

COPING STRATEGIES FOR NAVIGATING GENDER AND AGING: WISDOM BY OLDER WOMEN WORKERS FROM PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to explore coping strategies for navigating gender and aging among older working women from Punjab, Pakistan. In this qualitative study, the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was employed. A total of twenty-four women, aged 60 and above, were recruited from Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan. All participants had previous formal sector work experience and were currently involved in post-retirement employment. Using purposive sampling, data was collected through semi-structured interview guide and observations checklist. To enhance the credibility and confirmability of the findings, member checking and peer review were incorporated into the process of IPA analysis. The study revealed various coping strategies employed by older Punjabi women for successful navigation of gender and aging in their old age. The strategies encompassed ongoing education and skill enhancement, enabling women to seek additional qualifications and certifications to stay competitive and pertinent in their respective domains. Adopting technology emerged as a vital approach, as numerous individuals developed new technical skills to improve their career prospects. Establishing professional connections via associations and conferences has been crucial for sustaining visibility and relevance in their areas of expertise. Support from mentors and connections with peers played a crucial role in advancing their careers and navigating gender obstacles. Resilience surfaced as a key focus, with women utilizing their life experiences to adapt and take charge in their respective domains. Last but not least, physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle was considered essential for sustaining professional engagement and a balanced work-family life, bolstered by flexibility and family cooperation, allows women to manage their dual responsibilities effectively..

INTRODUCTION

Global aging is a significant demographic trend characterized by increasing life expectancy and declining fertility rates. It leads to a higher proportion of older people in overall population. Recent studies have also highlighted that the global population is inevitably moving upward with projections indicating substantial increases in the elderly population (Ma et al., 2024). South Asia, similarly to many other regions, is experiencing a significant demographic shift characterized by an increasing proportion of older individuals. The percentage of people aged 65 and above in the region has risen from 6% in 1990 to 9% in 2019, with projections indicating a further increase to 16% by 2050 (Mason, Lee & Russo, 2018). Pakistan, on the similar patterns, is experiencing a notable demographic shift characterized by an increasing proportion of older people. As of 2019, approximately 15 million people in Pakistan were aged over 60, constituting about 7% of the total population. This proportion is projected to 12% by 2050, with the number of older individuals expected to reach 40 million. Similarly, in Pakistan, the proportion of older women is also increasing, with life expectancy for females rising from 61.9 years in 2000 to 66.9 years in 2021 (Matthews et al., 2023; Usmani et al., 2024).

This aging trend presents several challenges for the country. The rise in life expectancy, coupled with a lack of comprehensive social safety nets and prevalent poverty, has led to an increasing number of older adults remaining in the workforce to sustain their livelihoods. Currently, only government employees and some private sector workers receive post-retirement pensions, leaving a significant portion of the elderly population without financial support. In many cases, women earn less than men during their working years and are more likely to take career breaks for caregiving responsibilities, which significantly affects their pension contributions and retirement savings (Taylor et al., 2024). However, older women who rely upon pension also face many multifaceted problems (Angel, Vega & López-Ortega, 2017). They often face financial insecurity due to lower lifetime earnings and interrupted career trajectories (Tambellini, 2021).

According to Ahmed and Shah (2023), the gender creates gap and systemic barriers in the workforce aggravating the financial challenges women face after retirement. Additionally, women tend to outlive men, leading to an extended retirement period during which they must stretch limited resources, making them more vulnerable to poverty in old age (Randel, 2017). Healthcare costs further compound their financial struggles. As women age, they are more likely to experience chronic health conditions, necessitating higher out-of-pocket expenditures for medical care. This issue is particularly pronounced in countries like Pakistan, where social safety nets and healthcare subsidies are limited (Shurtz, 2019). Fatima et al. (2024) highlight that many retired women relying on pensions struggle to afford essential healthcare services, which impacts their overall quality of life.

On the other hand, old-aged women without financial support face challenges e.g., poverty, poor health, and social isolation, more severely as compared to those older women who rely on pension as financial support. Financial insecurity is a primary issue, as many elderly women have limited or no access to pensions or savings, often due to informal employment during their younger years (Aroonsrimorakot et al., 2019; Lakshmi, 2023). This lack of income leaves them unable to afford basic necessities, such as food, housing, and healthcare. According to Hassan et al. (2023), older women in South Asia, including Pakistan, are disproportionately affected by poverty, with many relying on family members or charity for survival. However, as traditional family support

structures weaken due to urbanization and migration, these women are increasingly left without assistance.

