

The Impact of Midlife on Professional Life: A Study of Workplace Challenges for Women

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Abstract

Objective: To determine the impact of midlife on professional life by exploring the workplace challenges faced by women

Methodology: This cross-sectional study was performed on midlife working women aged 40-65 years from different fields from March 2024 to July 2024. Data were gathered utilizing a structured questionnaire that included demographic information, job stresses, physical and emotional health concerns, and professional challenges. Deep conversations were conducted with a selection of participants to provide qualitative insights. Statistical analysis, including chi-square tests and logistic regression, was undertaken to investigate the association between demographic characteristics and workplace problems.

Results: Overall mean age of women was 51.23 years. 48% women had mild depression, 18% moderate, and 12% severe. Midlife women reported major employment issues, with 36% feeling severely overworked and 44% suffering with role balance. Physical discomfort affected 52%, emotional instability was moderate to severe in 79%, and 65% reported effects on family relationships. Other issues were excessive job pressure (30%), a lack of support (35%), inadequate career advancement (32%), insufficient balance between work and life (26%), and age-related discrimination (22%). Women aged 40-50 faced higher depression, work-life imbalance, and emotional instability ($p=0.001$). Higher education correlated with more work stress and pain, while lower socioeconomic status linked to greater emotional instability and work-life conflicts. Married women and those with comorbidities reported higher depression and physical pain ($p<0.05$).

Conclusion: Study concluded that the midlife has a substantial impact on women's professional lives, with common issues such as work-life balance, volatile emotions, and physical discomfort. Age discrimination, had also a negative impact on job satisfaction and career advancement.

Keywords: Midlife women, workplace, Challenges, Emotional instability, Job pressure.

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Introduction

Midlife is an important moment in the life of a woman, usually between the ages of 40 and 65.¹ It is also a time marked with significant physiological, psychological, and social changes that can affect many aspects of life including professional endeavors.¹

During the transitional phase of midlife, women face unique challenges in the middle of their careers challenges that may affect their career trajectory, work satisfaction and overall well-being. One of the most important physiological changes during midlife is menopause and the duration of the menopausal transition varies greatly among women, typically lasting an average of two to four years, though it can extend up to a decade.^{2,3} It is estimated that 20% to 40% of

menopausal women experience vasomotor symptoms, such as hot flashes and night sweats (HFNS), which can adversely affect their quality of life, including both personal and professional domains. Many women find these symptoms particularly challenging to manage in the workplace due to feelings of embarrassment and worries about how others may react.^{2,4}

While paid employment generally plays also a positive role in enhancing the well-being of midlife women, offering them a sense of purpose and identity, there are also several work-related challenges that can negatively impact their overall health.^{5,6} One of the most prominent issues is work-related fatigue, which is found to be more common among highly-educated

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midlife women compared to other groups. Women, in particular, are more frequently exposed to risk factors contributing to fatigue in the workplace, such as high job demands, limited autonomy, and emotional strain.

This disparity is partly due to the fact that women are more likely to be employed in sectors traditionally dominated by females, such as healthcare. In fact, in 2021, the healthcare sector in the Netherlands reported the highest rate of occupational diseases, with women accounting for 62% of these cases, compared to 38% of men.^{5,7} Midlife involves increased personal responsibilities, such as caring for aged parents, guiding children through puberty, and managing personal health difficulties.⁸ High demands might lead to stress and work-life balance issues.⁸ Other studies indicated that women in midlife prioritize income and benefits as their primary reasons for working. However, combining work and personal duties can become increasingly challenging as they age.^{9,10} The middle years women often come across specific employment challenges such as gendered ageism a combination of sexism and age discrimination that results in attitudes that undervalue their contributions based on both their age and their gender. Prejudicial behavior can take several forms, including limited prospects for growth, exclusion from crucial projects, and underestimation of experience and skills. According to studies, women in their midlife face tiredness from both paid and unpaid work, with barriers emerging from the work environment and working circumstances, as well as pressures in their personal lives.⁵ In numerous nations, specifically in South Asia, the midlife population is not adequately represented in studies on workplace difficulties. Additionally, the present literature focuses mostly on the hormonal components of menopause or generic workplace issues, failing to effectively address the special challenges that midlife women experience in professional contexts. Furthermore, lack of the local data on this subject matter particularly in low-income countries such as Pakistan, where societal norms, healthcare facilities, and workplace dynamics differ greatly from those in the developed world. However, this study has been done to determine the challenges of working women in midlife especially at workplace

