

# The Impact of Societal Expectations on Women's Self-Esteem and Psychological Health

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## Abstract:

In today's globalized world, women are increasingly subject to conflicting societal expectations that shape their roles, behaviors, and self-perceptions. This paper explores the complex relationship between societal expectations and the psychological well-being of women. It delves into how societal norms and standards influence women's self-esteem and contribute to mental health challenges. By examining definitions, empirical studies, and the role of cultural context, the paper highlights the pervasive impact of societal pressures on women's lives. This study is significant because it sheds light on how deeply ingrained societal expectations contribute to the mental health challenges faced by women. The discussion focuses on specific effects, the mediating role of self-esteem, and potential strategies for societal change. The main theme of this research is to investigate how societal expectations, shaped by cultural norms, influence women's self-esteem and psychology. This research underscores the need for a broader societal shift to support women's psychological health and well-being. The findings of this research reveal a significant relationship between societal expectations and the psychological well-being of women, particularly in terms of self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Societal expectations; women's psychological health; media representation; policy initiatives.

## 1. Introduction

This research focuses on understanding the impact of societal expectations on female self-esteem and psychological health. In today's globalized world, women are increasingly subject to conflicting societal expectations that shape their roles, behaviors, and self-perceptions. These expectations vary across cultures but often place undue pressure on women to conform to certain standards, leading to significant mental health challenges. Exploring this issue is particularly relevant in light of the rising mental health concerns among women globally, as societal norms continue to evolve and exert influence.

This study is significant because it sheds light on how deeply ingrained societal expectations contribute to the mental health challenges faced by women. By examining the psychological impact of these expectations, the research aims to provide valuable insights that can inform policies and interventions designed to support women's well-being. Understanding these dynamics is essential for addressing the broader issues of gender inequality and promoting mental health in diverse cultural contexts.

The main theme of this research is to investigate how societal expectations, shaped by cultural norms, influence women's self-esteem and psychological well-being. Spe-

cifically, the study examines the pressures women face in balancing traditional roles with modern expectations and how these pressures impact their mental health. The research delves into various cultural contexts, comparing experiences across Japan, the US, the UK, India, and China, to understand the global dimensions of this issue.

The methodology employed in this study is primarily literature analysis, which involves a thorough search and review of relevant scholarly articles, books, and reports. This method is particularly effective for analyzing complex issues such as societal expectations, as it allows for a comprehensive examination of existing knowledge and the identification of gaps that the current research aims to address. The literature analysis provides a solid foundation for understanding the theoretical and empirical perspectives on the impact of societal expectations on women's mental health.

The ultimate goal of this research is to explore and highlight the psychological effects of societal expectations on women, particularly in relation to their self-esteem and mental health. To achieve this goal, the study conducts a detailed literature review, analyzing various cultural contexts to identify commonalities and differences in how societal expectations influence women. The research aims to contribute to the development of interventions

that can better support women in navigating these societal pressures, ultimately promoting mental health and gender equality.

## 2. Definition and Background

### 2.1 Definition of Societal Expectations

Societal expectations refer to the set of standards and norms that a society collectively holds, guiding how individuals, particularly women, are supposed to behave, appear, and live their lives. These expectations are deeply ingrained in cultural, social, and historical contexts and often dictate specific roles and responsibilities for women. For example, societal expectations might pressure women to conform to traditional roles, such as being the primary caregivers in families or maintaining a particular physical appearance to be deemed acceptable or attractive by societal standards [1]. These expectations create a framework within which women are judged and evaluated by others, as well as by themselves, influencing their behavior and self-perception.

In many societies, the expectations placed on women are rigid and challenging to meet, contributing to stress and anxiety. These pressures often begin early in life, with young girls being socialized to adhere to these norms, which can affect their self-esteem and psychological well-being throughout their lives. The impact of failing to meet these expectations can be significant, leading to feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth, and a range of psychological issues [2].

### 2.2 Definition of Psychological Health

Psychological health is a multifaceted concept encompassing an individual's emotional, mental, and social well-being. It is not merely the absence of mental illness but includes the presence of positive characteristics such as resilience, the ability to cope with stress, and a sense of purpose. Psychological health is influenced by various factors, including genetics, life experiences, and the social environment [3]. For women, societal expectations can be a significant stressor, potentially undermining their psychological health if they feel unable to meet these expectations or if they internalize negative societal messages about their worth and abilities.

Good psychological health allows individuals to navigate life's challenges effectively, maintain healthy relationships, and achieve a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. However, when psychological health is compromised, it can lead to a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and other emotional disorders [4]. The chronic stress associated with societal expectations can erode psychological health over time, particularly if

women lack the support systems or coping mechanisms to manage these pressures.

