caused by pandemic with parental burnout and marital satisfaction, the current study will provide an accurate understanding of how gender and family system plays its role in aggravating and stabilizing the detrimental effects of COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature as indicated earlier, highlighted how pandemics affects parental burnout and marital satisfaction. However, scarce literature on the indigenous factors (including family system) has prompted this research. To the best of researcher's knowledge, empirical findings on the parental burnout and marital satisfaction across family systems (nuclear and joint) are limited to none in Pakistan. Particularly, this research will contribute to the theoretical understanding of marital satisfaction of parents within the context of pandemic. In Pakistan, gender roles are culturally defined and during pandemic when these gender roles (in the form of shared responsibilities) changed. These shifts in responsibilities has altered the course of marital union and families altogether. In light of this, the present study posited to examine how pandemic has induced parental burnout and affected marital satisfaction of men and women. As in Pakistan, most of the families are living with their extended families, this study further assessed its role in elevating parental burnout among parents.

Study Objectives

Based on the literature provided and the research questions posited following objectives were formulated:

- 1- To examine the association between parental burnout and marital satisfaction among married individuals.
- 2- To assess gender differences across parental burnout and marital satisfaction of married individuals.
- 3- To assess differences across family system on parental burnout and marital satisfaction of married individuals.

Hypotheses

Keeping in mind, the above-mentioned objectives, the current study hypothesized that:

- 1) Parental burnout will have a negative association with marital satisfaction of married individuals.
- 2) Females will have higher parental burnout and lower marital satisfaction as compared to men.
- 3) Married individuals living in joint family systems will have higher marital satisfaction and lower parental burnout as compared to married individuals living in nuclear family systems.

Method

Participants and Procedures

In order to assess the hypotheses of the study, ethical approval was sought from Riphah International University. Married individuals ($N = 350$), having one or more children, within the age range of 25 to 65 ($M = 35.42$, $SD = 9.29$) were approached during July 2021- September 2021. 50 out of 400 distributed booklets were discarded on the basis of missing and socially desired responses. The sample constituted of men ($n = 161$) with mean age of 36.43 ($SD = 8.48$) and women ($n = 181$) with mean age of 34.56 ($SD = 9.88$) reported they have been married for an average of 11.75 years ($SD = 8.87$) with 55.4% participants belonging to nuclear family system and 50% of them being graduate. 26.6 % participants reported that they lost their jobs during COVID-19 pandemic while 24.6% reported that their spouse lost job. Overall, majority of the participants reported financial strain (81.4%) after the pandemic and they had to opt for offline (13.1%) and online (23.7%) part time jobs.

Measures

Parental Burnout Assessment (Roskam et al., 2018): The scale consisted of 23 items evaluating emotional exhaustion, contrast with previous parental self, loss of pleasure in one's parental role, and the inability of parent to engage with their children and their responsibilities measuring on a 7 point Likert point scale (0 = *never* to 6 = *Everyday*). The composite scores ranged from 0-138 with a satisfactory Cronbach's reliability ($\alpha = .86$ to $.97$).

ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (Olson et al., 1985): The present study adopted a shorter version of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) with 15-items using a 5-point Likert scale (1= *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The items of the scale were grouped within two subscales (1) marital quality with ten items and (2) idealistic distortion with 5 items measuring the extent of distortion of reality by married individuals. The scale has a satisfactory Cronbach alpha reliability $\alpha = .86$ (Fowers & Olson, 1992) and composite score was obtained by converting raw scores into percentile scores (Olson et al., 1985).

Results

Data was analyzed on SPSS 26 Version to test psychometrics and normal distribution along with hypotheses of the study. Descriptive analysis indicated skewness (± 1) and kurtosis (± 1) of all study variables within range (Byrne, 2016).