Health challenges are another significant concern for old-aged women without financial resources. Aging women often experience chronic health conditions such as arthritis, hypertension, and diabetes, which require regular medical attention. Without financial means, they are unable to access healthcare services or medication, exacerbating their physical and mental health problems (Ashiq & Asad, 2017). Moreover, social isolation compounds these issues, as elderly women without financial independence are more likely to feel marginalized and excluded from community life. Fatima and Khan (2024) highlight the psychological toll of poverty and loneliness among elderly women because of their socio-economic conditions.

To overcome women's post-retirement gender and aging issues, older women employ diverse coping strategies to address the dual burden of gender and aging, leveraging resilience, adaptability, and social support networks to maintain their well-being. Participation in volunteer work, religious gatherings, or informal support groups allows them to maintain social connections and gain emotional support (Nazir, Manzoor & Rashid, 2023). Ahmed and Fatima (2023) highlight that older women who remain socially active report higher levels of life satisfaction and reduced feelings of loneliness. Additionally, older women often rely on intergenerational relationships, drawing emotional and practical support from their children and grandchildren, which provides a sense of purpose and continuity (Kumar & Sharma, 2023). Another key coping mechanism is the adoption of positive psychological strategies. Many older women cultivate a sense of acceptance and focus on gratitude, which helps them adapt to the physical and social changes associated with aging. According to Khan et al. (2024), such proactive engagement enhances cognitive function and mitigates the effects of age-related marginalization (Ali, 2024).

Many older women actively engage in community and social activities, fostering a sense of belonging and combating isolation. Some engage in lifelong learning activities, such as enrolling in adult education programs or developing new hobbies, which fosters a sense of empowerment and self-worth (Patel & Singh, 2023). Many older women proactively manage their age-related transformations. In addition, women were also found relying upon emotion-focused strategies i.e., self-control, distancing, prayer, avoidance, and escape to cope with age-related changes and to protect themselves from harm (Dommann, 2020). Behavioral coping strategies emerged as the primary factor influencing daily activities, social roles, and overall participation in community life (Yıldırım et al., 2021). It means that research studies focused on demography of the old aged segment focused upon their problems and coping strategies to overcome the challenges of old age i.e., physical and psychological health issues. However, none of the studies have focused on exploring coping strategies for navigating gender and aging among older women which they developed throughout their young and middle age. To overcome this invisibility in existing scholarly discourse, the present study aims to explore coping strategies for navigating gender and aging among old age working women in a formal setting from Punjab, Pakistan.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

We investigated existing literature to uncover potential coping strategies to navigate gender and aging among old aged women who were engaged in formal work after retirement but found no clear consensus on the most effective coping mechanisms for this purpose. However, studies indicated that aging is as the gradual alterations in the structure and function of humans that

transpire over time, independent of disease or other severe accidents and ultimately result in an elevated likelihood of mortality as the individual ages (Hansen-Kyle, 2005; Quan, 2023). The expansion of the senior demographic correlates with a heightened probability of poor health, mental and physical disabilities, and reduced functional capacity (Yeung, P., & Breheny, 2021). This implies that aging is an inevitable process which results in certain outcomes for the elderly. However, successful aging is a process of aging in which the elderly are less likely to face severe consequences. They are resilient against a number of socio-economic and health adversities resulting from aging (Estebansari et al., 2020).

Scholarly studies also indicate that aging is differently responded by both older men and women. In developing countries like Pakistan, older women are more likely to face severe consequences of aging. Their aging intersects with gender and creates many challenges for older women (Hägg & Jylhävä, 2021). Research findings regarding coping strategies to navigate gender and aging are inconclusive; this may be attributed, at least in part, to the varying definitions (both positive and negative) of coping among scholars, a contentious issue beyond the purview of this study. In a meta-analysis regarding the relationship between coping and health, a substantial correlation between emotion-focused coping and adverse health outcomes was noted, whereas problem-focused coping exhibited the contrary effect (Çapkin & Vatansever, 2023).

