

PERCEIVED GENDER STEREOTYPE AND QUALITY OF MARRIAGE IN MARRIED WOMEN: MEDIATING ROLE OF SELF-SILENCING

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Abstract

The current study examined the intervening role of self-silencing between the relationship of perceived gender stereotypes and quality of marriage among married women. Cross-sectional research design was employed and a purposive sample 180 married women with the age range of 23-36 (M = 29.12, SD = 5.45) from Rawalpindi and Islamabad was recruited. Data was collected using Urdu versions of Gender specific belief scale [1], Silencing the self-scale [2] and Marital Quality Scale [3]. The results of Pearson product moment correlation analysis showed perceived gender stereotype significantly was positively correlated with self-silencing while significantly negatively associated with quality of marriage. However, self-silencing was also found to be significantly negatively associated with the quality of marriage in married couples. Results of mediation analysis through Structural Equation Modeling indicated that self-silencing significantly mediates the relationship between gender stereotype and quality marriage among married couples. The study underscores the vital role of addressing perceived gender stereotypes and promoting assertive communication in improving

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marital quality among married women, particularly in indigenous cultural contexts.

Keywords. : *Perceived Gender Stereotypes, Self-silencing, Quality of Marriage, Married Women.*

INTRODUCTION

Given humans' inherent social nature and their fundamental drive to belong and establish meaningful connections with others, there is a growing acknowledgement regarding the importance of the quality of relationships in impacting health. When considering the social makeup of humans, it is important to acknowledge that culture permeates every aspect and area of human social life, acting as a perpetual filter through which individuals perceive, think and behave [4]. Consequently, sociocultural contexts significantly influence an individual's life, with gender being considered pivotal in functional differences [5]. In the same vein, social norms play a role in prescribing behavior, and therefore, certain sex differences may be explained by gender-specific norms [1]. In accordance with entrenched traditional norms, the manifestation of traditional gender stereotypes have demonstrated negative impacts with the potential to lead to devastating consequences involving violence, oppression and discrimination [6]. Gender role expectations and agreements between spouses, designed and maintained in cultural contexts, has been associated with marriage quality and wellbeing in various researches [7]. Early research shows that traditional sex-role attitudes in both partners are associated with marital happiness. In contrast, some studies also indicate that non-traditional sex-role attitudes are also conducive to a satisfying marital relationship. In this view, both masculinity and femininity are critical for a healthy marriage [8].

One of the prevalent gender-based stereotypes differentiate men and women on the basis of their emotional expressivity, attributing men to be instrumental and women to be expressive [9,10]. Within the spectrum of emotional expressivity, more instrumental personality traits are attributed with men, including but not limited to self-reliance, restrictive emotionality, and toughness [11,12]. On the other hand, femininity is attributed to women, with traits such as emotionality, vulnerability, affect and submissiveness [11]. These beliefs about specific characteristics attributed to individuals based on their gender are known as descriptive stereotypes. Beyond these descriptions lie prescriptive stereotypes, which encompass beliefs about specific traits that individuals should possess based on their gender [13]. In other words, prescriptive gender stereotypes consist of the expectations surrounding actions and attitudes attributed to the genders. It is assumed that prescriptive and descriptive stereotypes serve different functions [13] and are constituent of different underlying processes [14,15]. In the context of implication of both of these components, descriptive stereotypes are crucial for maintaining status quo [16] however

prescriptive stereotypes maintain power inequities in the society [13]. Furthermore in the context of gender, prescriptive stereotypes are more critical [16,17]. When it comes to particularly emotionality across gender, descriptive stereotypical beliefs are given more importance [18].