Table 1: *Descriptive Characteristics and Correlations between all Study Variables (N = 350)*

Variables	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Parental burnout	.90	35.96	22.66	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2 Emotional exhaustion	.80	22.89	9.94	.93**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3 Parental contrast	.76	13.20	6.52	.84**	.75**	-	-	-	-	-	-
4 Emotional distance	.55	8.0	4.27	.74**	.61**	.44**	-	-	-	-	-
5 Fed up	.73	14.27	6.23	.78**	.58**	.51**	.56**	-	-	-	-
6 Marital satisfaction	.82	60.14	17.10	-.17**	-.16**	-.24**	-.04	-.09	-	-	-
7 Marital quality	.74	36.68	7.12	-.20**	-.18**	-.28**	-.06	-.11*	.98**	-	-
8 Idealistic distortion	.78	18.28	4.30	-.13*	-.12*	-.20**	-.01	-.05	.49**	.60**	-

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 1 indicated acceptable Cronbach alpha reliabilities for all scales of the study. Results further highlighted significant and negative association between parental burnout and marital satisfaction. However, non-significant association was observed between subscales of parental burnout (emotional distance and fed up) with marital satisfaction.

The present research further investigated gender differences across parental burnout and marital satisfaction.

Table 2: *Gender Difference across Parental Burnout and Marital Satisfaction (N = 350)*

Variables	Male	Female	<i>t</i> (₃₄₈)	<i>p</i>	CI 95%	
	(<i>n</i> = 161)	(<i>n</i> = 189)			LL	UL
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)				
Parental burnout	58.19 (22.65)	59.97 (22.70)	.77	.44	-6.65	2.91
Emotional exhaustion	23.24 (9.81)	22.60 (10.07)	.60	.55	-2.74	1.45
Parental contrast	12.72 (6.40)	13.76 (6.62)	1.50	.14	-2.42	.33
Emotional distance	8.50 (4.38)	8.69 (4.19)	.98	.68	-.71	1.09
Fed up	14.47 (6.37)	14.10 (6.13)	.62	.58	-1.69	.95
Marital satisfaction	58.17 (17.95)	61.84 (17.91)	.38	.06	-1.14	7.48
Marital quality	68.84 (21.98)	73.90 (22.08)	2.13	.03	.39	9.73
Idealistic distortion	70.56 (22.63)	76.99 (25.78)	2.15	.03	.54	12.34

Table 2 indicated that significant gender differences across subscales of marital satisfaction. Females had higher marital quality as well as idealistic distortions as compared to males.

Table 3: *Differences across Family System for Parental Burnout and Marital Satisfaction (N = 350)*

Variables	Family System		$t_{(348)}$	<i>p</i>	CI 95%	
	Joint (<i>n</i> = 156)	Nuclear (<i>n</i> = 194)			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)				
Parental burnout	54.43 (18.98)	62.60 (24.69)	3.50	.00	-12.76	-3.58
Emotional exhaust	20.97 (8.58)	24.44 (10.68)	3.37	.00	-5.50	-1.45
Parental contrast	11.84 (5.64)	14.29 (6.96)	3.64	.00	-3.78	-1.13
Emotional distance	8.00 (4.02)	9.08 (4.24)	2.37	.02	-1.98	-.18
Fed up	13.62 (5.88)	14.78 (6.47)	1.74	.08	-2.48	.15
Marital satisfaction	63.59 (17.62)	57.41 (17.87)	3.20	.00	2.39	9.79
Marital quality	76.28 (21.65)	67.84 (21.88)	3.58	.00	3.80	13.08
Idealistic distortion	79.92 (25.18)	69.30 (28.88)	3.67	.00	4.93	16.32

Table 3 indicated significant differences for parental burnout and marital satisfaction across family system except emotional distance and fed up (subscales of parental burnout). Married individuals living in joint family system had higher marital satisfaction as compared to those living in nuclear family system. However, married individuals living in nuclear family systems had higher parental burnout than those living in joint family system.

