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## Gender microaggressions: Lived experiences of women postgraduate and doctoral students

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### Abstract

Gender microaggressions against women, an overt form of discrimination, ranging from subtle remarks to systemic biases, undermine the academic achievements, professional growth, and overall well-being of women. In India, gender microaggression is reinforced by deep-rooted cultural and social norms, which persist even in higher education spaces, where women postgraduate and research scholars often face implicit bias, stereotyping, and exclusion despite increasing enrolment rates. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted nature of gender microaggressions within academic and social spheres. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten female students five postgraduate students and five doctoral scholars from both public and private universities in Kolkata, West Bengal, selected using a snowball sampling approach. Through a thematic analysis, the findings reveal several key themes, including Preconceived Notions, Dialogue Disaster, Impacts on Physical and Mental Health, and Endangered Physical Safety. Notably, this study underscores how family, peers, and societal norms continue to perpetuate dismissive comments, stereotyping, and social gas lighting, all of which reinforce traditional gender roles that marginalize women. Grounded in the Indian academic context, this research provides critical insights into global conversations on gender equity, offering participant-driven solutions to challenge gender microaggressions and foster inclusive learning environments.

**Keywords:** Gender, microaggression, women, social, academic

### Introduction

Violence and discrimination against women remain pervasive issues worldwide, impacting nearly one-third of all women (World Health Organization, 2018)<sup>[33]</sup>. According to recent data, an estimated 736 to 852 million women aged fifteen or older, about one in three, have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence, whether by intimate partners or others. Women are particularly vulnerable in contexts such as workplaces, educational institutions, and private life, often resulting in adverse psychological and physical effects (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013)<sup>[15]</sup>. In addition to these overt acts, subtle forms of gender-based discrimination (Tran *et al.*, 2019)<sup>[32]</sup>, such as microaggressions (Sue *et al.*, 2007)<sup>[31]</sup>, manifested through stereotypes, dismissive remarks, and biased attitudes, often go unnoticed but significantly affect women's lives and careers. Unlike overt harassment, microaggressions are frequently dismissed or normalized, but their cumulative effects can create a hostile, discouraging environment for women, affecting their confidence, mental health, and sense of belonging and limiting their advancement and participation in various spheres of life (Nadal *et al.*, 2013)<sup>[24]</sup>. One possible explanation for the persistence of gender inequality is that discrimination has evolved into subtler and less easily identifiable forms. As Jones *et al.* (2016)<sup>[13]</sup> highlighted in a meta-analysis, these subtle forms of gender bias can be just as harmful, if not more so, than overt discrimination (Jones *et al.*, 2016)<sup>[13]</sup>.

The term 'Microaggression' was coined by Harvard professor of education and psychiatrist Dr Chester M Pierce to describe subtle insults or 'putdowns' specifically inflected upon African Americans in 1970. Since it was propounded by academics, it is no wonder that the initial search for microaggression took place on the college campus. Later, Derald Wing Sue, professor of education and psychology defined microaggression as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue *et al.*, 2007, p.5)<sup>[31]</sup>.

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## Forms of Microaggression

Microaggressions can appear in three forms-Micro-assault, Microinsult and Microinvalidation (Sue *et al.*, 2007, 2010) [31, 30].

Among the three platforms of microaggressions, micro-assault is most resembling barefaced racism, sexism and bigotry. Sue, (2010, p.28) highlighted micro-assault as “conscious, deliberate and explicit” biased behaviors, and these can “degrade, attack and/or harm a person through overt discrimination and may include derogatory comment on description” verbally or nonverbally by “humiliating or objectifying name calling.” (Sue, 2010) [30]. For example, intentionally calling one a derogatory term and purposefully doing discriminatory action. Microinsults are subtler often conscious, verbal and may be unintentionally demeaning an individual’s gender identity or reinforce stereotypes (Sue *et al.*, 2007; Sue, 2010) [31, 30]. For example, treating female doctors as nurses. Similarly, Microinvalidations are often unconscious communications that negate or nullify a person’s thoughts and feelings, or experiential reality, often dismissing their perspective or response, such as by saying “don’t be so oversensitive.” (Sue *et al.*, 2007, p. 27) [31].

