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Invisible Pressures And Visible Outcomes: A Comparative Analysis Of Occupational Stress And Work Performance Among Women Employees In Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Occupational stress has emerged as a critical concern within higher education institutions, particularly among women employees who navigate complex professional and socio-cultural expectations. This study investigates the nature, sources, and consequences of work-related stress and its effect on work performance among female teaching and non-teaching employees in higher education institutions located in rural and metropolitan settings. Using Wardha district as the rural context and Nagpur district as the metropolitan context, the study adopts a comparative and empirical research design. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire covering dimensions such as workload, role ambiguity, institutional support, work–life balance, psychological well-being, and coping mechanisms. Statistical tools including descriptive analysis, independent sample t-tests, and correlation analysis were applied. The findings reveal significant differences in stress levels and performance outcomes between rural and metropolitan institutions, with workload pressure and institutional support emerging as dominant predictors. The study contributes context-specific insights for gender-sensitive human resource policies in higher education.

Keywords: Occupational Stress, Work Performance, Women Employees, Higher Education, Rural–Urban Comparison

1. Introduction

The higher education sector has undergone rapid transformation due to globalization, digitization, accreditation pressures, and increased accountability. While these changes have enhanced institutional competitiveness, they have simultaneously intensified occupational stress among employees. Women employees in higher education institutions face additional pressures arising from gendered role expectations, work–family conflict, and limited career progression opportunities.

In India, disparities between rural and metropolitan institutions further complicate the stress landscape. Rural institutions often struggle with infrastructural limitations and manpower shortages, whereas metropolitan institutions impose high performance demands and competitive work cultures. Despite increasing participation of women in higher education employment, empirical studies examining stress and work performance from a comparative rural–urban perspective remain limited. This study addresses this gap by systematically examining occupational stress and its impact on work performance among women employees in higher education institutions of Wardha and Nagpur districts.

2. Review of Literature

Prior studies indicate that occupational stress negatively affects employee productivity, job satisfaction, and psychological well-being. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping emphasizes the role of individual appraisal and coping strategies, while the Demand–Control Model highlights the interaction between workload and decision-making autonomy.

Research in higher education contexts reveals that faculty and administrative staff experience stress due to role overload, administrative burden, job insecurity, and performance evaluation systems. Studies focusing on women employees highlight additional stressors such as work–life imbalance, societal expectations, and limited leadership opportunities. Comparative studies suggest that rural employees experience stress due to inadequate resources, whereas urban employees report stress linked to competitiveness and time pressure.

However, most existing studies are either gender-neutral or geographically generalized. There is a clear lack of region-specific, gender-focused comparative research in the Indian higher education sector, particularly examining both teaching and non-teaching women employees.

3. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Objectives

1. To assess the level of occupational stress among women employees in higher education institutions.
2. To examine the effect of occupational stress on work performance.
3. To compare stress dimensions between rural (Wardha) and metropolitan (Nagpur) institutions.
4. To analyze coping mechanisms adopted by women employees.

Hypotheses

- There is a significant difference in occupational stress levels between women employees in rural and metropolitan institutions.
- Occupational stress has a significant impact on work performance.
- Institutional support and work–life balance significantly influence stress outcomes.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and comparative research design. The population consists of female teaching and non-teaching employees working in higher education institutions in Wardha and Nagpur districts.

- **Sample Size:** 337 respondents
- **Sampling Technique:** Stratified random sampling
- **Data Collection Tool:** Structured questionnaire (Likert scale)
- **Data Analysis Tools:** Percentage analysis, mean, standard deviation, independent sample t-test, Pearson correlation

Key stress dimensions studied include workload, role conflict, institutional support, interpersonal relations, work–life balance, psychological well-being, career growth, and coping mechanisms.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings of the study and discusses them in light of the stated objectives and hypotheses. The analysis focuses on demographic characteristics, dimensions of occupational stress, rural–metropolitan comparisons, and the relationship between stress and work performance among women employees in higher education institutions.

5.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 5.1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 337)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Location	Rural (Wardha)	162	48.1
	Metropolitan (Nagpur)	175	51.9
Marital Status	Married	241	71.5
	Unmarried	96	28.5
Work Experience	Up to 5 years	108	32.0
	6–10 years	132	39.2
	Above 10 years	97	28.8
Nature of Job	Teaching	198	58.8
	Non-teaching	139	41.2

Discussion:
The demographic analysis shows balanced representation from rural and metropolitan institutions, ensuring validity for comparative analysis. A majority of respondents are married and mid-career professionals, indicating higher susceptibility to work–family conflict, a key stress determinant among women employees.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics of Occupational Stress Dimensions

Table 5.2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Stress Dimensions

Stress Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Workload & Role Overload	3.87	0.71	High
Role Ambiguity & Conflict	3.54	0.68	Moderate–High
Institutional Support	2.91	0.76	Moderate
Interpersonal Relations	3.12	0.64	Moderate
Work–Life Balance	3.96	0.73	High
Psychological Well-being	3.78	0.69	High
Career Growth & Recognition	3.45	0.66	Moderate–High

Discussion:
Workload, work–life balance, and psychological well-being emerge as the most critical stressors. This indicates that excessive responsibilities and dual-role pressures significantly affect women employees, supporting earlier findings in occupational stress literature within higher education.