Research indicates that women exhibit lower scores than men in both psychological and physical well-being. Moreover, the perceptions of the meaning of life varies between males and females (Lee et al., 2021). Successful aging delineates the mechanisms by which older individuals effectively navigate the various transformations linked to aging. It entails effectively managing losses rather than avoiding them (Xu et al., 2023). Coping may be a crucial element of successful aging of older women. Lazarus and Folkman's classic definition of coping is a cognitive and behavioral effort made by people for the purpose of reducing, minimizing, mastering, or tolerating the demands that rise from the interaction between them and their environment (Sharifabad et al., 2020).

The authors postulated that coping has two major functions: dealing with the problem that is causing distress and regulating emotions stemming from this problem. Historically, the coping process after a stressful event has been characterized by a cognitive evaluation of the stressor, succeeded by the deliberate implementation of a coping strategy aimed at diminishing the perceived severity of the stressor or enhancing one's resources or capabilities to manage it (Salimzadeh, Hall & Saroyan, 2021). Cognitive evaluation comprises two elements: the individual's preliminary assessments regarding what is at risk for them, and the extent to which the environment is perceived as stressful or pertinent to their well-being (Riepenhausen et al., 2022).

Individual aspects i.e., perceived severity and controllability and contextual elements i.e., cause of stress, novelty and predictability of the scenario, environmental input collectively affect the individual's evaluation of a stressful experience.

The perception of coping techniques and their effects on the health of older people is crucial for ensuring successful aging in different demographic groups (Gonzalez, Portocarrero & Ekema, 2023). However, the root cause according to the number of studies is lack of socio-economic support which may facilitate older people to manage stressful experiences of old age. Due to historical powerlessness and silence, older women may be at an increased risk of inactivity in crucial health-related interactions (Naidoo, 2020). Formally engaged women even after their retirement tends to inactive physically as well as socially and they are encircled inside of their

homes. Older women are particularly susceptible due to their often-low educational attainment, unsatisfactory financial condition, and increased dependence on their spouses. Women have been observed to experience disability and its associated reduction in social activities more frequently than men (Lavee & Kuronen, 2024).

Conversely, McGuinn noted that evidences indicate the beneficial impacts of emotion-focused coping practices. Specifically, as individuals age, the employment of such coping mechanisms appears to increase in frequency and may yield greater benefits, providing another justification for not presuming that findings from non-geriatric studies in this domain are applicable to older women (Ben-Zur, 2020). Certain researchers contend that coping is predominantly employed in circumstances when stressors are regarded as immutable or as challenges to be tolerated. This may indeed pertain to the previously indicated situation in which numerous ethnically varied older women encounter challenges related to their health and physical functioning, rendering the investigation of coping strategies stemming from early and middle age to navigate gender and aging after retirement within this demographic a vital research objective (Grossman, 2022).

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Under qualitative research approach, the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was selected to explore coping strategies adopted by older Punjabi women to navigate the gender and aging after their retirement. The significance of employing a qualitative research method like IPA lies in the subjective and emotional aspects of coping for successful aging. The researchers employed IPA to explore coping strategies within the social context and to uncover the underlying processes at work (Kassai, 2020). IPA is characterized by concurrent analysis which facilitate the perspective development and data collecting (Glendening, 2022). The functions of such an approach encompass the summary of knowledge, the elucidation of phenomenon within the gerontology field using the theory, the facilitation of prediction and, ultimately, management of phenomena.

Recruitment of the participants

Twenty-four older women were recruited for collecting data. The inclusion criteria for selecting participants specified older women aged 60 and above, residing in Lahore, Rawalpindi, or Multan in Punjab. In addition, inclusion criterion also specified that only married, without children under the age of 18 years, possessing prior work experience in the formal sector were to be selected in the study. It is also pertinent to mentioned that participants of the study were currently involved in post-retirement employment. Post-retirement work denotes formal paid employment pursued after an individual has retired from their primary career or attained the official retirement age. In this instance, the participants had officially retired upon reaching the superannuation age of 60 in Punjab. All participants possess the capacity to recall and articulate their past experiences. Data were generated using purposive and theoretical sampling as well as observation. Purposive and theoretical sampling facilitated the authors to select representative participants keeping in mind the inclusion criteria of the study. Individuals from varied socio-economic backgrounds were chosen on the premise that they could contribute unique insights to the data. The participants exhibited diversity in socio-economic status, educational qualifications, employment histories, and financial resources.

