

# Qualitative Assessment of Resilience: Lessons from Rural Women in South India

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**Abstract:** Resilience among women has garnered significant research attention, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020 United Nations' theme of "Building rural women's resilience in the wake of COVID-19" aligned with that of the present study and sought to assess the applicability of the positive cognitive triad and psychological capital lenses in understanding the resilience characteristics of rural women in India. The study involved a diverse group of conveniently selected 31 rural women from the Idukki district, Kerala, South India, spanning an age range of 18 to 74 years. The deductive and inductive analyses of interview transcripts revealed convergence to the proposed positive cognitive triad -psychological capital framework and the emergence of new themes. Notably, gender emerged as a distinct theme that did not align with the operational definition of resilience, highlighting its significance in explaining resilience among Indian rural women. The study acknowledges limitations such as limited generalizability, social desirability bias, and a lack of quantitative data. In conclusion, this research contributes valuable insights to the literature on resilience among Indian rural women, emphasizing the importance of gender-centric and culturally sensitive resilience measures. The study recommends the implementation of such measures to enable a comprehensive assessment of resilience in this population, providing valuable resources for government and non-government agencies to design appropriate psychosocial interventions.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Rural Women, Qualitative Assessment, COVID-19, Positive Cognitive Triad, Psychological Capital

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## 1. Introduction

Resilience among women, a trending research topic since the COVID-19 outbreak, highlights the aggravated vulnerability of rural women, addressing escalated gender inequalities (Agarwal, 2021; Bonin et al., 2021; Chakraborty, 2021; Dash et al., 2021; Suresh et al., 2022). Resilience is the ability to cope with shocks, with diverse factors influencing adaptation (USAID, 2012) including perception and engagement with the world (Coley et al., 2021; Valsala and Devanathan, 2021). India, with 893 million rural residents, faces challenges in rural women's workforce participation, with a decline noted in rural women's Workforce Participation Rate (Bhattacharya and Goyal, 2017). COVID-19 has intensified vulnerabilities for women, deepening disparities in social, political, and economic spheres, highlighting the need for policies addressing gender mainstreaming and equality (Bonin et al., 2021; Chakraborty, 2021; Ahmed, 2016). A knowledge gap exists between constitutional provisions and the conditions of rural women in India, emphasizing the importance of gender mainstreaming strategies in policymaking to ensure equitable access and opportunities (Ahmed, 2016; Meier and Celis, 2011; Chaney, 2015). Gender, age, and personal identity significantly shape the impact of extreme conditions, with evidence highlighting gender-centric coping strategies that burden women (Kumar and Ravi, 2020; Smyth and Sweetman, 2015). Gender-specific resilience strategies are crucial to comprehend and appraise the unique challenges faced by Indian rural women (Boardman et al., 2008; Khan, 2022).

Amidst discussions on 'Building rural women's resilience in the wake of COVID-19' proposed by the United Nations, this study employs positive cognitive triad (Mak et al., 2011) and psychological capital (PsyCap) (Luthans et al., 2004) to characterize the resilience of Indian rural women through experiential profiles. Drawing from literature and field experiences with rural women, the authors assert that the positive cognitive triad and PsyCap as the theoretical framework, provide insightful explanations for the resilience of rural women in India. The positive cognitive triad, encompassing positive beliefs about oneself, others, and one's future, is identified as a protective factor against depressive symptoms, serving as a potential mediator between resilience and well-being (Pittard et al., 2021; Mehta et al., 2019). PsyCap, extending beyond human, social, and financial capital, is defined as an individual's positive psychological state characterized by high levels of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, each component defined formally by Luthans et al., (2010). PsyCap in rural women is culturally oriented and seen as more crucial than financial or social capital in a rural context, shaped by the cultural web. The collaboration of the positive cognitive triad and PsyCap provides insight into rural women's

resilience, influenced by patriarchal backgrounds and the collectivist nature of the Indian rural community (Chadda and Deb, 2013).

Factoring in the rural study population, literature review on resilience, and the proposed theoretical frameworks, the authors advocate the following operational definition of resilience: 'Resilience is the outcome of effectively negotiating, adapting to, and managing difficult, challenging life experiences, and significant sources of stress'. Assets and resources within individuals, their lives and the environment stimulate the capacity for adaptation to the calls of adversity. Across the life course, the experiences of resilience will vary (adapted from Windle, 2011 and APA Dictionary of Psychology (APA, 2022)).

