

# Resilience Amidst Adversity: Exploring Gender Disparities and Psychosocial Factors in Kerala

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**Abstract:** Despite notable progress in human development and gender equality indicators, mental health issues and gender disparities persist due to various socio-ecological factors in the southern state of Kerala, India. This study aims to identify the psychosocial factors of resilience that enabled rural and urban women to cope with during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic, while also comparing the experiences of resilience among women in rural and urban areas of Malappuram district. A demographic profiler and semi-structured interview questions were employed to assess resilience in a cohort of 44 women in rural and urban settings and within the age range of 21-60 years. Interview questions were specifically based on the definition of resilience, resilience factors specific to women, resilience-boosting elements, and obstacles during COVID-19. Qualitative analysis of the participants' responses revealed five key psychosocial factors (psychological factors, support, life experience, external factors, and gender) influencing women's resilience. Similar factors (support, psychological, and external factors) are critical in strengthening women's resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research also sheds light on subtle gender inequalities, underscoring the need for comprehensive initiatives to promote gender equity and improve men's attitudes towards women. The limitation of the study lies in the regional specificity, which affects its generalizability. The study highlights the importance of designing psychosocial interventions to promote resilience in women across diverse geographical contexts, presenting opportunities for empowering women through comprehensive strategies. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, enabling the development of effective measures to uplift women and create a more equitable and resilient society. Further research is recommended to bridge knowledge gaps and formulate comprehensive strategies to enhance women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Gender Disparity, COVID-19, Kerala women, Psychosocial factors, Gender Equality

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## 1. Introduction

Crises like pandemics and disasters serve as critical tests for individual and societal resilience, distinguishing those who adapt and persevere from those who succumb to the initial signs of disruption. Research affirms psychological resilience as the ability to adapt positively to life conditions (Dias *et al.*, 2015; Hilliard *et al.*, 2015; Brodsky and Cattaneo, 2013), as a dynamic process evolving over time (Dias *et al.*, 2015; Caldeira and Timmins, 2016). Adaptive functioning (Barber, 2013; Cuhadar *et al.*, 2016) specifically empowers individuals to face difficulties by recovering or bouncing back (Netuveli *et al.*, 2008; Violanti *et al.*, 2008) and as an opportunity for growth (Sisto *et al.*, 2019). Certain socio-demographic (Chesterman, de Batista and Causse, 2021; Alizadeh and Sharifi, 2021) and psychosocial factors were found crucial in promoting resilience and post-traumatic growth against the stresses caused by COVID-19 (Trzebiński, Cabański and Czarnecka, 2020; Schwarzer and Warner, 2013; American Society for Cell Biology, 2021; McAllister *et al.*, 2015; Tan *et al.*, 2019). All the 25 studies included in a systematic review unanimously showed higher levels of resilience correlated to fewer mental health problems, despite the heterogeneity of the populations studied and instruments. Supplements of resilience include multisystem factors, such as social, cultural, family, and individual aspects, which are in line with the multisystem approach described by recently proffered resilience theories (Mesman, Vreeker and Hillegers, 2021).

Despite Kerala's high Human Development Index (HDI) (0.752, Global Data Lab, 2021) and positive gender equality indicators, the state faces a paradox with unsettling mental health and elevated crime rates against women. Kerala's suicide rate (23.5 per 100,000 persons) doubled the national rate (National Crime Record Bureau, 2018), and recent data indicates a surge in crimes against women since 2016 (Kerala Police, 2023). Motivated by these incongruities, this study retrospectively explores psychosocial resilience factors among women in Kerala's northern, central, and southern regions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the HDI score (0.662) of Malappuram, a district in northern Kerala, being lower than Kerala's (0.752), it surpasses India's national score (0.609), prompting calls for improvements in education, health, and the economy (Rahman and Bassam, 2017). A study on married women in northern Kerala post-lockdown revealed links between domestic

violence, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and perceived stress (Indu et al., 2021). A qualitative study (Jabbar et al., 2022) with 10 conveniently sampled participants unveiled significant psychological impacts during COVID-19, influenced by individual and social factors, highlighting knowledge gaps as no other studies explore resilience among women in this specific part of Kerala. Given Malappuram's unique socio-demographic factors and the identified research gap, there is a need for a systematic examination of women's lifestyles and coping strategies. This motivated a retrospective study on women's resilience during COVID-19 and lockdown in Malappuram.