Data collection

Older women identified various issues related to their children, income, marital and educational status, as well as feelings of loneliness or cohabitation with others or siblings during their in-depth interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to conduct in-depth interviews with the participants. Interviews were carried out in the homes of the women as per their desires. The duration of interviews varied from 40 to 50 minutes, contingent upon participants' tolerance and interest. All interviews were recorded and transcribed immediately. Semi structured interviews included those concepts which was developed following the researchers' preliminary literature review. The follow of questions during interviews were from normal daily routine to more core questions. Many questions were informed by the participants' responses and the requirements of the developing theory. Interviews were concluded upon the saturation point as per the judgement of the authors. Observations were recorded during the interviews while participants hosted the researcher as a guest. Observations included interactions among participants and family members. In addition, interviewers also noted home arrangements, the presence of a maid, women's mobility and employment and their clothing and makeup. Following each interview, observations field notes were systematically compiled.

Ethical considerations

The present study is a part of PhD thesis of the principal author who is enrolled in Quid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. Therefore, the ethical committee of the Quid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan approved the study. Participants received both verbal and written information regarding the study and were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All participants provided written consent too.

Analysis

Data collection, analysis, and interpretation were conducted concurrently in accordance with IPA methodology. After every interview, the responses and observations were transcribed manually. Resultantly, initial impressions of emerging codes were identified. Participant quotes were translated into English verbatim by the principal author. After transcription, a printout was generated and it was rechecked with recordings of the interviews. Notes were also incorporated regarding tone of voice, recurring themes, and the researcher's preliminary thoughts and emotions. Each session of observations was analyzed through field notes. The transcripts were reviewed, and codes were assigned to recurring themes. The process of open coding facilitated a detailed examination of the data (Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2021). Consequently, the codes were generated which mirrored the language of participants. In the findings, direct quotes of the participants were referred by participant number i.e., P1, P2.....P24. Axial coding involves the relationship between categories and their subcategories, as well as the connection of categories through properties and dimensions. However, the integration and refinement of the theory were achieved through selective coding (Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2021). At this stage, the primary category "coping strategies for navigating gender and aging" was identified. The validation of emerging codes and categories in subsequent interviews and debriefings with supervisors enhanced credibility of the findings. The rigor and trustworthiness of the findings was supported through prolonged engagement, member checking, peer checking, and maximum variation of sampling (Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2021).

FINDINGS

Demographic characteristics

The demographic profile of the 24 research participants indicates a heterogeneous cohort of older women, aged 62 to 69, representing three districts: Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan. Their educational qualifications span from intermediate to advanced degrees, encompassing PhDs, Master's degrees, MBBS, and vocational diplomas. The majority were married, with a minority being divorced or widowed. Only one woman reported that she does not have any child while maximum number of children were reported 4 by three older women. The husbands of the participants engage in diverse professions, such as retired professionals, shopkeepers, and part-time university instructors, with some being widowed (Table 1).

Coping strategies for navigating gender and aging

Despite the significant progress women have made over the years, many still face considerable challenges related to gender and aging. As they age, some women experience which are often perceived as negative consequences of their aging. For older women, these challenges are further exacerbated by financial insecurity, societal expectations, and lifetime wage disparities (Dressel, Minkler & Yen, 2020). Many of the older women shared how they developed strategies to manage aging-related challenges through continuous skills acquiring and abilities they had refined over their long careers. They offered insights into how they navigated these obstacles, providing valuable advice for future generations of older women. Their strategies emphasize the importance of learning and capacity building, embracing technology and technical equipment, professional growth via professional associations and conferences, establishing supportive mentorship and peer networks, professional growth and leadership through resilience, Physical fitness and healthy life style, and a balanced work-family life. Together, these experiences show how older women have effectively transitioned through different stages of their careers and continue to thrive.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the research participants (n=24)