## 2. Method

Excluding COVID-19-affected households, 31 rural women (18 to 74 years age) were conveniently selected from Muttom Panchayath of Thodupuzha block in the Idukki district in the state of Kerala, India. After obtaining the ethical clearance (SSBS\_005) from the affiliated institution of the authors, interviews were conducted in local Malayalam language by the first author in January 2021 employing a socio-demographic questionnaire and the 10 semi-structured interview questions based on the domains of PsyCap viewed through the positive cognitive triad lens of self, others, and future. The English translation of the interview transcript data was mapped onto the existing positive cognitive triad and PsyCap framework through deductive qualitative analysis. Additionally, inductive analysis was conducted to identify new themes emerging from the data. To minimize the risk of interpreter bias and obtain an equitable holistic picture of the participants' responses, all the authors analyzed the interview transcripts, and the non-convergent themes were discussed and negotiated to arrive at a consensus, prior to finalization of the results.

## 3. Results and Discussions

Socio-demographic data reveals the participants' personal details, education, family, marital status, occupation, economic background, health, incidents of COVID-19, and post-COVID-19 conditions. The average age of participants was 46.13 years. The younger generation's focus was more on education, with 10 expressing interest in higher studies. Notably, 7 women had chosen their marriages in a conservative society. Unemployment reasons included a lack of education and traditional gender roles. Financial decision-making power was shared among 24 participants, but none had property rights, possibly due to the dowry system. Seven participants held property rights, though 24 shared financial decision-making power with their husbands. Medical history revealed instances of diabetes, C-sections, and hypertension. Discrimination experiences included limited education access, casteism, economic disparity, divorce stigma, and gender-based bias. Rural women's experiences during COVID-19 varied, influenced by socioeconomic status, education, and resources. The pandemic posed challenges for 28 participants, but government and NGO initiatives provided support, including community kitchens, subsidized food kits, vaccines, health centres, and local panchayath assistance.

**Table 1: COVID-19 Themes evolved from qualitative analysis**

| Theme  | Excerpts from the interview  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Health and well-being</b></p> <p>The participants were worried about their own health and its consequences on the family's mental health.</p>  | <p>I do have physical ailments now, post-COVID. I have a problem remembering things and my children get angry because of this. I do have intense back pain also. Earlier, I used to have this, but now there is more pain in my body</p>                     |
| <p><b>Social Isolation</b></p> <p>With restrictions on travel and gatherings, the women participants had to isolate themselves from their friends and family. This has led to feelings of loneliness and isolation, affecting their mental well-being.</p> | <p>It has become a situation where we must be in our own house in such a way that we cannot even go out for our own needs. No contact with anybody. Tension also increases as we are locked entirely in a closed compound.</p>                               |
| <p><b>Economic Impact</b></p> <p>The participants discussed the economic impact of the pandemic on their lives, livelihoods, and families, including job loss and financial struggles.</p>   | <p>During COVID time, a lot of people were taught to live. We can live anyway. In other words, now no one has a job, no income, and some have worked daily. They say they can do whatever they can to make a living. So, it has taught us so many things</p> |
| <p><b>Family Support</b></p>   |  |

| Theme  | Excerpts from the interview  |
|--|--|
| Interviews revealed how women have relied on their families for support to cope with the pandemic.   | I was also infected with COVID. Not that serious but my husband had it worse. But we hold on well. I didn't feel so. Because our siblings made us food and gave us everything we needed at those times. So, it was alright.  |
| <b>Coping Strategy</b><br>The participants shared their coping strategies and how they are managing to deal with the pandemic's challenges in a rural setting. | A lot of things are there. Because we were living lavishly. But now we know how to lead a normal life. ..., even regarding finances, we can live by lowering our expenses. Even though we couldn't lead a life as such in earlier times, we can do so now. All this was because of the advent of COVID. After the advent of COVID, I got a lot of productive time for myself. I got to read a lot, write, and learn as well. I engaged in a lot of activities related to cooking, and agriculture. So, it was a worthwhile time. |

Table 2: Qualitative Deductive Analysis

### 3.1 Self-perceived Hope, Optimism and Self-efficacy of the Respondents

| Categories  | Number of Respondents | Percentage | Categories      | Number of Respondents | Percentage | Categories      | Number of Respondents | (%)   |
|-------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Self-Hope   | 23                    | 74.19      | Self-Optimism   | 26                    | 83.87      | Self-Efficacy   | 21                    | 67.74 |
| World-Hope  | 20                    | 64.51      | World-Optimism  | 26                    | 83.87      | World-Efficacy  | 29                    | 93.55 |
| Future-Hope | 25                    | 80.64      | Future-Optimism | 30                    | 96.77      | Future-Efficacy | 28                    | 90.32 |

