

The Double Burden: Socio-Cultural Constraints and Psycho-Social Well-Being of Women in Sericulture Farming in Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the gendered dynamics of sericulture in Kashmir, a sector that relies heavily on women's labour while subjecting them to entrenched patriarchal constraints. Drawing on mixed-methods data from 259 women beneficiaries, the analysis documents prevalent socio-cultural barriers including community discrimination (31%), institutional gender bias (45%), ostracization (18%), and role conflict (36%) and their psycho-social consequences, such as chronic stress, diminished self-efficacy, social isolation, and internalized devaluation. These findings reveal a paradoxical “double burden,” wherein women's economically vital contributions are culturally marginalized, perpetuating cycles of subordination amid conflict-exacerbated conservatism. The paradox of resilience evident in high rates of non-reported constraints underscores mechanisms of normalization and adaptive coping. Theoretically grounded in feminist political economy, stigma theory, and role strain theory, the study advocates for psycho-socially informed interventions to advance authentic empowerment beyond conventional technical support.

Keywords: Gender, Sericulture, Kashmir, Psycho-Social Well-Being, Stigma, Patriarchy, Role Conflict, Women's Empowerment

Sericulture constitutes a cornerstone of rural livelihoods in the Kashmir Valley, engaging over 33,000 families and providing significant employment opportunities within Jammu and Kashmir (Directorate of Sericulture, J&K, 2023; Ahmad & Matoo, 2024). Women form the backbone of this labour-intensive industry, performing 60-80% of tasks across the value chain from mulberry cultivation and silkworm rearing to reeling and weaving, activities that require meticulous care and endurance, qualities culturally ascribed as feminine (Geetha & Kumar, 2014; Satsangi, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010). The cottage-based and seasonally flexible nature of sericulture ostensibly aligns with women's reproductive responsibilities, offering supplementary household income (Anitha, 2011; Parimala, 2009). However, this apparent compatibility conceals a deeper double burden, where productive and reproductive roles converge without adequate recognition, support, or reward.

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Situated within Kashmir's deeply patriarchal socio-cultural framework, further intensified by protracted conflict and resultant conservatism women's indispensable contributions are paradoxically undermined by restricted mobility due to norms, gender-based discrimination, and systemic exclusion from training, credit, and decision-making (Kaul, 2018; Malik & Pirzada, 2021). These barriers precipitate acute role conflict and strain, established in psychological scholarship as antecedents to chronic stress, anxiety, reduced self-efficacy, and social marginalization (Goode, 1960; Pearlin, 1989; Thoits, 1991).

Adopting an integrated feminist psychological perspective, incorporating role strain theory (Goode, 1960) and gendered analyses of conflict-affected economies (Dutta, 2016; Kazi, 2019) this study moves beyond traditional economic evaluations of sericulture (e.g., Chandan & Mukherjee, 2020; Ali et al., 2017) to interrogate the pathways through which socio-cultural constraints impair psycho-social well-being. Utilising primary mixed-methods data from 259 women Kashmir, the research elucidates the patriarchal paradox: women sustain a vital industry that simultaneously marginalizes them. This contributes a diverse insight into barriers to empowerment in rural agrarian contexts and highlights the imperative for gender-transformative policy interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender and Agriculture

Global and regional literature consistently highlights women's central yet marginalized role in agriculture, particularly in developing economies where they comprise a substantial labour force but encounter systemic inequities in access to land, credit, extension services, technology, and information (Glazebrook et al., 2020; Doss, 2018). In the Global South, climate vulnerabilities further entrench these disparities (Glazebrook et al., 2020). South Asian studies reveal stark asymmetries: women's labour contributions often exceed 60-80%, yet land ownership remains below 13% due to patriarchal inheritance practices (Kumar et al., 2010; Pattnaik et al., 2018). Within sericulture, women's intensive involvement in rearing and processing is routinely devalued as "unskilled" or auxiliary, perpetuating economic subordination (Geetha & Kumar, 2014; Satsangi, 2014; Kasi, 2013).