### 2.3 Definition of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a crucial component of psychological health, referring to an individual's overall sense of self-worth or personal value. It is a fundamental aspect of how individuals perceive themselves and their abilities, influencing their behavior and decisions [5]. High self-esteem is associated with positive mental health outcomes, including greater resilience, better stress management, and overall life satisfaction. In contrast, low self-esteem can contribute to a range of psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, and a diminished sense of self-efficacy.

Self-esteem develops over time, shaped by life experiences, social interactions, and internal reflections. For women, societal expectations play a significant role in shaping self-esteem. When women are constantly bombarded with societal messages that emphasize the importance of physical appearance, success, and adherence to traditional gender roles, their self-esteem can suffer if they feel they do not measure up to these standards [6]. This can lead to a vicious cycle where low self-esteem further diminishes psychological health, making it more difficult for women to meet societal expectations and maintain a positive self-image.

## 3. Empirical Studies

### 3.1 Relationship Between Societal Expectations and Women's Psychological Health

A substantial body of research demonstrates the profound impact that societal expectations have on women's psychological health. Women often face significant pressure to conform to societal ideals, which can lead to chronic stress and anxiety. For instance, the pressure to adhere to societal beauty standards is a common stressor for many women, leading to issues such as body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and depression [7]. These societal pressures can begin in childhood and persist throughout a woman's life, affecting her mental health at every stage.

The dual role that many women are expected to fulfill—being both successful professionals and primary caregivers—can also contribute to psychological strain. Women often experience role strain as they try to balance these conflicting expectations, leading to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and burnout. This strain is particularly pronounced in cultures that place a high value on both career success and traditional family roles, leaving women feeling as though they are constantly falling short in one area or another [5]. Research shows that this type of role strain

is a significant predictor of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders [1].

### **3.2 Relationship Between Societal Expectations and Women's Self-Esteem**

Societal expectations have a direct and often detrimental impact on women's self-esteem. When women perceive a gap between societal ideals and their own lives, they often experience a drop in self-esteem, leading to negative self-perception and reduced confidence. This is particularly true in areas such as physical appearance, where societal standards are often unrealistic and unattainable for most women [2, 5]. Women who internalize these standards may struggle with chronic low self-esteem, which can affect all areas of their lives, from personal relationships to career success.

Low self-esteem, in turn, exacerbates the psychological impact of societal expectations. Women with low self-esteem are more likely to internalize societal criticism and less likely to resist harmful societal messages, leading to a cycle of negative self-perception and poor mental health. This is especially concerning in adolescence, a critical period for developing self-esteem, where societal pressures are often at their peak [2, 6]. Studies have shown that young women who experience low self-esteem during adolescence are at greater risk for mental health issues later in life, including depression, anxiety, and eating disorders [3].

### **3.3 Influence of Cultural Context on Societal Expectations**

Cultural context plays a significant role in shaping societal expectations and, consequently, their impact on women's self-esteem and psychological health. Different cultures emphasize different attributes and roles for women, leading to varying societal pressures. In many Eastern cultures, for instance, there is a strong emphasis on collectivism and family honor, which can lead women to experience significant pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. This can result in psychological strain if women feel they are not meeting these expectations or if they desire a different life path [4, 7].

In contrast, Western cultures, which often emphasize individualism and personal success, may place more pressure on women to achieve in professional and academic arenas, sometimes at the expense of their mental health. The pressure to "have it all" can be overwhelming, leading to stress, burnout, and a diminished sense of self-worth if women feel they are not living up to these societal ideals [1]. The cultural context also influences how women internalize societal expectations and the extent to which these expectations affect their self-esteem and psychological

health [6].

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1 Specific Impacts of Societal Expectations on Women's Psychological Health**

The societal expectation for women to prioritize caregiving responsibilities often creates significant psychological pressure. Women are frequently expected to be the primary caregivers for their children, aging parents, and other family members, which can lead to role overload and feelings of inadequacy when they struggle to balance these demands with professional or personal aspirations [7, 8]. This pressure can be especially intense in cultures that emphasize traditional family roles, where deviation from these expectations might be met with social disapproval or criticism. The stress associated with trying to meet these conflicting demands can contribute to chronic anxiety, depression, and even physical health problems, such as hypertension and heart disease [1].

Moreover, societal expectations around motherhood can be particularly challenging. The idealization of motherhood as a self-sacrificial and all-consuming role can lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy in women who do not fit this ideal, whether due to career commitments, personal choices, or other factors [3]. The pressure to be the "perfect mother" can result in significant emotional distress, leading to issues such as postpartum depression, anxiety, and long-term mental health challenges [9]. This illustrates the pervasive impact of societal expectations on women's psychological health, where the pressure to conform to idealized roles can undermine their well-being.