ID	Age	District	Education	Marital status	Children	Spouse status
P1	64	Lahore	PhD	Divorced	1	N/A
P2	62	Lahore	PhD	Married	3	Retired
P3	69	Lahore	Masters	Married	2	Shopkeeper
P4	64	Lahore	Masters	Widow	2	Widow
P5	68	Lahore	Masters	Married	1	Lawyer
P6	62	Lahore	M.COM	Married	3	Part-time University teacher
P7	64	Lahore	Nursing	Married	2	Retired clerk
P8	63	Lahore	Intermediate	Married	2	Retired government driver
P9	66	Lahore	Graduation	Married	0	Retired clerk
P10	66	Lahore	Graduation	widow	3	Widow
P11	63	Rawalpindi	Intermediate	Married	4	Tailor
P12	62	Rawalpindi	Intermediate	Married	3	Paralyzed
P13	66	Rawalpindi	Masters	Married	2	Retired
P14	62	Rawalpindi	Masters	Married	2	Retired Commodore
P15	63	Rawalpindi	Vocational diploma	Divorced	2	N/A
P16	63	Rawalpindi	Graduate	Married	3	Retired
P17	67	Rawalpindi	Masters	Married	2	Retired
P18	66	Rawalpindi	MBBS	Married	2	Retired Brigadier
P19	64	Rawalpindi	Masters	Married	4	Electrician
P20	65	Multan	Dentist	Married	3	Retired
P21	64	Multan	Graduation	Widow	4	Widow
P22	62	Multan	Intermediate	Married	3	Drug Addict
P23	63	Multan	Fashion designing	Married	3	retired
P24	62	Multan	Masters	Married	2	Engineer

Learning and capacity building

For many older women, the pursuit of ongoing education and specialized training has been instrumental in maintaining career relevance, expanding opportunities, and cultivating a fulfilling professional identity. Participants highlighted that investing in continuous learning, later in life allowed them to stay competitive and resilient in their respective fields, even as they transitioned into older age (Schwartz, 2021). P18 reflected on her journey of pursuing a specialization in gynecology abroad after fulfilling her caregiving responsibilities. She stated;

My age signifies a significant transition, but it doesn't take away my need for meaning and identity. Advancing my qualifications opened new opportunities, showing that middle age can be an ideal

time for skill development. In fields like medicine, where advancements are constant, staying informed is essential to remain competent.

Continuous learning not only enhanced women professional abilities but also fostered a deep sense of relevance and personal accomplishment. By embracing lifelong education, middle age is not a barrier but an opportunity to thrive in dynamic and demanding professions (Bandura, 2023). Similarly, P13 underscored the importance of refresher courses and certifications. She noted;

Every profession evolves with innovations, and staying in your field means embracing the need for new knowledge. My advice? Always prepare yourself for new challenges and continuous learning. It's the only way to grow and remain relevant.

It is a necessity for older women to get engaged in lifelong learning and adaptability for professional growth. It further emphasizes the importance of staying updated to succeed in any career. A commitment to lifelong learning as a way to stay actively engaged and professionally capable (Brundiers & Wiek, 2017). Many participants reported that, in their early life, they pursued higher education to prepare themselves for successful aging. Higher education helped them to secure successful career paths. One of the participants (P1) claimed that *“pursuing higher qualifications elevated me, while others with just master’s degrees retired at lower ranks”*. These results supported those studies which claimed that higher education and advanced qualifications can significantly influence career progression, providing opportunities for professional growth and recognition. For older women, importance of lifelong learning helped them to adapt and to ever-evolve professional world (Camilleri, 2018). For the findings of the present study, advanced qualifications were not just milestones but pivotal tools for maintaining their professional identity and ensuring continued engagement in their fields (Salam et al., 2019). Their journeys illustrate that education and skill development remain critical throughout one’s career, enabling individuals to rise above limitations and seize opportunities even in later life. Collectively, these narratives highlight the important role that continuous learning plays for older women in securing new opportunities and sustaining a sense of purpose and achievement (Hirschi, 2018).

Table 1: Categories and codes of learning and capacity building

Education and Learning	Career and Professional Growth	Adaptability and Competence	Personal Development and Fulfillment	Opportunities and Success
- Continuous learning and education - Specialized training - Refresher courses and certifications	- Relevance - Professional identity - Advanced qualifications - Professional engagement	- Innovations - Competence - Dynamic	- Meaning and identity - Accomplishment - Resilience	- Opportunities - Skill development - Successful career paths

Technology and technical empowerment

Many participants emphasized the need to break the stereotype that older women struggle with technology and stated that they learned many new technological skills related to computer literacy and online tools and internet web surfacing. These technological learning enhanced their

confidence and open new prospective professional opportunities (Chen & Schulz, 2016). A junior clerk (P10), reflecting on her experience in learning office management software at the age of 57, reported that *“learning new skills like computer software at 57 opened up promotion opportunities that I never thought possible.”* Importance of acquiring new technological skills was stressed by the participants to stay competitive, especially in today’s increasingly digital work environments. From social media to new software, embracing technology was viewed as essential for staying relevant in their respective fields (Gell et al., 2015; Vaportzis, Giatsi Clausen & Gow, 2017).