The study involved deductive analysis of the responses to 10 semi-structured interview questions, using the framework of the positive cognitive triad and PsyCap. Nevertheless, a few themes emerged inductively as well. In the present study, the extent to which the women participants' responses to the semi-structured interview questions were aligned with the theoretical lenses was determined. The 'alignment' mentioned here is verily the convergence to the theoretical lenses of positive cognitive triad and PsyCap. Table 2 shows the respondents' self-perceptions of hope, optimism and self-efficacy, viewed through the positive cognitive triad lens of self, world and the future. These results could be considered as a confirmation of the theoretical frameworks of positive cognitive triad and PsyCap. The higher percentages of future-PsyCap perception of components of hope, optimism and self-efficacy in the participants could be attributed to their positive orientation towards the future. Women were found to be optimistic about their future as they prioritized their children's future and worked hard, with strong faith in God. Providence and strong family support could have a positive outlook towards life. General support from the husband together with hard work, was propitious in building self-efficacy in the women.

Table 3: Qualitative Inductive Analysis: Emerging Subdomains

### 3.2 Subdomains of PsyCap Components That Align With the Operational Definition of Resilience.

| Psychological Capital Subdomains        | Number of Respondents        | Excerpts from the Interview  |
|---|------------------------------|--|
| Providence                              | 25                           | I'll tell you about it with my experience. I'm the person who held onto the prayer. I have good faith in prayer. In that belief I have experience of achieving things by moving forward, relying on my God, whom I believe in, without relying more on human beings. That's the way I'm still going              |
| <b>Psychological Capital Subdomains</b> | <b>Number of Respondents</b> | <b>Excerpts from the Interview</b>   |
| Courage                                 | 18                           | We develop this courage when facing many challenges  |
| Hard work                               | 18                           | Well, in many houses where the parents quarrel, they may suicide, and they may abandon everyone and leave the houses. But I have witnessed that many children somehow hold on through these situations and they work hard to reach many heights. So, it was something their life taught them, not their parents. |
| Family Support                          | 17                           | That feeling arose from the strong support my family extends to me. That's the only thing. They'll be with me through thick and thin   |

| Psychological Capital Subdomains | Number of Respondents | Excerpts from the Interview  |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Self-efficacy                    | 11                    | If we were in the middle of the sea, wouldn't we swim? When it comes to our lives, we will do whatever it takes. It takes so much courage to do that. I have the ability. I do have it! I have the ability to achieve what I want, and I am working hard for that (laughed)  |
| Children                         | 12                    | There is hope. There is hope about our children and their future   |
| Spouse support                   | 12                    | I love tailoring. I want it to move ahead. My husband supported me. I studied tailoring for 1 year. He bought me the tailoring machine   |
| Adversities including COVID -19  | 10                    | We don't want our lives to be sad. That's why we are optimistic. That's how we move forward. But we can't do anything if there are any adverse moments. We are moving forward because we know that no one is there to hold you back. The fact that I had live alone influenced all these thoughts, whether it is pushing us to move forward or holding us back by thinking about suicides. But we chose to move forward. |
| Perseverance                     | 9                     | If we keep trying, we will achieve what we set out to do   |
| Mental Strength                  | 9                     | We must have some mental strength in life...the strength and capability to withstand every circumstance, mentally as well as physically too  |
| Life experiences                 | 9                     | We learn it from our experiences. I will try to help them based on my knowledge and my own experiences... I have come this far. Have gone through a lot of things.   |
| Confidence                       | 8                     | We achieve whatever we want through our confidence. But we should not think depressingly, but only look into the bright side   |
| Psychological Capital Subdomains | Number of Respondents | Excerpts from the Interview  |
| Future focus                     | 8                     | To raise our children in a good way, make them secure and see them having a good married life. Making them well educated is the most important after all   |
| Finance                          | 8                     | If I am talking about finances, I don't have anything to do and neither does anyone give me anything. I struggle financially to make a living. I built all these up. I even got (laughed) an award for it from the village   |
| Parental Support                 | 8                     | When I look back, I feel like I should've gotten a job somehow. But my ancestors were not capable enough. We need money to get an education for our kids. But only when our parents are educated enough will they send their kids to have better education. But mine didn't have that desire...  |
| Community Support                | 8                     | I have faced a lot of setbacks due to society. Well, there are people from our own community, our own political parties who do not like watching someone else growing well. As there are a lot of foul plays in politics, I could reach many higher places.  |
| Employment                       | 7                     | We can say that being self-sufficient is us looking after ourselves. If we try to live with something that someone else gave us, then we will be disappointed. If we do not get it, we will be disappointed. We will be disappointed if things do not go our way. We do not need to ask anyone if we make 10 bucks   |
| Financial resources              | 7                     | if there comes any financial problem, then there is no use of self-confidence in those situations. Right? Money is the only solution   |
| Self-regulation                  | 6                     | We should think it through with our minds. That we should do this, do that, look up to and compare ourselves with others   |
| Education                        | 6                     | Yes, as I live alone. Also, I do not have any educational background, isn't it a setback for us. Such things are there. (pause). I am living alone, isn't it? So, they kind of exclude me when I am out in the community. That is kind of difficult for me.  |
| Being strong                     | 6                     | It takes courage to hold on. It might be because of their strong mind. We have to achieve it. We get it from our life situations   |