According to Dasgupta & Basu [19], such stereotypes regarding gender role underscore the interactions in a marital relationship as well. Essentially, a harmonious and relatively conflict-free existence of two individuals and their ability to fit in together in a smooth functioning dyad determines the quality of their marriage, that includes culture's stereotypes in gender roles [19]. Beyond the confines of sociocultural factors in determining the quality of marriage, individual differences within the relationship remain; essentially, interpersonal communication and positive emotional expression are also considered important for the union [20]. Marital quality is conceived as a level of marriage excellence based on certain characteristics [21]. Conceptually, many terms are used to describe marital quality. Some commonly used terms include marital happiness, marital satisfaction, marital stability, marital success, marital adjustment [21]. This criteria may include but is not limited to, relations with extended family, adherence to traditional gender roles, and the role of religion in the relationship, with the importance of these standards differing across cultures [22]. The cultural rigidity observed in certain countries highlights the low tolerance for deviation from culturally appropriate behavior [23]. For instance, this rigidity may be apparent in Pakistan indicated by the influence of cultural norms and expectations on relationship standards within the societal contexts [22]. Meta analysis shows that gender differences in marital quality exist, with husbands holding more traditional gender role attitudes than their wives [24]. Addressing the predictors of marital attitudes in Pakistan is critical for understanding the complicated nature of the relationship between genders. Studies show that expectations and attitudes towards marriage in Pakistan are significantly shaped by gender roles, personality traits, and self-esteem [25]. Moreover, women in Pakistan are unable to openly express their needs because of their subservient role in marriage. A woman may choose to silence herself if she feels that speaking in front of people can be considered a disgrace [26].

Beyond the confines of sociocultural factors in determining the quality of marriage, individual differences within the relationship remain; essentially, interpersonal communication and positive emotional expression are also considered important for the union [20]. Communication is pivotal as a factor of determining the deterioration of relationships, underscored by the belief that intimate connections among partners is greatly affected by sensitivity with which both respond to each other [27]. This inhibited self-expression is the basis for silencing oneself, often miscategorized as "sacrifice" [28]. Although, sacrifice to some degree is considered

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necessary to maintain relationships [29], seen as an expression of the love and care an individual feels towards their partner. This is particularly the case for societies in Pakistan and China, where harmony in relationships is of the highest priority [22]. However, [30] present a contradictory argument, in which self-silencing as a sacrifice is more so linked to the avoidance of conflicts and disapproval from one's partner. With an avoidance motivation, self-silencing becomes self-defeating; it further harms the relationship and the psychological self [31]. In contrast, among many other determinants of marriage quality, emotional expression and interaction patterns are some crucial ones [32]. If any of the spouse conceals the emotions and feelings either to secure the marriage or to conform to the traditional gender roles disrupts the quality of a relationship [33,34]. Relational culture theory further validates that individuals may attempt to mold themselves to fit into their current relationships through strategies such as self-silencing [31]. Rejection sensitive people continuously seek approval and acceptance and tend to avoid rejection. Consequently these people exhibit extreme behaviors of attentiveness and accommodation that can be self-contradictory in order to seek acceptance from their significant others. When rejection sensitive individuals perceive a threat for rejection, put utmost effort to avoid it even at the personal cost. Vivid demonstration of rejection sensitivity exists in intimate relationships like marriage and found to be associated with poor communication in the marital relationship [35]. It is demonstrated that fear of rejection and avoidance motives result in self-sacrificing and self-silencing in the spousal relationships [36]. Therefore, effective communication contributes to the perceived high quality of marriage [27].

According to Jack [37], there remains the potential for cross cultural differences when considering the conceptualization and prevalence of self-silencing. Culture is pertinent when it comes to the value individuals place on experiencing emotions and how to express them [38]. Similarly, the difference within the self-silencing of men and women may be a manifestation of the gender roles prescribed by society, in other words, the relevant cultural norms regarding gender [28]. In the same vein, with the sense of self dependent on relationships, women have a tendency to employ self-sacrifice in their attachment [39]. A subscription to existing, prevalent gender norms of women being docile and submissive only acts as another motivation for women to continue to self-silence [40].

Not only this, self-silencing is a strong determinant of quality of interpersonal relationships [26,28]. It is expected that individuals who self-silence in romantic relationships have overall poor communicative functioning [28]. Since effective interpersonal communication and mutual connectedness within the context of relationship is crucial for a marital relationship, the withdrawal and suppression in

the form of self-silencing leads to hostility, discomfort, frustration and critical and intolerant perception of one's spouse [28]. The internalization of cultural and social prescriptions limits the authentic representation of self in a relationship, in the form of silencing that in turn eliminates the mutuality in relationship, posing to be detrimental for relationship growth and quality, that may be an underlying cause for psychological stress [41]. In the study of Hurst & Beesly [41], self-silencing is found to be playing a mediational role between sexism and psychological stress in relationships. This psychological distress is inferred to be an impact of complex relationship concerns related to marriage satisfaction and quality.

