

TIRED OF BEING STRONG: THE SILENT EMOTIONAL BURDEN OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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Abstract

The emotional well-being of women has emerged as an important yet often neglected aspect of gender justice in contemporary India. While women have made remarkable progress in education, employment, leadership, and public life, they continue to bear a disproportionate emotional burden arising from multiple social, familial, and professional responsibilities. Women are frequently expected to perform the roles of caregivers, homemakers, professionals, mothers, daughters, and spouses while maintaining emotional resilience in every circumstance. These invisible emotional expectations often remain unrecognized because emotional labour is neither legally acknowledged nor socially valued.

This paper examines the silent emotional burden carried by women in contemporary India from a constitutional, socio-legal, and gender justice perspective. It analyses how emotional labour, caregiving responsibilities, workplace pressures, gender stereotypes, domestic expectations, and social norms contribute to stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced well-being among women. The study evaluates the constitutional framework under Articles 14, 15, 16, and 21 of the Constitution of India, along with relevant judicial developments and international human rights principles promoting equality, dignity, and mental well-being.

The paper argues that emotional labour should be recognised as an essential component of women's contribution to families, workplaces, and society. It further highlights that the expectation for women to remain continuously strong, patient, and self-sacrificing often results in emotional fatigue while receiving little institutional support. The study adopts a doctrinal and analytical methodology based on constitutional provisions, judicial decisions, books, journal articles, government reports, and international literature.

The paper concludes that achieving substantive gender equality requires recognising women's emotional well-being as a matter of constitutional dignity and social justice. It recommends gender-sensitive workplace policies, greater mental health support, shared caregiving responsibilities, legal awareness, and public policies that acknowledge emotional labour as an integral part of women's lived experiences. A truly inclusive society is one that not only

values women's visible achievements but also recognises and supports the invisible emotional burdens they carry.

Keywords: Women's emotional labour, Mental health, Gender expectations, Care work, Invisible suffering, Feminist jurisprudence

1. Introduction

Women in contemporary India perform multiple roles within the family, workplace, and society. Along with professional responsibilities, they are often expected to manage household duties, childcare, caregiving, and emotional support for family members. These responsibilities create an invisible emotional burden that is rarely recognised in law, public policy, or social discourse. Society frequently expects women to remain patient, caring, emotionally available, and resilient regardless of their own mental and emotional well-being. The emotional burden carried by women extends beyond physical work. It includes managing relationships, resolving family conflicts, caring for children and elderly parents, providing emotional support to others, and balancing professional and personal responsibilities. This invisible emotional labour often results in stress, anxiety, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. Despite its significant impact on women's health and quality of life, emotional labour remains undervalued and largely absent from legal and policy discussions.

The Constitution of India guarantees equality, dignity, and the right to life under Articles 14, 15, 16, and 21. These constitutional values require not only protection against discrimination but also the creation of conditions that enable women to live with dignity, mental well-being, and equal opportunity. Recent discussions on gender justice increasingly recognise that emotional well-being is closely connected with substantive equality and women's empowerment.

This paper examines the silent emotional burden experienced by women in contemporary India through a constitutional and socio-legal perspective. It analyses the causes of emotional labour, its impact on women's lives, and the need for legal, institutional, and social reforms to promote mental well-being and gender justice.

2. Literature Review

Existing literature shows that emotional labour is an important but often invisible dimension of women's lives. **Arlie Russell Hochschild**, in *The Managed Heart* (1983), introduced the concept of emotional labour and explained how women are often expected to regulate their emotions while caring for others. **Flavia Agnes**, in *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India* (1999), discusses how traditional gender roles continue to impose unequal responsibilities on women within families and society. **Nivedita Menon**, in *Seeing*

Like a Feminist (2012), argues that social expectations often require women to suppress their own needs while fulfilling the expectations of others.

Reports published by the **World Health Organization (WHO)**, **UN Women**, and the **National Mental Health Survey of India** indicate that women experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion due to caregiving responsibilities, discrimination, and unequal social expectations. However, most existing studies focus on mental health from a medical or psychological perspective. Limited research examines emotional labour as a constitutional and legal issue linked to equality, dignity, and gender justice. This study seeks to address that gap.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the concept of emotional labour and emotional burden among women.
2. To analyse the constitutional framework relating to equality, dignity, and mental well-being.
3. To identify the social and cultural factors contributing to women's emotional burden.
4. To study the impact of emotional labour on women's personal and professional lives.
5. To examine the role of law and public policy in addressing women's emotional well-being.
6. To analyse existing judicial and international approaches relating to gender justice.
7. To evaluate the need for recognising emotional labour as an aspect of women's empowerment.
8. To suggest legal and policy reforms for promoting women's emotional well-being.

4. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a **doctrinal and analytical research methodology**. It is based on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, judicial decisions, books, journal articles, government reports, policy documents, reports of international organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UN Women, and other scholarly literature. The research analyses the constitutional, legal, and social dimensions of women's emotional burden and evaluates existing legal and policy measures relating to gender equality and mental well-being.

5. Research Problem / Hypothesis

Research Problem

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity, women continue to bear a disproportionate emotional burden arising from unpaid caregiving responsibilities, workplace expectations, domestic duties, and social norms. Emotional labour remains largely invisible in legal and policy frameworks, resulting in inadequate institutional recognition and support. The study examines whether the existing legal framework sufficiently addresses women's emotional well-being as an essential component of gender justice.

6. Hypothesis

H1: Women's emotional labour remains inadequately recognised in India's legal and policy framework.

H2: Recognition of women's emotional well-being as part of constitutional dignity and gender equality can contribute to more inclusive and effective legal and social policies.

7. Analysis and Interpretation

7.1 Understanding Emotional Labour: A Women-Specific Reality

Emotional labour refers to the continuous process of managing, controlling, and expressing emotions for the comfort, well-being, and satisfaction of others. Although emotional labour can be experienced by all individuals, women often carry a disproportionate share due to traditional gender roles and social expectations. From childhood, women are frequently conditioned to become caregivers, peacekeepers, and emotional supporters within families and communities.

Women's emotional labour includes absorbing family conflicts, maintaining harmony in relationships, providing emotional support to family members, suppressing personal anger, grief, and ambitions, and remaining emotionally available even when their own needs are ignored. Unlike physical labour, emotional labour does not produce visible signs of exhaustion, yet it creates significant psychological stress and affects women's identity, confidence, and mental well-being.

The absence of recognition of emotional labour creates a situation where women's contribution remains invisible. While society benefits from women's emotional support, patience, and care, these efforts are rarely valued as meaningful work. Therefore, recognising emotional labour is essential for understanding the complete nature of women's contribution to families, workplaces, and society.

7.2 Women, Care, and the Law: The Great Silence

Indian legal frameworks have traditionally focused on visible forms of harm such as physical violence, economic exploitation, and direct discrimination. However, the emotional burden created through continuous caregiving responsibilities, social expectations, and unequal domestic responsibilities remains largely outside the scope of legal recognition.

Although constitutional provisions under Articles 14, 15, and 21 guarantee equality, dignity, and personal liberty, many women continue to experience emotional exhaustion without adequate institutional support. They perform extensive care responsibilities without social security, recognition, or economic value. Their sacrifices are often considered natural duties rather than contributions deserving appreciation.

The legal system provides protection against certain forms of violence, but the question remains whether sufficient attention is given to protecting women from emotional exhaustion, burnout, and the invisible pressures created by social expectations. A gender-just legal system must recognise not only physical harm but also the conditions affecting women's dignity and mental well-being.

7.3 Judiciary and the Slow Awakening to Women's Inner Worlds

Indian judiciary has gradually expanded the understanding of women's rights by recognising dignity, autonomy, equality, and invisible contributions. Recent judicial developments reflect a movement towards understanding women's lived realities beyond traditional legal categories.

Important judicial trends include:

- Recognition of unpaid domestic work as having economic value.
- Expansion of the concept of family and caregiving responsibilities.
- Recognition of reproductive autonomy and bodily integrity.
- Rejection of gender stereotypes in judicial reasoning.

These developments represent significant progress in recognising women's experiences. However, emotional labour continues to remain largely unexplored within legal discourse. While courts have acknowledged women's physical, economic, and social contributions, the emotional burden carried by women has not yet received adequate legal attention. It remains

an issue that exists between legal interpretations rather than at the centre of gender justice discussions.

7.4 The Double Burden: Professional Success, Personal Sacrifice

Contemporary society encourages women to pursue education, employment, and professional success. However, traditional expectations regarding household responsibilities and caregiving have largely remained unchanged. As a result, many working women experience a "double burden" of managing professional responsibilities along with unpaid domestic and emotional responsibilities.

A working woman is often expected to:

- Manage household responsibilities without complaint.
- Prioritise family needs over personal aspirations.
- Achieve professional success while maintaining traditional social expectations.
- Provide emotional support to others despite personal stress.