These microaggressions can have deleterious effects on individuals, causing stress, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and a sense of marginalization (Nadal *et al.*, 2014) [21]. They can also influence professional opportunities and career advancements by generating a hostile and unwelcoming environment (Gartner *et al.*, 2020) [9]. The potential victims of microaggression fall into several categories as follows: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, mental disability/illness, physical disability, socio-economic class (Nadal, 2010; Nadal & Haynes, 2012; Nadal *et al.*, 2014a, 2014b; Sue *et al.*, 2007; Sue, 2010; Sprow *et al.*, 2021; Tran *et al.*, 2019; World Health Organization, 2021) [20, 25, 21, 26, 31, 30, 29, 32, 33].

## Gender Microaggression

In the Indian context, microaggressions are more of caste based (discriminating against individuals based on their caste), religion-based (excluding or mocking one based on their religious beliefs, practices, and attire) and gender based (assuming gender roles or stereotypes for instance, expecting women to take on administrative tasks and men to be assertive leaders). Sue outlines a few things in his gender microaggression literature, which include “Sexual Objectification, Second Class Citizenship, Use of Sexist Language, Assumption of Inferiority, Denial of the Reality of Sexism, Assumption of Traditional Gender Roles, Invisibility, Denial of Individual Sexism and Sexist Jokes” (Sue, 2010, p.169) [30].

Within the past century, women have secured various political and social rights, although research supports that sexism is still persistent in women’s lives. Particularly, traditional or hostile forms of sexism may be on the decline, but alternatively, ‘transformed into subtler, covert forms that continue to shape women’s lives’ (Miyake, 2018) [19]. Now, microaggression in all spheres is a growing area of research (Basford *et al.*, 2014; Capodilupo *et al.*, 2010; Gartner & Sterzing, 2016; Nadal, 2010; Nadal & Haynes, 2012; Owen *et al.*, 2010; Sue, 2010) [2, 4, 8, 20, 25, 27, 30]. Studies on gender microaggressions against women are significant embellishments to the sexism literature because they portray the evolution of sexism and show how sexism, discrimination, and oppression are articulated in modern

society.

The present paper aims to explore the multifaceted nature of gender microaggressions within and outside of educational settings, focusing on their definition, manifestations, and impacts specifically on female postgraduate students and research scholars. By exploring first-hand accounts and personal narrative, the researchers aim to illuminate the nuanced ways in which these microaggressions manifest and have a cumulative effect on individuals in general.

## Review of Literature

Gender microaggressions are common in a variety of social and cultural contexts, according to recent research conducted globally. Works related to gender microaggression were found in a variety of contexts, including corporate workplaces (Holder *et al.*, 2015) [10], college graduates, and young people (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016) [8].

## Gender Microaggression in Academia

The frequency of gender discrepancies in academia, especially in STEM subjects, has been the subject of in-depth research by certain researchers. At a mid-sized university in Knoxville, Diaz-Espinoza (2015) carried out an intrinsic case study and investigated the lived experiences of twenty-eight female undergraduates enrolled in three engineering majors (Diaz-Espinoza, 2015) [5]. Individual interviews, document reviews from websites, and observation revealed that despite a nationwide effort to increase the number of women in STEM fields, it was discovered that women still had to establish their worth. Likewise, a study conducted in the United States by McCormick, Barthelemy, and Henderson (2014) where a mixed-methods approach to investigate gender discrimination and microaggressions faced by graduate students in physics and astronomy (McCormick *et al.*, 2014) [17]. The findings revealed frequent experiences of presumed incompetence, hostile environment, and exclusion from academic opportunities, contributing to imposter syndrome and mental health challenges. These findings highlight the pervasive nature of gender bias in STEM fields. Twenty-three undergraduate women from a prestigious university in Berkley participated in a focus group interview conducted by Gartner in 2021 (Gartner, 2021) [7]. The participants discussed how, despite attending one of the century’s most socially progressive institutions, they encountered a pronounced culture of objectification and sexualization of women. Additionally, when they interacted with men on campus, they frequently felt invisible and unheard. Using an ad hoc questionnaire and open-ended questions, Martínez Ruiz and Hernández Amorós (2023) carried out a qualitative study investigating gender bias and micro-discrimination experienced by female university students in Spain (Martínez Ruiz & Hernández Amorós, 2023) [16]. According to the participants’ accounts, it was found that female pupils felt they were treated unfairly in the classroom, at home, and in sports. In actuality, gender-based microaggressions are also common in medical school. In exploratory research of medical students at the University of Florida College of Medicine, Espaillat *et al.* (2019) found that 54% of them had experienced microaggression, with most of those students being female (Espaillat *et al.*, 2019) [6]. Accordingly, even though recent advancements have made surgery more accessible to women, low female