Table 2: Categories and codes of technology and technical empowerment

Technology and Digital Skills	Professional Growth and Opportunities	Learning and Adaptation
• Technological skills • Computer literacy • Online tools • Internet web surfacing • New software	• Professional and promotion • Digital work environments • Competitiveness • Relevance	• Learning experience • Embracing technology

Engagement with professional Associations and Conferences

Many participants emphasized the importance of maintaining connections in their professional fields for successful navigation to gender and aging. P17 stated that *“in academia and the corporate sector, people build strong networks through seminars and conferences. Staying connected is essential; it keeps you informed, visible, and relevant in your field.”* In addition, the study found that participants considered writing, publishing, and attending conferences highly supportive for their successful aging. Building professional networks was emphasized as a critical coping strategy for enhancing work engagement in later life (Forsetlund et al., 2021). P13, a retired civil servant currently working as an administrator of non-governmental organization (NGO), shared her reflections on the importance of professional connections;

I have observed that many working women, often constrained by socially and culturally defined roles as caregivers and homemakers, miss opportunities for personal and professional growth. These choices, shaped by societal norms, have long-lasting repercussions, such as limiting their financial independence, career advancement, and professional standing. By contrast, cultivating strong professional networks and actively participating in conferences and training sessions can act as a powerful coping mechanism. These efforts allow women to remain relevant, enhance their skills, and improve their prospects for career growth, even later in life. Women who invest in these strategies are better positioned to navigate challenges, stay engaged in their professions, and secure more fulfilling roles.

Professional networking and continuous learning serve as transformative strategy which enabled older women to overcome barriers and thrive in their later careers. Professional training and conferences enhance learning and social capital. Women who prioritize their growth and development by embracing every opportunity to learn are better equipped to successfully navigate challenges related to gender and aging (Dong, 2015; Myerhoff, 2019).

Table 3: Categories and codes of engagement with professional Associations and Conferences

Connections and Visibility	Growth and Engagement
• Strong networks • Being informed • Visible and relevant • Social capital	• Enhancing work engagement • Overcome barriers

Supportive mentorship and peer networks

Professional integrity and networking were also found supportive in women's career development in their later life i.e., old age. Professional attitude and attire helped them to maintain their professional integrity and respect. Based upon these professional ethics, women successfully built their solid careers. Mentorship and professional relationships were vital for navigating challenges and breaking down gender barriers (Kalpazidou Schmidt & Faber, 2016). P14, a director of an NGO, also advised women based on her own experiences to cultivate networks, especially in non-profit sectors, where collaboration can lead to growth and new opportunities. Participants claimed that it is absolutely essential to stay connected. Strong professional networks are not just acquaintances. They are assets that can significantly nourish career. These connections provide opportunities for growth, open doors to new possibilities, and help establish a reputable name in respective field. A well-maintained network is the foundation of long-term success and professional fulfillment (Geffen, 2019).

Table 4: Categories and codes of supportive mentorship and peer networks

Career and Opportunities	Reputation and Integrity	Barriers and Fulfillment
• Solid careers • Growth and new opportunities • New possibilities	• Professional integrity and respect • Establish a reputable name	• Breaking down gender barriers • Long-term success • Professional fulfillment

Resilience a way to professional growth

Resilience emerged as a pivotal theme among the women in the study, reflecting their ability to adapt, thrive, and lead despite the challenges associated with aging and professional transitions. Many participants emphasized the importance of leveraging their life experiences and expertise to maintain relevance and authority in their fields. Confidence, wisdom and experience allowed older women to successfully managing their aging in their later life. Aging was not a limitation but an opportunity which assigned new roles and responsibilities to older women (MacLeod et al., 2016). P15, who transitioned to a mentoring role, highlighted the sense of fulfillment she derived from guiding younger colleagues. She explained that *"taking on a mentoring role after decades of work has been incredibly rewarding. It allows me to share my experience and wisdom while staying active and engaged in the workforce."* However, the determination is required to succeed in later life even after a very successful career building in early years of life. Leading at older age means balancing experience with energy. Many of the participants were of the views that they have to prove that age is not a barrier to performance. It is an asset. Their resilience kept them motivated (Smith & Hollinger-Smith, 2015).