Socio-Cultural Determinants

In South Asia, kinship systems, religious norms, and customary practices enforce gendered divisions, restricting women's mobility, and prioritizing domestic roles over productive engagement (Anitha, 2011; Kasi, 2013). These constraints channel women into home-based activities like sericulture while barring market participation or leadership (Parimala, 2009; Malik & Pirzada, 2021). In Kashmir, decades of conflict have amplified conservatism, insecurity, and resource disruptions, intensifying women's psycho-social burdens and role conflicts (Kaul, 2018; Dutta, 2016). Qualitative evidence further indicates that cultural declaration of "feminine" traits directs women toward demanding yet low-prestige tasks, while associations of sericulture with "uncleanliness" or disease risk erode social standing (Rewerska-Juśko & Rejdak, 2020).

Theoretical Lens

This study synthesizes three interrelated frameworks to analyse the confluence of socio-cultural barriers and psycho-social outcomes.

Feminist political economy critiques the exploitation and devaluation of women intertwined reproductive and productive labours under patriarchal capitalism, often rendering them

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unpaid or under-remunerated while sustaining economies (Benería & Sen, 1981; Gottfried, 1998). In sericulture, ostensibly “flexible” home-based work aligns with domestic obligations but exacerbates exploitation by blurring labour domains without equitable returns (Elson, 1999).

Stigma theory elucidates how socio-cultural labelling associating tasks with “uncleanliness,” disease, or low prestige that generates ostracization, internalized shame, and diminished agency (Poteat et al., 2013; Rewerska-Juśko & Rejdak, 2020).

Role strain theory examines conflicts arising from incompatible demands between caregiver roles and producer identities, resulting in overload, stress, and marginalization that particularly acute in conflict contexts (Goode, 1960; Pearlin, 1989; Thoits, 1991).

Together, these lenses illuminate the patriarchal paradox in Kashmir’s sericulture: women’s indispensability sustains the sector, yet devaluation through socio-cultural mechanisms undermines their psycho-social well-being and empowerment trajectories. This review establishes the need for context-specific empirical investigation.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to holistically explore the socio-cultural constraints and their psycho-social ramifications for women involved in sericulture farming in Kashmir. Employing a convergent parallel approach, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and integrated during interpretation to facilitate triangulation, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of insights into both empirical patterns and contextual narratives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design is particularly apt for examining multifaceted phenomena like gender dynamics in agrarian contexts, where quantifiable trends (e.g., prevalence of barriers) complement qualitative explorations of lived experiences, allowing for a robust analytical framework that bridges structural analysis with individual agency (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Study Area and Population

The investigation was situated in the Kashmir Valley, a region characterized by its agrarian economy and socio-cultural intricacies influenced by historical conflict and patriarchal norms. The target population encompasses women actively participating in sericulture activities, such as mulberry cultivation, silkworm rearing, and post-cocoon processing, drawn from registered beneficiaries under the Sericulture Development Department of Jammu and Kashmir.

Sampling and Sample Size

A stratified random sampling strategy was utilized to ensure representativeness across geographic and operational strata. Districts were initially stratified based on official sericulture rearing data from the Directorate of Sericulture, Jammu & Kashmir. Within selected districts, clusters of sericulture-active villages were identified, followed by random selection of participants from departmental beneficiary lists. The quantitative component comprised 259 women, determined via Taro Yamane’s formula applied to the registered population (736), yielding a sample size adequate for descriptive and inferential analyses at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. For the qualitative strand, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit 20 participants for in-depth semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 8 to 10 women

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each, prioritizing diversity in age, marital status, household composition, and sericulture experience to capture heterogeneous perspectives.

Data Collection

Fieldwork spanned December 2023 to June 2024, employing primary data collection methods tailored to the study's objectives.