Present Study examining how gender stereotypes, self-silencing, and marital quality intersect in Pakistani married women, we aim to understand the real-life impact of cultural expectations on women's quality of marriage. This research could offer valuable insights into how to support women in navigating these challenges and fostering more fulfilling relationships. Moreover, it aims to identify gaps in the existing literature and delineating areas for future research is critical for advancing our understanding of these complex dynamics and tailoring effective interventions in practical settings.

HYPOTHESES

- H1: Perceived gender stereotype and self-silencing are likely to negatively impact marital quality
- H2: Self-silencing is likely to mediate a relationship between perceived gender stereotype and quality of marital relationship of married women.

METHODOLOGY

A correlational (cross-sectional) research design was carried out on a purposive sample of 180 married women (calculated from G*Power) with the age range of 23-36 ($M = 29.12$, $SD = 5.45$) from Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Married women having at least one year of marriage, and having at least one child, moreover couples living with the spouse were included. Married couples who were not living together because of separation or living away from their partner due to job. Second marriage women were also excluded.

GENDER-SPECIFIC BELIEFS SCALE (TIMMERS ET AL., 2003)

Gender specific beliefs scale consisting of 54 items, measures prescriptive and descriptive gender specific beliefs using 7 point Likert-type scale for agreement. The descriptive dimension consists of four subscales i.e., tolerance/intolerance of power, display of powerful/powerless emotions, sensitivity and power related preferences, attitudes toward emotional behavior and display of emotion at work.

SILENCING THE SELF SCALE (JACK, 1992)

Silencing the Self scale measures different dimensions of self silencing through 31 items. Silencing the Self Scale consists of four subscale i.e., externalized self-perception, care as self-sacrifice, silencing the self, and divided self subscale. The

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scale is rated on a 5 point Likert-type scale of agreement.

MARITAL QUALITY SCALE (SHAH, 1995)

Marital Quality Scale is a multidimensional scale for both male and female consisting of 50 items each. The scale measures the quality of marriage along 12 subscales named Understanding, Rejection, Satisfaction, Affection, Despair, Decision Making, Discontent, Dissolution Potential, Dominance, Self-disclosure, Trust and Role-functioning. The items are scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale of frequency.

PROCEDURE

All participants received the informed consent form and project information sheet, detailing the research topic and procedure. The data was collected firsthand from the participants using pens and questionnaires. Further, the participants were asked to respond carefully and honestly as their responses will affect the results of the study. All 120 participants in the study returned the questionnaires upon completion, presenting a response rate of 100%. Husband and wife were seated separately to respond to Gender specific belief scale (Timmers et al., 2003), Silencing the self scale (Jack, 1992) and Marital Quality Scale (Shah, 1995) to ensure the authenticity of the responses and to reduce the likelihood of response bias. Finally, data analysis was performed to obtain the results of the research ideas.

RESULTS

The data was analyzed into three key steps in step I, descriptive statistics of demographic characteristics of the married women were calculated. However, in step II, Pearson product moment correlation and reliability analysis was carried. Lastly, mediation analysis was conducted using structural equation modeling to investigate the mediating role of self-silencing between perceived gender stereotype and quality of marriage in married women.

TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Characteristic of Married Women (N=180).

Variables		%	M	D
Age			29.12	.45
Education			12.24	12
Age at Marriage			24.15	.98
Marriage Duration			4.15	.52
Number of Children				
1-2 children	10	58.4		
3-5 children	0	27.77		
Type of Marriage				
Arranged		86.11		

Love 5 13.88

The mean age of the participants was 29.12 (SD=5.45), while the mean for education in years was 12.24 (SD=2.15). Further, the mean of age at marriage was 24.15 (SD=3.98), while the marriage duration mean was 4.15 (SD=7.52). Around 58.4% of women had 1 to 2 children and 27.77% women had 3 to 5 children. However, 86.11% of women were in arranged marriages and 13.88% of women were in love marriages.

TABLE 2

Descriptive Statistic, Reliability Analysis, and Correlation between Perceived Gender Stereotype, Self-silencing, and Quality of Marriage of Married Women (N=180)

Variables	M	SD	α	1	2
1. Gender Stereotype	212.74	44.26	.74	-	.47** .27**
2. Self-silencing	95.96	16.45	.81	-	- .62***
3. Quality of Marriage	83.98	19.33	.77	-	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The table 2 showed that all measures were excellently reliable with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .74-.81. Pearson product moment correlation analysis indicated that gender stereotype was significantly positively correlated with self-silencing. On the contrary gender stereotype was significantly negatively correlated with quality of marriage. Similarly, self-silencing was significantly negatively associated with the quality of marriage.