## 2. Method

Ethical clearance (IEC-AIMS-2023-ASSBS-63) was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection. The sample included 44 women (age 21 to 60), equally distributed between rural and urban areas. The study aimed to identify the psychosocial resilience factors of women during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malappuram district and a comparison of the experiences of resilience among women from urban and rural areas. A demographic profiler consisting of 13 questions and 2 semi-structured questions with probing questions were used for interviewing the rural and urban women participants. The semi-structured questions were developed based on the review of resilience-related literature in psychology, social work, and related domains. For the current study, the questions were specifically based on the definition of resilience, resilience factors specific to women, resilience-boosting elements, and obstacles during COVID-19. Data were collected through in-person or phone interviews in the local language of Malayalam from March 24 to April 3, 2023. Analysis revealed recurring sub-themes, with data saturation indicating thematic saturation.

## 3. Result and Discussions

### 3.1 Socio-Demographic Profile

**Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of rural and urban women participants**

Characteristic	Level/Status	Rural Percentage(%)	Urban Percentage(%)
Education	Primary	4.54	18.18
	SSLC	13.63	22.73
	Higher Secondary	22.74	18.18
	Diploma	13.63	0
	Graduate	22.74	31.83
	Post-graduate	13.63	4.54
	Ayurveda Nursing General Nursing	9.09 -	- 4.54
Age	20-29	36.36	27.28
	30-39	40.9	36.36
	40-49	18.20	13.63
	50-59	4.54	22.73
Marriage	Unmarried	13.63	22.73
	Married	81.83	72.72
	Widow	4.54	4.54
Marriage Preference	Arranged	81.82	63.64
	Love	4.54	13.63
Marital Age	Below 18	-	9.09
	18 - 21	63.64	40.9
	22- 25	18.20	22.73
	Above 25	-	4.54
Family Size	1-2	4.54	0
	3-5	50	90.91
	6-9	45.46	9.09
Occupation	Employed	31.83	45.46
	Unemployed	54.54	50

Characteristic	Level/Status	Rural Percentage(%)	Urban Percentage(%)
	Unemployed after Marriage	13.63	4.54
Power to make financial decisions	Yes	22.74	31.82
	Participatory	45.46	40.9
	No	31.83	27.28
Property Rights	Yes	18.18	40.9
	No	81.82	59.1
Income Sources	Agriculture	22.74	4.54
	Pension	18.18	31.82
	Daily wage	50	45.46
	Government	36.36	18.18
	Private	9.09	9.09
	Business	18.18	31.82
	Nursing	4.54	-
	MGNREGA	4.54	-
	Driver		13.63
	Air force		4.54
	Bank		4.54
Medical History	Thyroid	0	0
	Diabetes	4.54	13.63
	Hypertension	0	18.18
	Complications in Pregnancy	0	0
	Cholesterol	0	4.54
	Others	31.83	31.82
Environmental hazard	Yes	40.9	36.36
	No	59.1	63.64
Other Personal Hardships in Life	Yes	63.64	45.46
	No	36.36	54.54
Financial Liabilities	Yes	54.54	59.1
	No	45.46	40.9
Discrimination	Yes	13.63	18.18
	No	86.37	81.82
COVID-19 infection	Yes	22.72	40.9
	No	59.1	54.54
	Had fever but not COVID	18.18	4.54
COVID-19 Impact on overall health	Yes	0	4.54
	No	100	0