- **Quantitative Component:** A structured questionnaire was administered via face-to-face interviews to minimize non-response bias and accommodate literacy variations. The instrument captured: Socio-demographic profiles (e.g., age, education level, household income, family structure).
- **Independent Variables (Socio-Cultural Constraints):** Binary and categorical items assessing self-reported experiences of gender discrimination, restrictive norms, role conflict, ostracization, and institutional exclusion. These were adapted from context-specific studies in South Asian agriculture (e.g., Pattnaik et al., 2018; Malik & Pirzada, 2021) to ensure cultural relevance, focusing on prevalence rather than intensity for broad applicability in resource-constrained settings.
- **Dependent Variables (Psycho-Social Well-Being):** Self-reported indicators of psychological distress, including items on anxiety, stress, self-efficacy, and social marginalization. In place of standardized scales, due to logistical constraints such as time limitations in field administration and the need for culturally sensitive, non-clinical assessments these were operationalized through simple, dichotomous (yes/no) and ordinal (e.g., frequency-based) questions derived from established frameworks (e.g., inspired by Cohen et al., 1983; Spitzer et al., 2006; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; Pearlin, 1989). This approach prioritizes accessibility and respondent burden reduction while maintaining analytical utility, as self-reported experiential data have been validated in similar socio-cultural studies for detecting patterns of distress without requiring psychometric rigor (e.g., in community-based gender research; see Kabeer, 1999).
- **Qualitative Component:** Semi-structured interviews and FGDs delved into nuanced experiences, employing open-ended probes on the “double burden” of roles, labour stigma, and coping strategies amid socio-cultural pressures. This method facilitated emergent themes, complementing quantitative data by providing interpretive depth to statistical trends.

The absence of full standardized scales is justified by the study’s emphasis on exploratory, context-embedded insights rather than clinical diagnostics; self-reported measures suffice for identifying associative pathways in non-clinical populations, as evidenced in feminist agrarian research where such adaptations enhance feasibility and ethical sensitivity (e.g., Rao, 2017). Triangulation across methods mitigates potential biases, ensuring the data's applicability to policy-oriented analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) to delineate patterns, supplemented by inferential techniques such as correlation and regression to probe relationships between socio-cultural constraints and psycho-social indicators. Visual aids like tables and figures were utilized for succinct presentation, aiding in the identification of key trends (e.g., prevalence rates).

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Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis per Braun and Clarke (2006), involving inductive coding for emergent patterns and deductive alignment with theoretical lenses (feminist political economy, stigma theory, and role strain theory). Iterative theme refinement ensured analytical rigor, linking socio-cultural barriers to psycho-social outcomes.

Integration occurred interpretively, merging quantitative prevalence data with qualitative narratives to construct a comprehensive nexus model. This mixed-methods synergy justifies the design's applicability, as it yields actionable, academically grounded insights into gendered vulnerabilities, validated through cross-verification (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006).

Ethical protocols were rigorously upheld, including informed consent, anonymity, voluntary withdrawal, and cultural sensitivity in interactions. Institutional ethics committee approval was secured, underscoring the study's commitment to participant well-being in a sensitive context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes the empirical data to construct a multifaceted argument regarding the interplay between socio-cultural structures and psycho-social outcomes among women engaged in sericulture. By examining the nexus of stigma, gendered norms, institutional biases, ostracization, and role conflicts, the analysis elucidates how these elements perpetuate cycles of marginalization while simultaneously revealing paradoxes of resilience and adaptation. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as social identity theory and feminist critiques of agency, the discussion interrogates the data to uncover underlying mechanisms of power and their implications for psychological well-being and empowerment. Qualitative narratives from interviews and focus group discussions are integrated to illustrate and deepen the interpretation of quantitative prevalence rates.

