BREAKING FREE FROM GENDER EXPECTATIONS: EXPLORING HOW WOMEN DEFINE SUCCESS IN A MALE-DOMINATED SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Traditional understandings of success have historically emerged from patriarchal structures that privilege male experiences and values. For many women, these definitions—centred on financial achievement, hierarchical advancement, and public visibility—often conflict with their lived realities and aspirations. This cross-cultural qualitative study explores how 35 women from India and Brazil define, negotiate, and challenge societal expectations of success. Using semi-structured interviews, the research reveals that women frequently diverge from conventional male-centered metrics by prioritizing emotional well-being, autonomy, life satisfaction, and community impact. Findings highlight significant cultural and generational differences, with young women increasingly rejecting patriarchal norms and redefining success in deeply personal terms. The study underscores the pervasive influence of gender expectations and the resilience with which women resist, reinterpret, and reconstruct success. It concludes with recommendations for schools, families, workplaces, and society to adopt more inclusive, equitable frameworks that affirm women's diverse experiences of achievement.

Keywords: Women, Success, Gender Expectations, Patriarchy, Cross-Cultural Study, India, Brazil, Emotional Well-being, Feminist Psychology, Social Norms

INTRODUCTION

Across many societies, the idea of "success" is largely shaped by patriarchal ideals rooted in male experiences, values, and opportunities. Traditionally, success is measured through income generation, hierarchical mobility, public recognition, or control over resources—standards historically associated with men and their privileged access to institutions of power (Connell, 2009; hooks, 2000). These masculine-coded benchmarks often become the universal norm to which women are expected to conform, generating a tension between societal expectations and women's individual aspirations (Ridgeway, 2011).

Despite increasing advocacy for gender equality, women continue to encounter structural barriers, traditional gender roles, and cultural expectations that influence their career trajectories, leadership opportunities, and even personal identities (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sandberg, 2013). For many women, the pressure to succeed professionally while simultaneously fulfilling domestic expectations results in emotional conflict, identity negotiation, and re-evaluation of what success truly means.

As a result, a growing number of women are redefining success by centering values such as emotional health, mental well-being, freedom of choice, social contribution, and resilience—dimensions often overlooked in conventional definitions (Gilligan, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991). This research aims to examine how women living in patriarchal environments construct and articulate their own definitions of success.

OBJECTIVES

The study aims to:

1. Explore how women from diverse backgrounds define and experience success within patriarchal and male-dominated social structures.

2. Understand the role of gender expectations in shaping or restricting women's personal and professional aspirations.

3. Examine strategies women use to navigate, challenge, or resist societal norms in their pursuit of self-defined success.

4. Contribute to a more inclusive understanding of success that reflects women's lived realities and cultural contexts.

HYPOTHESIS

Women define success in ways that diverge significantly from traditional, male-centered metrics. It is hypothesized that emotional well-being, personal fulfillment, social contribution, and autonomy will be prioritized over material gains or hierarchical advancement. These definitions are shaped by experiences of gender-based constraints and vary across age, socioeconomic status, and cultural backgrounds.

METHOD

A qualitative design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with **35 women** from diverse age groups, cultural contexts, and socioeconomic backgrounds, with participants drawn from **India and Brazil**. The comparison of these two national contexts enabled exploration of cultural variability in how women conceptualize success.

Sample questions included:

- *On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate your work–life balance?*

- *Have you ever experienced conflict between professional work and household expectations?*

- *How do you personally define success? Who or what shaped this definition?*

- *Do you feel pressure to manage multiple responsibilities such as caregiving, work, and domestic tasks?*

- *Have past family experiences or childhood adversity influenced your perception of success?*

- *What does "self-care" mean to you?*

Interviews were coded thematically using qualitative content analysis.

RESULTS

Cultural Differences Between India and Brazil

Clear patterns emerged across cultural contexts:

- **Indian participants** reported significantly higher pressures related to household roles, marriage norms, obedience, and expectations tied to family reputation. Many described negotiating or compromising ambitions to meet domestic responsibilities.

- **Brazilian participants**, while not free from gendered norms, expressed comparatively more autonomy in decision-making. Their narratives reflected greater personal agency and lesser family intervention in life choices.

Indian women highlighted tradition, intergenerational hierarchy, and religious expectations as major forces sustaining patriarchal norms, whereas Brazilian women often pointed to media and cultural representation as both empowering and restrictive.

Generational Differences

- **Younger women (below 30)** in both countries were far less influenced by patriarchal definitions of success. They emphasized:
  - emotional well-being
  - independence
  - freedom
  - authenticity
  - happiness
  - self-directed goals

  Many explicitly rejected success defined by marriage, status, or financial dominance.

- **Women above 30**, especially in India, described greater tension between societal obligations and personal ambition. Some internalized patriarchal expectations early in life; others redefined success only after gaining self-awareness or financial independence.

Gendered Double Standards

Across all groups, women unanimously reported:

- Men are **not scrutinized** for prioritizing career over family.
- Men face **fewer social consequences** for delaying marriage or choosing autonomy.
- Women's choices are **more heavily judged**, especially when they diverge from domestic expectations.

These differences reflect broader patriarchal beliefs associating masculinity with autonomy and femininity with sacrifice and compliance (Connell, 2009).

Redefining Success

Participants commonly rejected traditional success metrics. Instead, they defined success as:

- "Being happy"
- "Feeling free"
- "Taking care of myself"
- "Choosing my own path"
- "Making a difference to others"

These values illustrate a shift toward a more holistic, human-centered understanding of success.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to understand how women conceptualize success within patriarchal societies and how cultural, generational, and gender-based factors influence these definitions. The voices of 35 women from India and Brazil show a clear trend: women are not merely adapting to male-centered standards of success—they are redefining them.

While some women still associate success with financial stability or professional advancement, many now prioritize emotional well-being, autonomy, meaningful relationships, and community impact. Young women, especially, are rejecting patriarchal scripts and asserting their right to define success on their own terms.

The findings highlight persistent social inequalities, where women continue to face greater scrutiny and constraints than men. Yet, they also reveal immense resilience, creativity, and self-awareness in how women challenge, reshape, and resist patriarchal norms.

By acknowledging women's diverse definitions of success, society can move toward more inclusive, equitable, and empowering frameworks that honor lived realities rather than impose narrow standards.

SUGGESTIONS

Reframing Success in Schools and Media

Educational institutions and media should highlight diverse role models and showcase success in terms of creativity, caregiving, social contribution, emotional intelligence, and community leadership.

Gender-Sensitive Workplace Policies

Governments and workplaces must adopt flexible work schedules, paid parental leave, equitable promotion structures, and mentorship programs to support women's leadership and autonomy.

Transforming Family and Community Norms

Family-centered awareness programs should challenge intergenerational beliefs that confine women to rigid gender roles. Communities must encourage shared responsibility within households.

Strengthening Women's Networks

Creating safe, supportive networks—both virtual and in-person—can empower women to share experiences, mentor each other, and collectively navigate societal barriers.

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