Methodology

This descriptive cross-section study was done at Rawal Institute of Health Sciences at Islamabad. Duration of study was five from March 2024 to July 2024. Women

aged 40 to 60 years who were currently employed in full time or the part time roles were included. Study was limited to the formal sector, which includes individuals working in offices, healthcare, education, and other service-oriented fields. All the women who were not currently employed in informal sectors or non-professional roles and those who did not agree to take a part in study were excluded. Each participant was given a detailed information sheet detailing the study's goal, the independent nature of their engagement, and the assurance of privacy concerning the answers they provided. Every individual provided written informed permission. In terms of secrecy, the identities of participants were kept confidential. Furthermore, participants had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative effects. To analyze the working barriers experienced by midlife women, a systematic questionnaire was developed and separated into sections. The first component collected demographic data, while the second portion used to assess workplace stressors, including work-related stress, feeling overlooked, difficulty in balanced the multiple rules, emotional volatility and physical pain. All the information was entered and analyzed using SPSS version 21.

Results

The majority of participants (64%) were aged 40-50 years, while 30% were between 51-60 years, and 15% were over 60 years. Educational attainment varied, with 10% having completed matriculation, 40% holding graduation degrees, 30% having master's degrees, and 20% being doctors. In terms of SES, most participants (52%) were classified as middle class, followed by 38% in the upper class and 10% in the poor category. Marital status showed that 70% were married, 22% were widowed, and 8% were single. Furthermore, 35% of participants reported having comorbidities, while 65% had no such conditions. Table I

Depression was present in varying degrees, with 48% experiencing mild depression, 18% moderate, and 12% severe. Feeling overworked was a prominent concern, with 36% strongly agreeing and 40% agreeing to this sentiment. Difficulty balancing roles was reported as very difficult by 44% and somewhat difficult by 36%. Physical pain was common, with 30% experiencing severe pain and 22% moderate pain. Emotional volatility was moderate in 45% of participants and high in 34%. Family relations were affected in 65% of cases. Other workplace challenges included high work

pressure (30%), insufficient workplace support (35%), inadequate career advancement (32%), poor work-life balance (26%), and instances of gendered ageism (22%). Table II

Table I: Analysis of demographic variables. (n=100)

Variables		N	%
Age groups	40-50 years	55	64.0%
	51-60 years	30	36.0%
	>60	15	15.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Educational level	Matric	10	10.0%
	Graduation	40	40.0%
	Masters	30	30.0%
	Doctors	20	20.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
SES	Poor	10	10.0%
	Middle	52	52.0%
	Upper	38	38.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Marital status	Single	08	08.0%
	Married	70	70.0%
	Widow	22	22.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Comorbidities	Yes	35	35.0%
	No	65	65.0%
	Total	100	100.0%

Table II: Analysis of work place challenges. (n=100)

Work place challenges		N	%
Depression	No	22	22.0%
	Mild	48	48.0%
	Moderate	18	18.0%
	Severe	12	12.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Feeling overworked	Strongly Agree	36	36.0%
	Agree	40	40.0%
	Neutral	16	16.0%
	Disagree	06	06.0%
	Strongly Disagree	02	02.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Difficulty in rules' balancing	Very Difficult	44	44.0%
	Somewhat Difficult	36	36.0%
	Neutral	14	14.0%
	Not Difficult	06	06.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Physical pain	Mild	20	20.0%
	Moderate	22	22.0%
	Severe	30	30.0%
	None	28	28.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Emotional volatility	Low	21	19.0%
	Moderate	45	45.0%
	High	34	34.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Family relation effects	Yes	65	65.0%
	No	35	35.0%
	Total	100	100.0%
Other work place changes	High pressure of work	30	30.0%
	Lower job satisfaction	25	25.0%
	Insufficient workplace Support	35	35.0%
	Gendered Ageism	22	22.0%
	Inadequate career Advancement	32	32.0%
	Poor balance of work-Life	26	26.0%

Furthermore, women aged 40-50 years had higher rates of depression, work-life imbalance, and emotional instability than those over the age of 50 (p<0.001). Participants with higher level of education had more work stress, physical pain, and mental strain. People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported higher levels of emotional instability and conflicts between work and personal lives. Married women faced greater difficulties in balancing work and home responsibilities, while women with comorbidities reported more feelings of depression and physical pain (p<0.05).