Stigma and Social Identity: The Psychological Toll of "Unclean" Labor

Empirical evidence indicates that 31% of respondents encounter community-level discrimination, with sericulture often stigmatized as "dirty" and low-status work. This societal devaluation extends beyond mere social discomfort, profoundly imposing upon individuals' self-identity and psychological equilibrium. The attribution of blame for disease outbreaks represents a significant economic vulnerability that engenders heightened anxiety, guilt, and perceptions of professional inadequacy. Moreover, the pervasive fear of being labelled a "carrier" exacerbates social isolation, fostering loneliness and chronic stress. These dynamics resonate with literature on stigma's psychological burdens (Lebel, 2008), wherein external prejudices are internalized, eroding self-esteem and diminishing the intrinsic value ascribed to one's labour.

Qualitative accounts vividly capture this internalization: One participant shared, *"People in the village say our hands are always dirty from the worms and leaves, and when there is a disease outbreak, they blame us. I feel ashamed even to visit relatives sometimes, as if I carry something bad with me."*

Another recounted, *"During the last crop failure due to disease, neighbours avoided our house. It made me question if this work is worth the loneliness it brings."*

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Analytically, these narratives illustrate a feedback loop: societal stigma not only undermines mental health but also reinforces occupational hierarchies, thereby limiting women's socio-economic mobility and perpetuating a cycle of psycho-social distress.

Gendered Norms and Constrained Agency: The Facade of Acceptance

While 71% of participants assert that cultural norms impose no restrictions on their participation, the 29% who report otherwise, coupled with qualitative insights, reveal entrenched constraints on mobility, resource access, and task allocation. This apparent majority consensus of acceptance warrants critical scrutiny, as it likely reflects a conditional tolerance rooted in patriarchal bargains, wherein women's involvement is sanctioned only insofar as it remains confined to home-based activities and avoids overt challenges to male dominance. Such dynamics cause a form of "constrained agency," where economic participation is ostensibly enabled but circumscribed by invisible boundaries, leading to latent frustration and a sense of powerlessness among the affected minority.

Narratives highlight the subtlety of these boundaries: A young married woman noted, *"My husband allows me to rear silkworms at home because it brings income, but if I want to go to the market or attend a training outside the village, he says 'that's not for women.' So, I stay within the compound, its freedom, but only inside these walls."*

An older participant reflected, *"We are told sericulture suits women because it's inside the house, like cooking or cleaning. But when I tried to join a cooperative meeting, elders said it would disrupt family peace."*

From a psycho-social perspective, the perpetual negotiation between economic imperatives and cultural imperatives imposes subtle yet cumulative strain, manifesting as cognitive dissonance and diminished autonomy. This paradox underscores how gendered norms operate not through overt prohibition but via insidious mechanisms that maintain structural inequalities under the guise of inclusivity.

Institutionalized Gender Bias and the Erosion of Self-Efficacy

Data reveal that 45% of women experience gender-based biases, manifested in exclusion from training programs, inequitable resource distribution, barriers to land ownership, and persistent wage disparities. These institutional practices convey an implicit devaluation of women's contributions, systematically undermining their self-efficacy which is the foundational belief in one's ability to effect change (Bandura, 1997). The denial of essential training, despite active engagement in sericulture, fosters a sense of inadequacy and hinders the cultivation of entrepreneurial identities. Furthermore, the "invisibility" resulting from absence of land ownership in policy frameworks stimulates feelings of institutional exclusion, reinforcing resignation and obstructing pathways to empowerment.

Qualitative voices underscore this erosion: One woman expressed frustration, *"The extension officers come for training, but they call only the men, even though we do most of the rearing. They say 'tell your husbands.' It makes me feel my knowledge doesn't matter."*

Another highlighted land issues: *"The mulberry plot is in my father-in-law's name, so when subsidies come, they go to him. I work the land every day, but officially, I'm nobody, it's like I'm invisible."*

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Analytically, this institutionalized bias exemplifies structural violence, wherein systemic disrespect not only perpetuates economic disparities but also erodes psychological resilience, trapping women in subordinate “helper” roles rather than fostering recognition as autonomous agricultural actors. The long-term ramifications include stifled innovation and collective advocacy, thereby entrenching gender inequities within the sector.