P8 reported that;

Well! It is hard to hear negative comments about yourself, and you know if your age fellows (male colleagues) start calling you ‘aunty,’ it feels hilarious [laughter]. But instead of fighting it, I decided to embrace this status of being the senior-most employee. To me, it means that my opinion matters, and I am leading the decisions.

This implies that older women may transform age-related biases into opportunities for leadership, resilience, and professional growth. For that purpose, they need to continue leading and inspiring with their experience and wisdom, maintaining resilience, and embracing new opportunities (Kansky, 2017).

Table 5: Categories and codes of resilience a way to professional growth

Personal Qualities	Knowledge and Experience
• Adapt • Thrive • Lead • Confidence • Determination • Motivated • Balancing experience with energy	• Life experiences • Expertise • Wisdom • Experience • Asset

Physical fitness and healthy life style

Health and lifestyle emerged as pivotal factors enabling older women to continue working and thriving in their later years. Participants consistently highlighted that maintaining good physical and mental health was essential for sustaining their professional engagement. They described it a fundamental prerequisite for productive employment. For these women, good health was not only an enabler of work but also a reciprocal benefit derived from their active professional lives. Staying active and maintaining well-being were essential not only for professional life but also for fulfilling role as a caretaker. This perspective underscores how good health serves as the bedrock for older women navigating the dual demands of personal and professional commitments later in their lives (Langhammer Bergland & Rydwick, 2018). Another participant (P2) expressed her gratitude for her health, explaining that *“I’m grateful for my good health. I think it’s one of the reasons I’m still working. I’ve seen others my age who can’t continue because of health issues, and I realize how fortunate I am.”*

For many, maintaining their health was not just about surviving the demands of work but thriving because of it. Participants described how their professional engagement motivated them to adopt healthier lifestyles, ranging from dietary changes to physical activity routines and stress management practices. They highlighted the interplay between lifestyle choices and their ability to remain effective in the workforce, recognizing that poor health could limit their productivity and job satisfaction (McPhee et al., 2016).

P5 while Reflecting on her dietary habits expressed;

I used to eat a lot of junk food without a second thought, but as I got older, I realized my work capacity might decline if I didn’t change my eating habits. So, I made a conscious decision to focus on healthier choices—more vegetables, less fried food. It wasn’t easy, but over time, it’s made a huge difference in my energy levels and effectiveness at work.

This implies that proactive decisions in middle age shaped physical vitality and professional engagement in later years. By adapting diet to align with the demands of work participants not only improved their energy but also demonstrated the importance of personal accountability in maintaining health and productivity throughout the aging process. In addition, these narratives also serve as a powerful reminder that small, consistent adjustments can yield profound benefits, especially for older women in balancing the challenges of work and aging (Samdal et al., 2017).

Physical activity emerged as a vital component of participants' lifestyle adjustments, particularly as they navigated the demands of work in later life. P11 reflected on how she creatively integrated exercise into her daily routine;

Although I'm not attending a gym or following a formal exercise program, I understand the importance of staying active to maintain my health and handle work pressures. That 1-2 kilometer walk to the bus stop every day keeps me fit and energized for work. It's a simple habit, but it has a big impact on my health. This has become my coping strategy—it keeps me working and healthy.

This implies that even modest forms of physical activity can significantly contribute to maintaining health and workability especially for older women. By emphasizing practicality and consistency, participants highlight the adaptability required to sustain physical and mental well-being amidst the demands of work and aging. For some participants, religious practices doubled as both spiritual outlets and physical routines supported their well-being (Zimmer et al., 2016). P21 explained that *“my five daily prayers not only help me manage anxiety but also keep me physically active. It's a routine that blends my personal and professional life, helping me cope with the demands of work and aging.”*

Participants during their interviews emphasized the importance of cultivating healthy habits early in life to ensure workability and resilience in later years. Their narratives reflect a shared understanding that proactive health management is essential for navigating the dual challenges of aging and sustained professional engagement. It underscores how adopting a proactive approach to physical and mental well-being enables older women to maintain their independence, contribute meaningfully to their professional roles, and experience a higher quality of life. The emphasis on preventing diseases and managing stress early on reflects a forward-looking strategy that resonates across participants' experiences (Langhammer Bergland & Rydwick, 2018; McPhee et al., 2016; Samdal et al., 2017).