| Psychological Capital Subdomains | Number of Respondents | Excerpts from the Interview  |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Success                          | 5                     | But I have witnessed that many children somehow hold on through these situations and they work hard to reach many heights. So, it was something their life taught them, not their parents. They themselves, prepare their hearts and move forward with great determination, if you ask me about my opinion. It was their determination to not take any wrong turns, suicide but move forward and achieve success |
| Psychological Capital Subdomains | Number of Respondents | Excerpts from the Interview  |
| Meaningful support               | 5                     | We are able to hold on because we have someone- if we believe that there are people who support us, then we will be able to hold on. If we feel like there is no one for us. The moment we feel helpless. We many even think about suicides(somber). We come to that state. If we have only one person on our side, then we will move forward with the belief that there is that person at least                 |
| Age                              | 5                     | Speaking of the life we want to lead...my age is around 60 now...it is a very short time that we get to live... I have no great expectations in life anymore. How long... I had. But the truth is that it couldn't be achieved   |
| Health                           | 5                     | We need health for sure likewise we need finances. Even though we don't have a lot of money, we need a little to sustain life.   |
| Role model                       | 5                     | That's because of my mother only. She has gone through a lot in her life. But she won't express anything in front of us. Her only aim was to raise us in a good way, and she has succeeded in that. Now also, I am following her way of leading the life.  |
| Secure environment               | 4                     | If it's difficult at home, talk to them as much as possible. Some of us cannot stand it at all. That may be why .... If someone says that it is so difficult, we will ask them if it is difficult at home. Suicide is not an option in any case! I will try to understand her. Without any support we will be feeling down and lonely, if so then we will have a feeling that we cannot live in any way          |

Table 3 indicates that providence, courage and hard work were highly rated by the participants. Most of the respondents frequently used the words God, faith and prayer while explaining how sources of hope and optimism helped them be resilient in detrimental life situations. We found that Indian rural women often rely on their faith in God as a means of emotional coping. Overall, we found that faith in God can be a powerful tool for the sustenance of emotional balance for Kerala rural women, providing them with a sense of meaning, purpose, and interrelationships, during challenging times. The rural Kerala women's insistence on courage and hard work is presumably rooted in a complex set of cultural, social, economic, and historical factors that embody the lived experiences of rural women in the region.

Gender, albeit an inductively derived theme, does not directly align with the operational definition of resilience, yet of admonishes relevance to the (women) participants. The theme 'woman' emerged from the interview transcripts of half (16) of the surveyed participants. Five of the women participants perceived their gender as a significant factor in resilience.

*"I'm a woman, strong enough to face any daunting situation; I'm proud of it."*

One possible reason could be that they often have to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, besides domestic work, childcare, and agricultural labor. These obligations require them to be strong, adaptable, and resourceful, which are meaningful traits associated with resilience.

Kerala has a diverse population, with the experiences of its rural women in Kerala vary, formulated by a variety of factors such as education, socioeconomic status, and communal norms. In general, Kerala has earned a higher place in the gender development index (Kodoth and Eapen, 2005), upheld by rural women in the state having unrestrained access to education, healthcare, and other basic resources, when compared to other states in India (Franke and Chasin, 1994).

Women in Kerala have been politically active, organizing themselves into various groups to advocate for their rights and interests. The Kudumbashree program, launched on 17 May 1998, in Kerala, is a women's empowerment and poverty eradication initiative that has been effective in mobilizing rural women, furnishing them with access to financial credit, training, and other resources. The program has been heralded with reducing poverty, impressive health outcomes, and promotion of gender equality in Kerala's rural areas. Overall, despite

apparent challenges and inequalities that persist in rural Kerala, many women perceive their gender as a strength revealing demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of adversity.