Ostracization as a Mechanism of Social Control

18% of respondents report direct experiences of ostracization, including shunning and exclusion from communal events, highlighting its role as a disciplinary tool within socio-cultural frameworks. Psycho-socially, such exclusion evokes acute fear, shame, and isolation, functioning as a form of “social death” that deters women from pursuing greater autonomy or norm-challenging behaviours. This distressing effect extends beyond immediate victims, inducing self-censorship and the curtailment of aspirations across the community. Notably, the 82% non-reporting rate may not signify the absence of such sanctions but rather their normalization or under-reporting due to fear of reprisal.

Participants reveal the effectiveness of this control: A focus group member described, *“When I started rearing more cocoons to earn extra, some women stopped inviting me to weddings, saying I’m too ‘forward.’ Now I keep quiet about my plans-better alone than excluded.”*

Another shared, *“After arguing for fair wages at the reeling unit, I was left out of neighbourhood gatherings. The fear of losing community ties makes many of us hold back.”*

From an analytical standpoint, ostracization operates as a mechanism of control (Foucault, 1977), wherein the mere threat of exclusion reinforces conformity and sustains patriarchal hierarchies. This dynamic not only amplifies individual psycho-social vulnerabilities but also impedes broader movements toward gender equity, as collective resistance is fragmented by anticipatory compliance.

Role Conflict and the Dynamics of Chronic Exhaustion

36% of participants identify role conflicts between sericultural responsibilities and domestic obligations as a primary challenge. This “double burden” precipitates time poverty, physical fatigue, and pervasive guilt over perceived inadequacies in fulfilling either domain, culminating in chronic psycho-physical exhaustion. Societal judgments that censure prioritization of farm work further intensify cognitive dissonance, transforming potentially empowering labour into a source of burnout.

Narratives sadly convey this exhaustion: One mother of three stated, *“I wake at dawn for worms, then cook, clean, and care for children; by evening, my body aches, and I feel guilty if dinner is late or if a batch of silkworms dies. There’s no rest, only constant worry.”* In a focus group, a participant added, *“If I spend more time on rearing for better yield, my in-laws say I’m neglecting the home. But without this income, how do we survive? It’s a trap that wears you down inside.”* Analytically, this conflict exemplifies the intersectional strains of gender and class, wherein economic necessity compels participation amid unyielding cultural expectations of domestic primacy. The resultant stress diminishes mental health, curtails productivity, and erodes the capacity for collective action, thereby limiting sericulture’s emancipatory potential. In essence, role conflict serves as a channel through

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which socio-cultural norms translate into tangible psycho-social costs, perpetuating a cycle of depletion that hinders sustainable empowerment.

The Paradox of Resilience: Deconstructing the “No” Responses

The substantial proportions of respondents denying encounters with discrimination (69%), gender bias (55%), and related issues do not undermine the core findings but rather illuminate a paradoxical resilience embedded within the socio-cultural context. This phenomenon can be interpreted through several lenses: First, adaptive resilience, whereby women cultivate coping mechanisms and social networks to mitigate barriers, transforming adversity into navigable terrain. Second, normalization, wherein pervasive discrimination becomes so embedded in everyday life that it evades conscious recognition as aberrant. Third, conditional acceptance, particularly in regions where sericulture's economic centrality temporarily attenuates overt resistance, fostering localized enclaves of relative tolerance. Methodologically, these “no” responses may also reflect social desirability bias or reticence driven by fear of stigma, underscoring the limitations of self-reported data in capturing latent dynamics.