Urban and rural women in Malappuram share similar sociodemographic characteristics, with younger girls having educational opportunities. Despite this, pursuing a career post-marriage is discouraged by both family and community, influenced by cultural norms shaping women's lives. Women, urban and rural, married between 18 and 21 through arranged marriages, with comparable financial decision-making. Urban women held more property rights. Challenges, like financial liabilities, were common, and the pandemic affected both areas, causing more health issues for urban women. No significant urban-rural divide in socio-demographic factors was observed. Malappuram district presents intriguing sociodemographic factors, including high education levels, limited job opportunities, and low marriage ages. Census data (Kuruville and Nisha, 2015) reveals a prevalence of child marriages, reflecting patriarchal beliefs. However, the National Family Health Survey shows a reduction from 23.3% (2015-16) to 15.3% (2019-20). Despite higher education levels, a majority of women in Malappuram remain unemployed, signalling potential social norms and gender-related issues. Despite achieving high education, women face challenges in economic and socio-cultural conditions (Jafar, 2015). Early marriages, influenced by socio-cultural factors (Scaria, 2014), limit women's choices and hinder their progress. Kerala's resistance to raising the marriageable age to 21 in 2023 is portrayed as progressive but may mask support for socio-cultural influences on vulnerable women (Hindustan Times, 2023). This study prompts reflection on gender inequality and societal norms in Malappuram, impacting employment and life choices for educated women.

### 3.2 Objective 1: The Psychosocial Factors of Resilience in Both Rural and Urban Women

**Table 2: Factors of resilience in both rural and urban women**

Factors- Rural			Factors- Urban		
Theme	Subtheme	Number of Responses	Theme	Subtheme	Number of Responses
Support	Husband (4) Friend (2) Family (2) Mother (1) General support system (2) Community (2) Psychologist (1)	14	Support	Husband (2) Mother (1) Advice (1) Environment (1) Joint family system (1)	6
Life Experiences	Experiences (2) Learning from experience (1) Intensity of experience (1) Joint family Experience (1) Experience of solving issues (1) Life situations (4) No other option (2)	12	Life Experiences	Experience (3) Life situations (5)	8
Psychological Factors	Bold (4) Natural disposition (3) Courage (2) Willpower (2) Hope (1) Ability to take decisions (1) Efforts (1) Communicate (1) Automatic (1) Immediate action (1) Move forward without any hesitation (1) Self-Confidence (1) Following mind (1) Heard (1)	21	Psychological factors	Courage (6) Responsiveness (3) Individual Capacity / Capability (3) Decision making (2) Willpower (2) Self-Realisation (2) Communication (2) Self Assessment (1) Thoughtfulness (1) Crisis management (1) Immunity (1) Fearlessness (1) Strength (1) Problem solving ability (1) Ability to handle Family issues (1) Self-Belief (1) Independent (1)	30
External Factors	Socialisation (1) Self-Defence class (1) Education for girls (1) Social media (1)	4	External factors	Self-Protection (1) Responsibilities (1) Awareness (3) Financial Independence (2)	7
Gender		3	Gender		2

Five major psychosocial themes emerged: psychological factors, support, life experience, external factors, and gender. Rural participants identified boldness, courage, and willpower, while urban participants highlighted courage, responsiveness, individual capacity, decision-making, self-realization, and communication. A rural participant (Participant ID-MU/18) says,

*‘Having the courage to confront a situation single-handedly, rather than seeking assistance and managing it independently, especially when it’s a minor issue.’*

An urban Participant ID- MU/3 says,

*'Before taking any decision, I closely analyse the current situation. I usually respond to any situation after taking ample time for self-reflection. We should not jump to conclusions influenced by anger and sadness. Such decisions will not provide any solutions.'*

### 3.2.1 Support

Support from various sources played a significant role in building resilience among rural women, with husbands being the most common source of support, followed by friends, family, community, and other support systems. The responses of urban women cover sub-themes such as husband's support, mother's support, joint family system, environment, and advice.