representation and microaggressions still exist. As an explanation, Sprow *et al.* (2021) conducted a scoping review of thirty-seven studies examining the experiences of women surgeons, surgical trainees, and medical students (Sprow *et al.*, 2021) [29]. Drawing primarily from research in the United States, Canada, and India, the review underscores ongoing gender inequities in surgical fields and emphasizes the need for structural reforms to promote greater inclusivity and support for women in surgery.

### Gender microaggression at the workplace

A growing body of research has shown that gender microaggressions occur in the workplace (Capodilupo *et al.*, 2010; Gartner *et al.*, 2020; Yang and Carroll, 2018) [4, 9, 34]. Ahmad *et al.* (2022) conducted a mixed-methods survey-based study of physicians at a single academic health care institution to capture physicians' experiences of gendered microaggressions from patients in 2019 (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022) [1]. It was found that female physicians experienced a higher frequency of gender microaggression, and it was significantly associated with job satisfaction, burnout, behavioural modification, and perceived career impact. Similarly, in the same year, Hovey (2019) conducted a qualitative study to explore the subjective experiences of microaggressions of women employed as dental hygienists, residing in the United States (Hovey, 2019) [11]. Despite being in a women-dominated field, participants shared microaggressions committed by a dentist employer, a male patient, and other women. They confronted feelings of disrespect and undervaluation as professionals. Michele (2020) in her study interviewed twelve women, who shared examples of being assigned stereotypical tasks, such as planning office events or note taking, and felt undervalued in leadership roles. Correspondingly, in India, Paranjape (2021) examined the lived experiences of 22 mid-senior management women in corporate India and the study revealed microaggression could be the biggest 'push out' factor for women employees who often felt the workplace to be a battlefield where they had to fight hard every single day just to prove they deserved and to belong in their workplace (Paranjape, 2021) [28]. Some of the members faced microaggressions from their family members, and they had to get permission to have a 'career'. In addition, they were expected to manage household chores, take care of children, and the elderly at home. Hence, they felt drained and demotivated. Some reacted and retaliated, some suffered in silence. Further, Jacob, Lijeesh, and Thomas (2024) studied 129 women IT employees across four different job positions in Bangalore's information technology sector, in India (Jacob *et al.*, 2024) [12]. The study revealed that gender based microaggressions, such as exclusion and stereotyping, contributed to imposter feelings and increased turnover intention among women IT employees.

### Research Questions

The present study is guided by three primary research questions:

- What kind of microaggressions do higher education female students face from peers and families?
- How are they affected by their experiences of microaggressions?
- How do the students propose to reduce these microaggressions and promote a more sustainable and gender-inclusive society?

## Methodology

### Context

This study explores the experiences of gender microaggressions among female postgraduate students and Ph.D. scholars in West Bengal, India. While higher education institutions are often viewed as progressive spaces, subtle gendered biases also emerge within academic settings and in broader social interactions. Therefore, this study considers the participants' experiences across multiple spheres, including universities, peer groups, families, relatives and community interactions, to understand how microaggressions collectively shape their academic and personal lives.

### Participant Selection

A purposive snowball sampling approach was used to identify participants who had experienced gender microaggressions. The sample consisted of ten participants: five female Ph.D. scholars and five female students enrolled in MA in Education programs, drawn from one private and two government universities in West Bengal. This composition enabled a diverse range of academic and socio-cultural experiences to be represented.

### Inclusion Criteria

Female students currently enrolled in the Master's in Education program and the Ph.D. program.

- Institutions affiliated with government or private universities in West Bengal.
- Individuals who have personally experienced gender microaggressions in academic or broader social interactions.