Structural equation modeling was employed to examine the mediating role of self-silencing between the perceived gender stereotype and quality of marriage in married women. Model fit is showed in table 3.

TABLE 3

Fit Indices for Perceived Gender Stereotype, Self-silencing, and Quality of Marriage.

Model	χ^2	f	χ^2/df	FI	FI	NFI	RMA	RMR
Initial model	18.69		.07	96	92	91	05	06

Note. N=180, All change in chi square values is computed relative to model, $\chi^2 > .05$., GFI= Goodness of fit index, CFI=comparative fit index, NNFI= non-normed fit index; RMSEA=root mean square error of approximation, SRMR=Standardized root mean square.

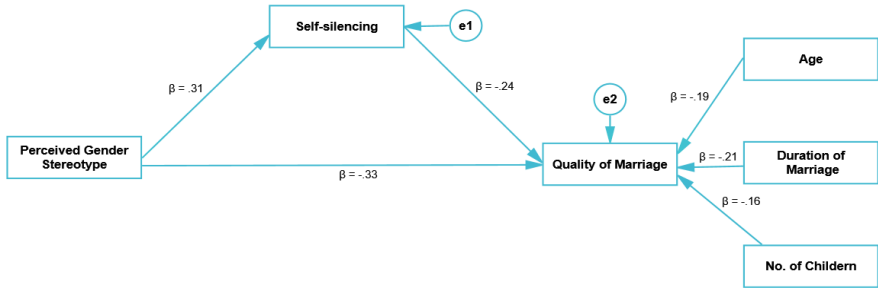
The initial model's absolute fit, as evidenced by the chi-square test $\chi^2 (9) = 18.69$, $p < .05$, indicated a excellent fit with the data. However, acknowledging the inherent limitations of the chi-square test regarding sample size and model

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complexity, we turned to additional fit indices (GFI, CFI, NNFI, RMSEA, SRMR) for a comprehensive evaluation. These indices (RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06, GFI = .96, CFI = .92, NNFI = .91, and $\chi^2/df = 2.07$ collectively suggested that the model demonstrated a commendable fit according to conventional standards of descriptive fit measures.

FIGURE 1

Empirical Results of Mediation Analysis of Self-silencing, Perceived Gender Stereotype, and Quality of Marriage.



The estimates to be analyzed for direct and indirect effects after done with the model fit, for perceived gender stereotype, self-silencing, and quality of marriage with 5000 bootstrapped sample (see table 5 and 6).

TABLE 4

Standardized Estimates of Direct Effects for Perceived Gender Stereotype, Self-silencing, and Quality of Marriage in Married Women (N = 180).

Variables	Self-silencing		Quality of Marriage	
	β	E	β	SE
Perceived Gender Stereotype	.31***	.16	-.33**	0.23
Self-silencing			-.24*	0.12
Covariates			-	-
Age			-.19*	0.11
Duration of Marriage			-.21**	0.17
No. of Children			-.16*	0.09
Total R ²		312		423

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The Direct effect showed that perceived gender stereotype was found to be a significant positive predictor of self-silencing, however it was a significant negative predictor of quality of marriage. Similarly, self-silencing was a significant negative

predictor of quality of marriage in married women. Additionally, covariates indicated that age, duration of marriage, and number of children significantly negatively predict quality of marriage.

Table 5

Standardized Estimates of Indirect Effects through Self-silencing, Perceived Gender Stereotype, and Quality of Marriage. (N = 180)

Variables	Quality of Marriage	
	β	SE
Perceived Gender Stereotype	-.11**	0.09

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

The results of indirect effect showed that self-silencing was found to be a significant negative mediator between perceived gender stereotype and quality of marriage. Which showed that increase in perceived gender stereotypes tend to increase self-silencing. While increase in self-silencing in-turn decreases quality of marriage in married women.