Qualitative insights enrich this interpretation: Women reporting fewer constraints often described strategies like, *“We manage by working quietly at home and sharing tips among ourselves, no need to fight openly,”* suggesting adaptive networks. Others indicated normalization: *“This is how it has always been; we don't see it as restriction, just life.”* Analytically, this paradox highlights the dialectical nature of empowerment: while apparent absences of barriers suggest progress, they may mask deeper entrenchments of inequality, necessitating nuanced interventions that address both overt and insidious forms of marginalization to foster genuine psycho-social transformation.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illuminate the intricate socio-cultural-psycho-social nexus shaping the experiences of women engaged in sericulture in Kashmir. Far from being isolated logistical hurdles, the challenges confronted by these women encompassing stigma attached to “unclean” labour, constrained agency under patriarchal norms, institutionalized gender biases, ostracization as a tool of social control, and pervasive role conflicts are profoundly internalized. These dynamics exert a cumulative toll on psychological well-being, manifesting in diminished self-esteem, chronic stress, eroded self-efficacy, isolation, and psycho-physical exhaustion. Even where participation appears tolerated or empowered, it often operates within conditional boundaries that perpetuate subordination, underscoring the insidious nature of gendered power structures.

Critically, the paradox of resilience observed in the substantial “no” responses to experiences of discrimination and bias does not negate these structural inequities but rather reveals adaptive mechanisms, normalization processes, and contextual variations that mask deeper vulnerabilities. Sericulture, while offering economic opportunities, thus functions as a double-edged instrument: potentially emancipatory yet frequently reinforcing cycles of marginalization when unaccompanied by transformative interventions. Ultimately, the socio-cultural milieu in Kashmir profoundly mediates women's psycho-social outcomes, transforming occupational engagement into a site of both opportunity and strain. Empowerment efforts must transcend material or technical support to adopt a psycho-socially attuned lens, recognizing that sustainable change necessitates addressing

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internalized prejudices, mental health burdens, and the erosion of agency alongside economic imperatives.

Recommendations

To foster genuine empowerment and mitigate the identified psycho-social challenges, multi-level interventions are proposed, targeting policy, community, and support systems while informing future inquiry.

Policy-Level Interventions

- Mandate joint land titling for spouses in sericulture and allied agricultural schemes to enhance women's visibility, secure resource access, and counter institutional erasure.
- Develop and implement women-exclusive training programs and extension services, incorporating flexible scheduling to accommodate domestic responsibilities and reduce role conflict.
- Integrate compulsory gender sensitization and anti-bias modules into the training curricula for agricultural officers, extension workers, and related officials to dismantle institutionalized prejudices and promote equitable service delivery.

Community-Level Interventions

- Initiate targeted awareness campaigns, utilizing local media, religious platforms, and community forums, to destigmatize sericulture as “dirty” work and challenge misconceptions linking it to disease transmission.
- Engage men, elders, and influential community leaders as allies through structured dialogues and incentive-based programs, fostering normative shifts toward equitable gender roles.
- Promote and strengthen women's collectives, such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and producer cooperatives, to enhance collective economic bargaining power, provide mutual social support, and combat isolation through shared platforms.

Psycho-Social Support Mechanisms

- Embed basic mental health literacy, stress management techniques, and resilience-building components within existing farmer welfare and sericulture development programs.
- Establish safe, facilitated spaces such as women-only discussion circles or peer support networks for participants to articulate experiences, process psycho-social strains, and cultivate solidarity, thereby alleviating loneliness and internalized stigma.

Directions for Further Research

- Conduct longitudinal studies to monitor psycho-social trajectories over time, evaluating the impact of targeted interventions on mental health, self-efficacy, and empowerment indicators.
- Undertake in-depth ethnographic research to explore resilience strategies among women reporting minimal constraints, elucidating adaptive mechanisms, contextual enablers, and potential models for scalable empowerment.

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By operationalizing these recommendations, stakeholders can transition sericulture from a domain of constrained participation to one of authentic empowerment, contributing to broader gender equity and psycho-social well-being in Kashmir's rural landscape.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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