One of the rural participants shared (Participant ID-MR/32),

*'We draw inspiration from those who surround us. Whether it's our spouse or other supportive family members, their presence during times of trouble empowers us to conquer any obstacle. With their unwavering support, we never feel alone, and together, we can overcome anything.'*

The following quote from urban Participant ID- MU/11 is an example,

*"I share my problems with my husband, and his support provides me with courage and motivation to overcome challenges".*

### 3.2.2 Life Experience

Life experience emerged as the third influential theme shaped by life situations, the intensity of experiences, and lessons learned, which contributed to the resilience of rural women in Malappuram.

A rural Participant ID- MR/42 said,

*'When we consider the circumstances of life, particularly within the context of our home and as part of a joint family, we gain a plethora of experiences. These experiences equip us to navigate society with utmost adaptability, even as children, allowing us to respond fittingly to every individual we encounter.'*

An urban Participant ID MU/60 said,

*"Married at eighteen, I initially worked as a housewife but later found courage and financial independence through various jobs, including a temporary conductor at KSRTC, allowing us to stand on our own feet."*

### 3.2.3 External Factors

Education, self-defence training, and social media positively influenced resilience in rural women, while urban women found awareness, financial independence, responsibilities, and self-protection as favourable factors.

Participant ID- MR/42 said,

*'Children, when going out, learn to respond appropriately, with many schools now offering classes like karate to empower girls in self-defense'.*

Participant ID- MU/4 said,

*'Sitting at home, if something happens to my husband, it becomes challenging. During a war, my husband was affected, and we didn't inform my mother. All the income stopped, but since I had a job, I could manage. Without income, a woman may suffer in such situations'.*

### 3.2.4 Gender

Participants from rural and urban areas identified gender as one of the factors that influenced their ability to be resilient during tough situations. Women were observed to exhibit a mixed feeling of confidence and uncertainty, regarding their ability to handle challenging circumstances as women.

Participant ID- MR/49 said,

*"Women often find solutions independently, but family support, especially with husband's encouragement, is crucial. Women exhibit various attitudes and capabilities, with some boldly handling situations on their own".*

In addition, two participants from urban areas highlighted gender as a significant factor impacting resilience.

Participant ID- MU/33 said,

*"If you ask like that (laughs), I don't know how to say it that way. I still have the same feeling. If I say that, it itself is a victory, as that's what I have realised. Now, we women are not weak at all (laughs)."*

Individual traits crucial for resilience evolved as integral to the participant's personality, combining with life experience, external factors, and gender to create a robust environment for multidimensional resilience development.

### 3.3 Objective 2: Factors That Enabled Women to Manage During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

**Table 3: Factors that helped women manage during COVID-19**

Factors- Rural			Factors- Urban		
Theme	Subtheme	No of Responses	Theme	Subtheme	No of Responses
Support	Community support (3) Family support (2) Children (2) Husband support (1) Maintained student-teacher relationship & friendships through phone (2) Providing support to community (1) Friends (1)	12	Support	Community support (1) Political support (1) Engaged with neighbours & friends (1) Husband's support (2)	5
Psychological Factors	Acceptance (1) Depression (1) Self-Regulation (1) Exploring life (1) Engaged in work (2) Engaged in studies (6)	12	Psychological Factors	Difficult situation (1) Engaged in studies (1) Urge to live (1) Precautions (1) Stressed out / Mental distress (4) Engaged in work (3)	11
External Factors	Social distance (5) Govt. job in health (1) Social isolation (1) Book (1) Dairy farm (1) Family time (2)	11	External Factors	Social distance (7) Financial constraints (5) Unemployment (3) Social isolation (2) Pregnancy complications Engaged in leisure Activities / Family time/ Social media (3) Financial security (1) Technology dependent (1)	22

The three main themes that emerged from the analysis were support, psychological factors, and environmental factors.