Discussions

Living with the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic, families were compelled to adjust with the unprecedented changes which posited great risk to the stability of families as they induced conflict and stress among individuals. Responsibilities of married individuals changed with very little time to get accustomed to these changes, their resources depleted while expenses increased, continuous workload and responsibilities further increased the risk of parental burnout and declined marital satisfaction. Along with this detrimental effect of parental burnout on marital satisfaction, the present study investigated the effect parental burnout and marital satisfaction across gender and family system. Results indicated that parents with increased burnout had lower marital satisfaction demonstrating that negative life events such as natural disasters (pandemics) have negative consequences on the married life of individuals (Mousavi, 2020; Roskam et al., 2021; Mikolajczak et al., 2022). Flouri and fellows (2018) argued that stressful life events including financial stressors, natural disasters, and sudden environmental changes severely affect the mental health of parents by exposing them to parental burnout. Specifically, parents of young children going through stressful times, are more prone to marital conflict.

The non-significant differences between subscales of parental burnout (emotional distance and fed up) and marital satisfaction highlighted that although Pakistani parents were emotionally not available (considering the overwhelming pandemic), it has not impacted their marital quality at all. It can be explained through mutual understanding of partners, as both similar challenges. Nonetheless, these results were quite exceptional and are need to be studied in detail.

Gender differences highlighted that females tend to have higher marital quality and idealistic distortion. These results are rather interesting and indicated that mothers try to build a distorted idealistic perception about their marital satisfaction. Traditional gender roles in Pakistan, makes women a sole responsible figure for childcare and house chores. As a care taker (household) of the family, majority of the women restrict themselves to household chores. This protective environment shelters them from any set back, and hence, they built their own mental image of their relationship. Aiding to this, the idea of compromise, adjustment, and tolerance engraved in the mind of Pakistani women plays a leading role in reporting of their marital

satisfaction. Women are constantly scrutinized and pressured regarding their marital lives preventing them from openly expressing their fears and dissatisfaction regarding their marriage, thus they distort their perceptions of marriage as compared to men (Qadir et al., 2005; Akbar, 2022). In contrast, men are considered bread earners of the family, defined by the traditional roles of Pakistan, as economic utilities (Nasrullah & Bhatti, 2012; Ayub & Iqbal, 2012) they spend most of their time at their workplace by sacrificing their family time. However, COVID-19 confined them to their homes without any prior preparations, they had to manage both work and family from their home along with financial crisis. The prolonged work-family setup heightened their insecurities and costed them their marital satisfaction (John & Montgomery, 2009; Jackson et al., 2014; Mousavi, 2020; Skjerdingsstad et al., 2021; Grover, 2018). Contrary to this, parental burnout equally affected both parents, which highlighted that pandemic didn't differentiate in terms of its effects on gender. As both parents, suffered the consequences of the pandemic, they have shared equal toll of the pandemic in terms of parental burnout.

Married individuals living in nuclear family systems (with their spouse and kids) reported higher parental burnout and lower marital satisfaction as compared to individuals living in joint family systems (family set up with extended family members living under a same roof). These results mirrored the findings shared by Dockrill (2021). American parents reported highest parental burnout due to its individualistic culture and nuclear family systems, as compared to most Asian cultures where joint family system is prevalent. This could further be posited that the extended family member's help and support during COVID-19 in managing kids along with work and family duties reduced parental burnout of married individuals which ultimately strengthened their union with their spouse (Blanchard et al., 2022).

Conclusion and Implication

Although the world got accustomed to the pandemic, the viral outbreak is far from over as the aftereffects of the pandemic are yet to come. Therefore, a thorough understanding of how married individuals have struggled and coped during the pandemic could help in the planning and execution of strategies for developing countries specifically collectivistic cultures. Parental burnout in association with marital satisfaction is understudied and a tabooed topic in Pakistan. Authors are hoping that the findings of the study could help open doors and minds alike for discussions so that appropriate steps can be taken to help parents struggling in their relationships which ultimately leads to divorce and breaking up a family unit. The finding of the present research could help in the right direction, highlighting the need for interventions targeting parental needs, parental concerns, and marital quality of families living in nuclear family systems. Lastly, the present research highlighted that parental burnout does not vary across gender and it affects both parental equally. This highlight the need for intervention on parental burnout for both parents .

Acknowledgments

None


Conflict of Interest


Authors declared no conflict of interest.


Funding Source


The authors received no funding to conduct this study.

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