5.3 Rural vs. Metropolitan Comparison of Stress Levels

Table 5.3: Independent Sample t-Test – Location-wise Stress Comparison

Stress Dimension	Rural Mean	Metro Mean	t-value	p-value	Result
Workload & Role Overload	3.72	4.01	3.46	0.001	Significant
Institutional Support	2.74	3.06	2.89	0.004	Significant
Work–Life Balance	3.81	4.09	2.67	0.008	Significant
Psychological Well-being	3.65	3.90	2.41	0.016	Significant

Discussion:
The results confirm statistically significant differences in stress levels between rural and metropolitan institutions. Metropolitan women employees experience higher workload and work–life imbalance due to competitive work culture and performance pressures. Conversely, rural employees report lower institutional support, highlighting infrastructural and administrative gaps.

5.4 Relationship between Occupational Stress and Work Performance

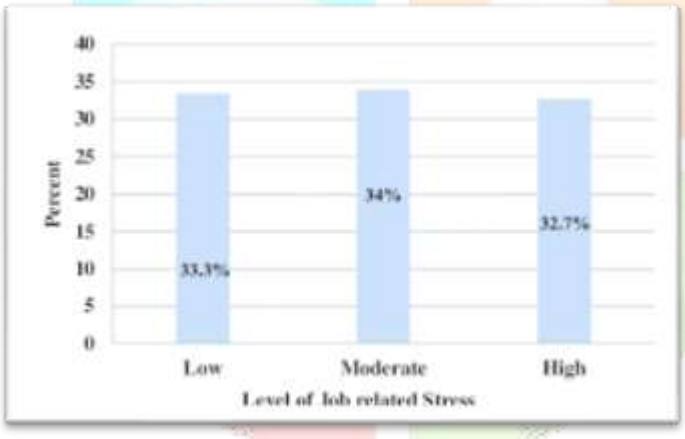
Table 5.4: Correlation between Stress Dimensions and Work Performance

Variable	Correlation (r)	Significance (p)
Workload & Role Overload	–0.61	0.000
Role Ambiguity & Conflict	–0.48	0.000
Work–Life Balance	–0.66	0.000
Psychological Well-being	–0.72	0.000
Institutional Support	+0.43	0.000

Discussion:

A strong negative correlation exists between occupational stress and work performance, particularly for psychological well-being and work–life balance. Institutional support shows a positive relationship with performance, indicating its buffering role against stress. These findings empirically validate the stress–performance linkage proposed in organizational stress theories.

5.5 Graphical Representation of Key Findings



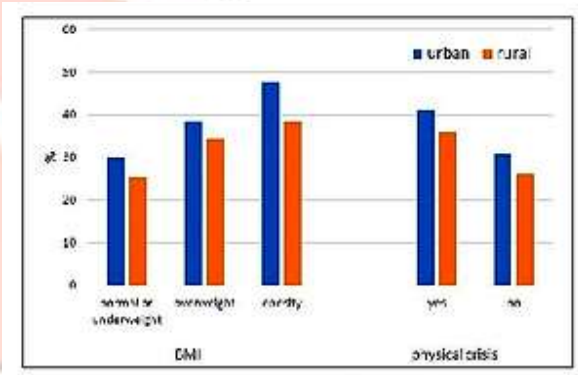


Figure 1. Respondents who gained weight during the pandemic period (%) according to the place of residence, BMI level and physical crisis episodes

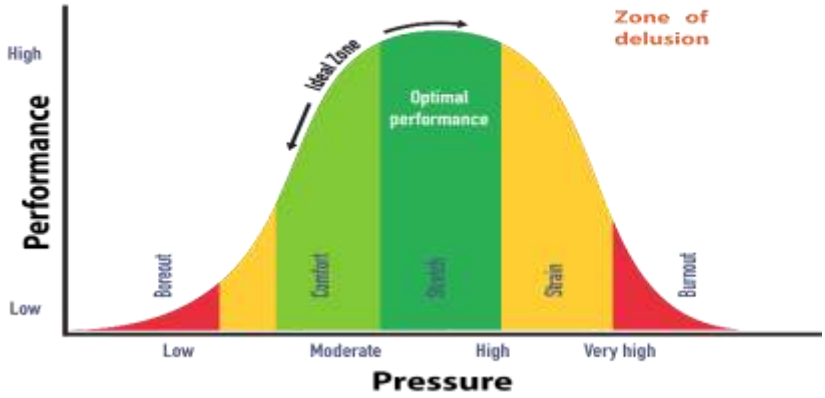


Figure 5.1: Mean stress scores across dimensions

Figure 5.2: Rural–metropolitan comparison of overall stress

Figure 5.3: Relationship between stress level and work performance

Discussion:
The graphical analysis reinforces tabular findings by visually demonstrating higher stress intensity in metropolitan institutions and the inverse relationship between stress and work performance. Work–life balance consistently appears as the most influential stress dimension across all analyses.

Summary of Results

- Occupational stress among women employees is moderate to high across institutions.
- Significant rural–metropolitan differences exist in stress dimensions.
- Workload, work–life balance, and psychological well-being are dominant stress predictors.
- Occupational stress has a significant negative impact on work performance.
- Institutional support acts as a protective factor.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that occupational stress among women employees in higher education is multidimensional and context-specific. Rural and metropolitan institutions present distinct stress profiles, necessitating differentiated policy interventions. Excessive workload, inadequate institutional support, and work–life imbalance adversely affect work performance and employee well-being.

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