DISCUSSION

Based on the evidence from previous literature it was hypothesized that gender stereotypes negatively impact the quality of marriage [42]. However, the contradictory results of the present study are better explained by the presence of other factors that may contribute to the overall quality of marriage. It is found that spouses' genetic and environmentally influenced background characteristics for instance personality, beliefs and attitudes influence marital interactions and overall marital quality [25, 43]. It also includes personalities and characteristics men and women bring in marriage in the broader socio-cultural context, family-friend network being the crucial one [25,44]. Especially in the context of Pakistani marriages, in-laws' relationships are very crucial for the quality of marriage [45]. Family level environmental characteristics [25] that prefer and practice gender-specific traditional beliefs in the context of marriage also tend to influence the quality of marriage due to which gender specific stereotypes might not appear to be a problem in the broader context of quality of marriage.

In addition, Pakistan has culturally tight relationship standards that are reflective of traditional gender norms. Among these standards, family responsibility is given as much importance as relationship efforts, and predicts the satisfaction in marriage especially for women [22, 46]. A study indicates that these culturally bounded relationship standards determine the overall satisfaction in marriage [22]. Moreover, in a low socioeconomic country like Pakistan with decline in economic stability and increasing inflation, income, financial status become a crucial predictor

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of the quality of marriage and low income may serve as a strain in marriage as indicated in previous research [47,48].

Since in the context of gender, prescriptive stereotypes are more crucial [16], it was hypothesized that among gender stereotypes, prescriptive stereotypes will likely have more negative impact on marital quality than descriptive stereotypes. However, the present research findings are in contradiction, indicating that prescriptive stereotypes may increase the quality of marriage since prescriptive stereotypes prescribe what men and women should do and behave like, individuals prescribing to these traditional stereotypes, fulfill the spousal expectation hence contributing to the overall quality of marriage moreover [19]. Overall, masculinity for men and femininity for women are more strongly linked with the marriage quality rather than opposite [19].

Contradictory to our assumption, descriptive stereotypes are found to be negatively influencing the marital quality among married couples. Descriptive stereotypes are considered to be more automatic and uniformly shared within a culture contrary to prescriptive stereotypes that are a more deliberate process reflecting personal beliefs [49] due to which descriptive stereotypes are more stable and both are found to have differing functions [50]. People in the individual and broader social context may shift the trend of role stereotypes but change is not warranted in descriptive aspects [14]. Hence, descriptive gender stereotypes are more susceptible to cause role conflict and misalignment with societal categorization and expectations than prescriptive stereotypes, leading to the dissatisfaction in individuals and may result in the decline of marriage quality [51]. On the other hand, a spouse that aligns with the prescriptive stereotypes and is high on them would be more satisfied with the spousal relationship that could have been affected otherwise.

Furthermore, as it was hypothesized, present study shows that self-silencing plays a mediating role between gender stereotypes and quality of marriage. This is aligned with the previous studies that have established a mediating role of self-silencing in the relationship of various factors with marriage quality [28, 41,52]. Self-silencing is symptomatic of societal roles ascribed to the gender, with women more projected to self-silencing when they have frequent sexist experiences [41, 53]. The social and cultural stereotypical divisions of gender into the rigid patterns of masculinity and femininity builds a social environment which allows silencing of thoughts, feelings and needs conforming to the external expectation, which is also indicated by the differing self-silencing practices among men and women [54]. It restricts women to display a full range of emotions, consequently affecting interpersonal communication and mutual connectedness resulting in the withdrawal and suppression which leads to hostility, discomfort, frustration and critical and

intolerant perception of one's spouse [41] Previous studies infer that self-silencing is detrimental for relationship growth and quality [41] and is associated with marital dissatisfaction [28]. In short, strong gender specific beliefs related to emotionality shapes the emotional behaviors of men and women in marriage, that leads to concealment of emotions, thoughts and feelings and leads to dissatisfaction and overall decline in the quality of marriage.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the mediating role of self-silencing between the perceived gender stereotype and overall marriage quality in married women, using structural equation model. The results demonstrated an indirect relationship between gender stereotype and quality of marriage indicating the gender stereotype as a positive predictor of self-silencing and a negative predictor of quality of marriage whereas self-silencing negatively impacts the quality of marriage. These findings hold a significant implication in the context of couple counseling and intervention, exploring the socio-cultural influence of gender stereotypes on emotional expressivity and marriage quality, and the examination of pathological trajectories leading up to more psychological problems.



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