Rural Kerala's cultural obligations double down on family and community values, which embody the way women view their roles and responsibilities. Women are expected to prioritize their family commitments, their children, and attention to their well-being. In this context, women are expected to seamlessly switch their roles as wives and mothers, frequently appraised on their capability to fulfil these roles effectively. This bearing down of cultural imperatives on family and community values can reinforce gender norms and expectations, where women are expected to adhere to traditional gender roles and prioritize their domestic duties. As a result, rural Kerala women often consider their womanhood and children of special value, perceived as integral parts of their identity and roles within the community.

Children are often viewed as priceless as they are the future of the family and community; providing for their well-being is a responsibility that falls upon the parents, especially the mother. This cultural perspective also reinforces the concept that having babies and raising children is a central part of a woman's role and identity. In essence, the culture prevalent in rural Kerala reinforces the idea that women's resilience is intimately tied to their ability to fulfil their traditional gender roles, which are centered around caring for their families and communities. Some women (n= 4) participants consider their gender as a vulnerability.

*"The first thing I would say is 'support'. Women always need support. When support may not be available, some people may not be able to move forward."*

They may view their sex or gender as a vulnerability or weakness restrained by the societal norms and expectations that limit their opportunities and rights. For example, women may be expected to prioritize their domestic duties over their education or career, and face restrictions on their mobility and social interactions. This can lead to restrictive access to resources and decision-making power, which encumber women to cope with various challenges, such as economic insecurity, health issues, and natural disasters. It is important to note that Kerala rural women are a diverse group with varying experiences and perspectives, and it would not be accurate to generalize about their attributes. However, there are some common societal norms and cultural beliefs that affect how rural women in India view their gender.

Among the participants, 26 of them affirmed that resilience is a state/process rather than a trait.

*"We acquire it from life experiences. We don't need to come across such situations though. But we do acquire some qualities when faced with different challenges."*

Rural women in Kerala may consider psychological resilience as acquired through life experiences, as they have likely faced many challenges and stressors throughout their lives, such as poverty, illness, or social discrimination. These experiences can be testy that call for the development of coping mechanisms, and strategies to overcome them. By successfully navigating through these challenges and developing effective coping mechanisms, women can build their resilience capabilities and feel better equipped to handle future stressors. Thus, Kerala rural women may see resilience as something that is learned and acquired through live experiences rather than being an innate trait or characteristic. Rural women may also consider psychological resilience as a dynamic process as they recognize that life is continually changing and that they need to adapt to new unforeseen encounters. They may view resilience as an ongoing process of learning, growth, and development, rather than a fixed trait or characteristic.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The qualitative deductive analysis suggests positive cognitive triad and psychological capital (PsyCap) as viable theoretical frameworks for comprehension of resilience in rural women. The inductive analysis revealed subdomains of hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience which can be considered crucial in explaining resilience in rural women. The inductively derived subdomain that did not align with the operational definition of resilience is gender, which should be reconsidered in explaining resilience in Indian rural women. The investigative report builds on the literature review of resilience among Indian rural women. This study is deemed to be helpful to government agencies and NGOs, by pinpointing the enablers and barriers of resilience and the diverse manifestations of resilience can in this rural population. In turn, this can assist in formulating and designing intervention policies. The present study also highlighted the propriety of psychological strength-based perspectives of Indian rural women's resilience. The findings of this study are purported to be of relevance to developing countries with rural populations.

#### 4.1 Limitations

The present study was constrained by the rules imposed by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kerala, one of the worst-affected states in India. Since the present study focused only on a small number of participants at a single rural outpost, the findings may not be generalizable to other settings or populations, within the state of Kerala or others. Participants may provide responses that they believe are socially desirable or that align with the expectations of the researcher. This can lead to biases in the data and may not provide an accurate reflection of their experiences or perspectives. The present study does not provide quantitative data, which can make it difficult to draw statistical conclusions or make comparisons across different groups or contexts.

#### 4.2 Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Studies

Gender-specific, culturally sensitive resilience measures for Indian rural women are required to have a comprehensive assessment of the resilience of this population. A comprehensive assessment of rural women's resilience helps the government and non-government agencies in designing appropriate psychosocial interventions. Conducting longitudinal studies tracking rural women in Kerala over time aids in understanding resilience fluctuations and pinpointing contributing or detracting factors. Employing mixed methods approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative data, enhances researchers' comprehension of resilience and its influencing factors. Recognizing resilience's variation based on social identities (caste, class, religion), researchers should explore intersectionality to understand how different identities impact resilience. Intervention studies, focusing on building social support networks or providing skills training, offer insights into effective strategies to enhance resilience among rural women in Kerala. Collaboration with local organizations ensures culturally appropriate research approaches and relevant research questions.

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