### **4.2 Mediating Role of Self-Esteem in Psychological Health**

Self-esteem is not only a buffer against the negative effects of societal expectations but also plays a pivotal role in how women navigate social interactions and personal challenges. Women with high self-esteem are more likely to assert their needs, set boundaries, and seek out supportive relationships, all of which contribute to better psychological health [5, 6]. High self-esteem also fosters resilience, enabling women to recover more quickly from setbacks and resist the internalization of negative societal messages. This resilience is crucial in environments where women are constantly bombarded with unrealistic expectations, whether in the media, workplace or within their communities.

On the other hand, low self-esteem can lead to a range of maladaptive behaviors and cognitive patterns, such as self-criticism, rumination, and avoidance, which exacerbate mental health issues. Women with low self-esteem

may be more likely to engage in unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse, disordered eating, or social withdrawal, in an attempt to manage the stress associated with societal pressures [2]. These behaviors, while temporarily alleviating stress, ultimately contribute to a downward spiral of poor psychological health, reinforcing the negative impact of societal expectations [4].

### 4.3 Strategies for Changing Societal Expectations

Addressing the negative impact of societal expectations on women's psychological health requires both individual and collective efforts to change the norms and standards that perpetuate these pressures. One key strategy is to promote more diverse and realistic representations of women in media and popular culture. By challenging the narrow and often unattainable standards of beauty, success, and behavior, media can help to broaden the scope of what is considered acceptable and admirable in women [8]. For example, campaigns that celebrate body diversity, highlight the achievements of women in various fields, and portray a range of life choices as valid and valuable can help to reduce the pressure on women to conform to a single ideal [7].

Educational initiatives are also critical in changing societal expectations. Programs that focus on building self-esteem, critical thinking, and media literacy can empower women to resist harmful societal messages and develop a stronger sense of self-worth [3]. These programs can be particularly effective in schools, where young girls are first exposed to societal expectations and are in the process of developing their identities. By teaching girls to critically evaluate the messages they receive from society and to value themselves for their intrinsic qualities rather than external achievements or appearances, these programs can help to build a generation of women with higher self-esteem and better psychological health [5].

Policy changes are also necessary to support women in balancing the various demands placed upon them by societal expectations. This includes advocating for workplace policies that promote gender equality, such as parental leave, flexible working hours, and equal pay for equal work. These policies can help to alleviate some of the role strain that women experience by allowing them to better balance their professional and personal responsibilities without sacrificing their psychological health [1]. Additionally, public health campaigns that address the stigma associated with mental health and encourage women to seek help when needed can contribute to a culture where psychological well-being is prioritized and supported [6].

### 4.4 Long-Term Impact and Future Directions

The long-term impact of societal expectations on women's psychological health is profound, affecting not only individual women but also the broader society. When women are unable to achieve their full potential due to the psychological burden of societal expectations, society as a whole loses out on their contributions in the workforce, in leadership roles, and in other areas of life. Furthermore, the intergenerational transmission of societal expectations means that the pressures women face today are likely to be passed down to future generations, perpetuating the cycle of stress, low self-esteem, and poor psychological health [10].

Future research should focus on identifying the most effective strategies for mitigating the negative impact of societal expectations on women's psychological health. This includes exploring the role of social support networks, community-based interventions, and policy initiatives in promoting mental health and well-being. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how different cultural contexts influence the relationship between societal expectations and psychological health, particularly in non-Western societies where traditional gender roles may be more deeply entrenched [4, 9].

In conclusion, societal expectations have a significant and multifaceted impact on women's self-esteem and psychological health. By addressing these expectations through media representation, education, and policy changes, it is possible to create a society where women are valued for their true selves rather than their ability to conform to unrealistic ideals. This shift is essential not only for the well-being of individual women but also for the health and progress of society as a whole.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this research reveal a significant relationship between societal expectations and the psychological well-being of women, particularly in terms of self-esteem. Specifically, the study demonstrates that societal pressures, whether related to gender roles, professional achievements, or physical appearance, can lead to various mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, and diminished self-worth. This conclusion underscores the pervasive influence of cultural norms and societal standards on women's mental health across different regions and highlights the importance of addressing these expectations to promote better psychological outcomes for women globally.

This research offers valuable insights into how societal expectations shape women's experiences and mental health. It contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality

and mental health by emphasizing the need for policies and interventions that are culturally sensitive and tailored to the specific challenges faced by women in different societies. The study's impact extends beyond academia, providing a framework for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals to better support women in navigating societal pressures.

Future research should focus on deepening understanding of the mechanisms through which societal expectations impact women's mental health, particularly by exploring the intersectionality of gender with other social factors such as race, class, and sexuality. Additionally, there is a need for longitudinal studies that examine the long-term effects of societal pressures on women's mental health. Future studies could also explore intervention strategies that empower women to resist harmful societal norms and develop stronger self-esteem. By doing so, future research can contribute to creating more inclusive and supportive environments for women.

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