This continuous balancing creates feelings of guilt, exhaustion, and emotional isolation. The expectation that women must succeed professionally while carrying the majority of family responsibilities reflects an unequal distribution of emotional and domestic labour.

7.5 Mental Health: The Most Neglected Women's Issue

Women's mental health remains one of the most overlooked aspects of gender justice. Emotional distress among women is often dismissed through stereotypes such as "mood swings," "emotional nature," or "hormonal issues." Such responses reduce serious emotional concerns to personal weakness rather than recognising them as consequences of social, economic, and structural pressures.

The lack of awareness and social acceptance often prevents women from seeking mental health support. Many women continue to silently manage stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion due to fear of judgment or social stigma. As a result, emotional suffering becomes a private burden rather than a public concern requiring institutional attention.

7.6 Cultural Conditioning and the Glorification of Sacrifice

Indian social and cultural traditions have often celebrated women who silently tolerate difficulties and prioritise family needs above their own well-being. Qualities such as patience, sacrifice, and endurance are frequently presented as ideal characteristics of womanhood.

However, when sacrifice becomes compulsory rather than voluntary, it can transform from a virtue into a form of social pressure. Constant expectations of adjustment, tolerance, and self-denial restrict women's freedom to express their needs and aspirations. True empowerment requires moving from the glorification of silent suffering towards recognition of women's individuality, choices, and emotional needs.

7.7 Why This Is a Legal and Developmental Issue

Women's emotional well-being is not merely a personal concern; it is closely connected with social development, economic progress, and constitutional values. A society cannot achieve sustainable development by ignoring the emotional exhaustion of nearly half of its population.

Women's emotional health directly influences:

- Family stability and healthy relationships.
- Child development and social learning.
- Workplace productivity and professional growth.
- Community well-being and social harmony.

Ignoring women's emotional burden weakens the principles of equality, dignity, and inclusive development. Recognising emotional labour as an important aspect of women's lives is therefore necessary for creating a more equitable legal and social framework.

8. Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Recognise emotional labour as a socio-legal issue and acknowledge women's emotional contributions within families, workplaces, and communities.
2. Integrate mental health awareness and psychological support mechanisms into women-centric laws, policies, and welfare programmes.
3. Promote shared caregiving responsibilities by encouraging equal participation of men in household work, childcare, and emotional support.
4. Introduce gender-sensitive education from an early stage to challenge stereotypes and promote equality in social roles.

5. Create institutional support systems for women through counselling, mentorship, childcare facilities, and flexible work policies.
6. Strengthen workplace mental health policies to address stress, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and work-life balance challenges.
7. Recognise unpaid care work in policy planning and social security frameworks to reduce the invisibility of women's contributions.
8. Develop affordable and accessible mental health services for women without stigma or social barriers.
9. Encourage interdisciplinary research on women's emotional labour and its impact on health, family life, and professional growth.
10. Promote gender-responsive budgeting to address women's unpaid work, caregiving responsibilities, and mental health needs.
11. Increase legal awareness among women regarding constitutional rights, workplace protections, and available support systems.
12. Promote public awareness campaigns to challenge the glorification of women's silent sacrifice and emotional suppression.
13. Develop gender-sensitive judicial and administrative approaches by incorporating women's lived experiences into decision-making.
14. Encourage men's participation in caregiving and household responsibilities to achieve genuine gender equality.
15. Recognise emotional justice as an essential component of gender justice, dignity, and substantive equality.

9 Conclusion

Women are not born strong—they are **forced to be strong**.

Women are not born strong—they are often expected to become strong because society places unequal emotional responsibilities upon them. For generations, women have been praised for their patience, sacrifice, and ability to silently manage personal and social challenges. However, true empowerment does not lie in celebrating women's ability to endure hardship; it lies in creating a society where women are not forced to carry unnecessary emotional burdens. Emotional labour, though invisible, significantly shapes families, workplaces, and communities. Ignoring this burden results in incomplete understanding of gender equality. A society that values women's contributions must also value their emotions, mental health, and individual aspirations.

Constitutional equality is not achieved merely by providing women with formal rights; it

requires creating conditions where women can live with dignity, freedom, and emotional security. Emotional justice is therefore not a luxury but an essential component of substantive equality.

Until women are allowed to express vulnerability without judgment, seek support without stigma, and prioritise their own well-being without guilt, the promise of equality remains incomplete. A nation that listens to women's silence, understands their struggles, and supports their emotional well-being is a nation prepared to achieve true gender justice

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