#### 3.3.1 Support

The most frequently mentioned sub-themes included community support, family support, keep-in-touch relationships, and friendships through phone.

Participant ID- MR/32 said,

*'It came to all of us. It was during such a terrible situation that the Covid hit us, our friends, even in a situation where we are isolated inside the house, a friend knew about this medicine and brought us the medicine and all this through them. And these ASHA workers will call and ask about everything'.*

Urban women perceived husband's support, community support, political support and engagement with neighbours and friends as crucial.

Participant MU/54 said,

*'Even though we don't go out, we all live together here in the neighbourhood, so it hasn't been difficult.'*

### 3.3.2 Psychological Factors

The participants' ability to distract themselves through engagement in studies and engagement in work helped them manage the COVID times. The responsibilities shouldered by the participants helped them remain active and engaged throughout the pandemic period.

Participant ID- MR/60 shared,

*'If we say this COVID era, the first reason is that we have all this work, we don't have time to think about everything, our work and work at home are all combined and we don't have time to think about some things. But when you have a small child, house, work, and everything...'*

Sub-themes associated with psychological factors include mental distress, self-distractions including engaging oneself in studies and work, urge to live, precautions, and engaging in work during unwelcome situations. These sub-themes indicate that maintaining a positive outlook towards life and attending to pre-assigned responsibilities to divert attention from the ongoing chaos were strategies employed by the participants to manage the pandemic situation.

Participant ID- MU/38 shared,

*'Because it was my work, we used to work every day during the COVID period...we were doing tele-counselling. It didn't even take that much time, we had to meet at least 80-90 people in one day. So, we have another one .... engaged throughout the COVID period.'*

### 3.3.3 Environmental Factors

Environmental factors encompassed sub-themes such as COVID-19 precautions, employment in the health sector, and family time. These factors signify individuals' responsible efforts to bring about collective change and cope more effectively during COVID-19. Participant ID- MR/49 said,

*'During the period of COVID, we have not gone out for two or three months and husband will go only if necessary. Yes, follow the Covid standards and come back, because if one person gets infected, then the family will also be sure. Now my home is Mancheri... I went there after three months and followed the correct rules, so there were no covid during these three to four years.'*

The most recurrent sub-themes under environmental factors for urban participants in managing the COVID-19 pandemic were social distancing, financial constraints, unemployment, family time/leisure activities, social isolation, and technology dependence. Sub-themes such as social distancing, family time, social isolation, and technology dependence (e.g.: use of technology or mobile phones to remain active during lockdown period) were identified as effective strategies utilised by the participants to manage the effects of the COVID-19 situation.

Participant ID- MU/18 shared,

*"During the COVID period, I did not face much difficulty because I had a cow, I mean I did not have to go out like that, and even if it was giving milk, the milkman would come home and take it and leave like that."*

Rural and urban women employed distinct strategies during COVID-19. Rural women relied equally on support, psychological, and external factors, while urban women primarily used external and psychological factors along with support. Notably, factors contributing to women's resilience and coping during the pandemic were similar. Women consistently relied on comparable psychosocial factors, mirroring their approach to everyday challenges.

## 3.4 Objective 3: Comparison of the Experiences of Resilience Among Women From Urban and Rural Areas of Malappuram District

The resilience factors mostly contributing to rural participants were psychological and support, with life experiences following. Conversely, urban women primarily relied on psychological factors for resilience, attributing this to minimal support and life experiences. Rural women, benefiting from close-knit communities, receive more support, and life experiences contribute significantly to their resilience. Urban women, confined

in their lives, lack community connectedness and face fewer tough situations, relying heavily on psychological strength for resilience.