Table 6: Categories and codes of physical fitness and healthy life style

Professional Contribution	Health and Well-being	Lifestyle and Practices
• Continue working • Sustaining professional engagement • Productive employment • Work enabler • Active professional life • Meaningful contributions	• Adapting diet • Walk • Exercise • Healthy eating habits • Proactive health management • Precautionary measures • Independence	• Role as a caretaker • Lifestyle choices • Practicality • Consistency • Religious practices • Spiritual outlets

A balanced work-family life

Balancing work and family life emerged as a significant theme in the study, revealing the challenges and strategies older women employed to navigate dual responsibilities. Adaptability

and prioritization play crucial roles in achieving work-life balance, particularly as life circumstances evolve. Time management and workplace flexibility tailored solutions and empowered older women to navigate caregiving and work successfully (Gragnano, Simbula & Miglioretti, 2020). P17 shared her thoughtful strategy for managing caregiving responsibilities while continuing her professional commitments:

I adjusted my work hours to accommodate my caregiving duties. In the mornings, I cared for my granddaughter with the help of a servant while my daughter-in-law was at work. Once she returned in the afternoon, I would shift my focus back to my professional responsibilities. This flexible arrangement allowed me to manage both roles effectively without compromising on either.

The pivotal role of family support also helped participants to balance family-work balance. Family encouragement and involvement were instrumental in maintaining work-life balance. In addition, shared responsibilities within families alleviate the pressures of dual roles, fostering an environment where professional and caregiving duties can coexist harmoniously (Kelliher, Richardson & Boiarintseva, 2019). P12 who shoulders the immense responsibility of caring for her paralyzed husband and adult son with a disability, shared her struggles with balancing work and caregiving. She expressed;

In this age, I am unable to handle both work and caregiving responsibilities without any support or help. Being financially unstable, I am the sole provider for my household, but I am exhausted from playing this dual role. I don't want to work while also being a caregiver at this stage of my life. After completing a physically demanding day at work, I return home to face another physically challenging job. It's hard—really hard.

This implies that the immense resilience required to juggle caregiving and professional roles, highlighting how family cooperation becomes indispensable in navigating such complexities. In addition, it is also confirmed that dual roles can take on physical and emotional well-being, especially in the absence of sufficient support systems. The critical role of family support, adaptability, and institutional flexibility enabled older women to maintain work-life balance. Remarkable resilience and creativity in managing dual responsibilities also supported them to balance family-work responsibilities (Gragnano et al., 2020; Kelliher et al., 2019; Kossek & Lee, 2017).

Table 7: Categories and codes of balanced work-family life

Workplace Management	Family Support	Personal Qualities
• Adaptability • Prioritization • Time management • Workplace flexibility • Institutional flexibility	• Family support • Family encouragement and involvement • Responsibilities within families • Family cooperation	• Resilience

CONCLUSION

The study uncovered various coping strategies utilized by older Punjabi women to tackle challenges related to gender and aging after their retirement. Key coping strategies encompassed ongoing education and skill enhancement to ensure professional relevance, embracing technology to remain competitive in digital landscapes, and active participation in professional networks via conferences and associations to boost career visibility. These strategies helped the women to

navigate their gender and aging for successful aging. Women were also found relying upon guidance and collaboration among peers which played a vital role in navigating challenges associated with their gender specific aging. Moreover, resilience shaped by personal experiences, played a crucial role in advancing their career, while maintaining physical health. Balanced lifestyle was vital for ongoing involvement in work as an active and healthy worker. Successfully managing work and family responsibilities was made possible through adaptability, support from family, and flexibility within institutions. Based upon the findings, researchers suggest developing lifelong learning initiatives specifically designed for older women, enhancing technology training to address the digital divide, and advocating for organizational adaptability to support caregiving duties of the older women. Moreover, bolstering mentorship networks and providing focused assistance for sustaining health and achieving work-life balance can significantly improve the professional involvement of older women even after their retirement.

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