Discussion

Women during midlife come across considerable employment obstacles, notably weariness caused by both work conditions and personal life obligations.¹¹ Health difficulties such as work-related weariness and menopause affect their overall well-being. These concerns are not isolated issues, but are driven by systemic causes. Women frequently adopt methods to manage their weariness, such as switching jobs or lowering work hours, reflecting their struggle to combine work and personal duties.¹¹ This study was conducted on 100 working women to explore the impact of midlife on professional life by examining workplace challenges faced by women. The overall mean age of participants was 51.23 years. A majority of participants (64%) were aged between 40-50 years.

Most women had attained a graduate level education, with 52% categorized as middle-class socioeconomically, and followed by 38% in the upper class and 10% in the poor category. Marital status indicated that 70% were married, 22% were widowed, and 8% were single. Additionally, 35% of participants reported having comorbidities, while 65% had no such conditions. In comparison, Kiskac N et al¹² reported an average participant age of 46.34±5.24 years, with 84.2% married, 60.4% holding a university degree, and 70.8% employed. Forty-five percent had two children, 67.9% were not experiencing menopause, and most (93.3%) lived with their families, with 69.2% reporting a medium household income. Pan Y et al¹³ found that participants had a mean age of 39, with ages ranging from 24 to 50 years. They worked in diverse sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, public management, finance, and transport. Among these participants, 10 held bachelor's degrees, nine had master's degrees, and one had a doctoral degree. Discrepancies in demographic characteristics across studies may be attributed to differences in study

designs and population selection, particularly given that participants in this study were drawn from a health facility.

In this study a significant workplace challenges for midlife women, including depression (48% mild, 18% moderate, 12% severe), overwork (76%), and role imbalance (80%). Physical pain affected 52%, emotional volatility 79%, and family relations 65%. Additional issues included high work pressure (30%), insufficient support (35%), limited career advancement (32%), poor work-life balance (26%), and age or gender biases (22%). Espinola M et al¹⁴ highlighted similar challenges, noting midlife women faced income disparities, gender and age discrimination, limited political and administrative representation, and caregiving duties, which hinder job advancement and perpetuate inequalities. Another study emphasized menopause-related issues such as impaired concentration, fatigue, and sadness that negatively impacted productivity, job satisfaction, and career progression.¹⁵ In one more study demonstrated that the women during midlife have distinct challenges such as redefining their roles, shifting perceptions, and a desire for new tasks. These issues can impede their job advancement if businesses fail to accommodate their special demands in comparison to younger women and male colleagues.¹⁶ Further, Yang PL et al¹⁷ discussed the physiological and psychological effects of menopause, including hormonal changes and digestive issues, impacting overall well-being. Sabir M et al¹⁸ underscored the role of extended working hours in contributing to hypertension, anxiety, and burnout, along with limited family collaboration leading to poor work-life balance. These findings emphasize the need for workplaces to adopt flexible hours, promote self-care, implement effective time management, and ensure supportive policies for midlife women to foster their professional and personal well-being. Few other studies also found some partially related findings.¹⁹⁻²¹

The significant disparities observed across studies can be attributed to substantial differences in the nature of the research, the characteristics of the study populations, and variations in assessment criteria and questionnaires. Each study operates within its unique context, utilizing different methodologies, sample demographics, and data collection tools, which naturally leads to differing results. Moreover, inconsistencies in the definition and measurement of workplace challenges, as well as the use of diverse questionnaires and evaluation criteria, further

contribute to the observed differences. These factors highlight the importance of context-specific research and the careful interpretation of results when comparing studies. This study also has several limitations, including a limited sample size, being conducted at a single institution, the use of a self-developed questionnaire, and potential respondent bias. Further large-scale, multi-institutional studies with standardized tools are recommended to validate the findings and provide more generalizable results.

Conclusion

Study concluded that the midlife has a substantial impact on women's professional lives, with common issues such as work-life balance, volatile emotions, and physical discomfort. Age discrimination, had also a negative impact on job satisfaction and career advancement. Despite these challenges, many women have implemented coping techniques such as medical care and flexible work arrangements. Further substantial studies are recommended to validate the findings and to address these challenges; specific workplace support as well as inclusive policies should be implemented to promote an appropriate professional environment for midlife women.

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