In both rural and urban contexts during COVID-19, environmental factors were important, reflecting the 'new normal.' While psychological factors are influential in promoting resilience for both groups, distinct differences exist in the roles of support and life experiences. Adverse situations revealed rural women's reliance on close-knit social circles, highlighting gender inequalities in mental health, performance, and socio-cultural aspects in Kerala.

Participant ID- MU/46 shared,

*'When I was young, those days, women got married after 10<sup>th</sup> standard. It is especially so in our Muslim community. It is like child marriage, right? What to say, we were underage and not mature enough, and obligated to follow our parents' wishes'*

Participant ID- MU/38 shared,

*'Once I was travelling on a train, one of the fellow passengers misbehaved with me, and I slapped him. At that moment, all the passengers turned against me, saying he was an elderly man, and I should not have slapped him. I tried to explain that his touch was inappropriate, but irrespective of my clarification, people chose to side with the man. That moment I understood that as a woman travelling alone, chances are high that I will be isolated if I react in such situations.'*

This quote throws light on the systemic gender bias and the prejudiced treatment of women who choose to respond to instances of misconduct. It shows the need for broader societal transformation to confront stereotypes, and gender inequality, and to enable an environment where women can assert their rights without fear of isolation or ridicule. The poignant experiences of women provide evidence that gender inequalities play a significant role in shaping their resilience.

### 3.5 Crucial Observations From the Study

The study was significantly impacted by the prevailing patriarchal structure in society, leading to instances where participants, initially agreeing to take part, chose to withdraw their involvement due to disapproval from their spouses. One participant expressed this influence by stating, "Now I require my spouse's permission before answering some questions and may not be able to continue further by disobeying his words." As a consequence of this withdrawal of consent, the researcher was unable to maintain any interview records, forcing the premature termination of some interviews. This scenario can be interpreted as an illustration of gender discrimination and power imbalances that are widespread in the study area, where women face challenges in making decisions independently, with the approval of male members deemed crucial, especially for activities considered unconventional.

In addition, some participants exhibited hesitancy in being fully open during the interviews, often attributing it to nervousness. It is noteworthy that participants demonstrated heightened self-awareness, providing responses that they perceived as socially desirable during the interview sessions. This introduction of social desirability bias into the collected data highlights the participants' inclination to respond in ways deemed socially acceptable, potentially deviating from their genuine thoughts and experiences.

## 4. Conclusion

The study found no urban-rural divide in sociodemographic factors among participants. However, it revealed subtle gender inequalities tied to structural and social norms in the study area. Rural women draw resilience mainly from psychological factors, life experiences, and socio-ecological sources, while urban women rely more on psychological factors, life experiences, and external influences. The study emphasizes the need to understand identified psychological factors for designing effective psychosocial interventions fostering resilience in both rural and urban contexts, highlighting resilience as a multifaceted process evolving over time in response to challenges.

### 4.1 Limitations

The qualitative study on women in Malappuram district, Kerala, captures subjective resilience experiences, but its regional focus limits generalization. Concentrating solely on Malappuram participants implies unique

experiences, emphasizing the contextual nature of qualitative research. While caution is needed in extending findings, the study provides insights into women's resilience within communities sharing a similar sociocultural background.

## 4.2 Recommendations and Suggestions

The study highlights deep-seated gender inequalities, suggesting a multifaceted approach involving awareness programs and activities to address cultural and structural factors, fostering a positive attitude among men towards women. A thorough examination of psychological factors affecting resilience in rural and urban women can guide the development of targeted psychosocial interventions. Utilizing a mixed-method study for specific collaborative research offers a more effective approach, providing valuable insights for practical innovations and addressing knowledge gaps. These in-depth findings can inform government efforts to strengthen women's empowerment through well-targeted statutory measures.

## Acknowledgements

This project has been funded by the Ph.D. in Social and Behavioural Sciences Fellowship Program offered by Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham. I extend my gratitude to the academic program of the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, the Center for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (CWEGE), and Ammachi Labs for providing all the support.

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