### Tool Used

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed by the researcher, grounded in observations of gendered interactions within Indian socio-cultural settings and informed by foundational conceptual discussions on microaggressions (Sue *et al.*, 2007; Nadal, 2010; Basford *et al.*, 2014) [31, 20, 2]. The open-ended format allowed participants to narrate their lived experiences in depth and in their own terms. The interview guide was reviewed by a subject expert to evaluate the clarity and appropriateness of the questions, and minor modifications were made accordingly.

### Data Collection and Procedure

Interviews were conducted telephonically and lasted 25-30 minutes each. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the data collection process to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and minimize interpretive bias.

### Data Analysis and Process

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure (Barun V, Clarke V., 2019) [3]. The researcher familiarized herself with the transcripts, generated initial codes manually, organized these codes into themes and subthemes, and refined them through iterative comparison with the original data to ensure authenticity and coherence in representation.

## Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifying information from the transcripts. Participation was voluntary, and individuals retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

## Results

### Preconceived Notions

This theme captures the preconceived ideas and assumptions that contribute to gender microaggressions. It includes two subthemes.

### Presumed Incompetence

Participants frequently encountered situations where their abilities in math, science, technology, research methods, statistics, or hardware-related tasks were questioned or undervalued based on their gender. Seven of them reported that they mainly faced it from male peers.

"In a group project, I was never given a chance for presentation; I was often assigned less important tasks, because it was assumed that I would not be able to manage technology-based tasks as competently as my male peers."

Another scholar recalled that one of her male peers even asked her once,

**"How can you be so good at statistics, why so fast? Grow slowly".**

A postgraduate student noted discouragement when choosing a science course:

**"Math is not for you, pick something softer".**

Such experiences reflect broader gendered assumptions that position women as less capable in STEM, analytical or technical domains which has also been identified across workplaces and academic spaces (Basford *et al.*, 2014; Yang & Carroll, 2018; Martínez Ruiz & Hernández Amorós, 2023) [2, 34, 16].

### Stereotyping based on Gender Roles

Nine out of ten participants indicated that these stereotypes often resulted in expectations that women should prioritize marriage, maternity, and caregiving over their academic and professional aspirations.

#### One scholar shared,

"One of my aunts once suggested to me that I should consider a teaching job because research would be too demanding for a woman planning to have a family".

#### Another participant stated,

"My relatives pressurized my family to arrange my marriage immediately because no one is going to marry a woman of 30 years of age, and I should plan for a baby as early as possible. So, my higher education should be stopped right now".

These accounts highlight how sociocultural expectations continue to shape women's academic and career trajectories (Gartner, 2021; Martínez Ruiz & Hernández Amorós, 2023; Michel, 2020; Nadal *et al.*, 2013) [7, 16, 18, 24].

## Dialogue Disaster

This theme addresses the challenges participants faced in their interactions with family, relatives, and broader society, which reinforced gender microaggression. It includes two sub-themes.

### Dismissive Comments from Family, Relatives, and Friends

Participants reported receiving dismissive or belittling comments from family members and relatives, which undermined their academic achievements and reinforced traditional gender expectations.

#### One postgraduate student shared,

"I am doing a double Master's, and whenever I speak about my future plan to pursue a doctorate and to be an assistant professor, my relatives quickly change the topic to my cousins who are living successful married lives at my age. They tell me not to chase a career like men,"

#### Another participant added,

"We women are told since childhood that we will get married and go to another house, and we are not capable of supporting our parents financially and physically. So why invest money and time in providing higher education for daughters?-My parents are often being questioned."

Such expectations align with social norms that link womanhood to caregiving and domestic responsibility, which can restrict women's professional identity formation (Capodilupo *et al.*, 2010; Gartner, 2021; Martínez Ruiz & Hernández Amorós, 2023) [4, 7, 16].

### Social Gaslighting

Social gaslighting refers to the subtle or overt ways in which participants' perceptions and experiences are questioned or invalidated by society, leading them to doubt their abilities and worth. This form of gaslighting often manifests in conversations where their achievements are downplayed or attributed to factors other than their hard work and intelligence.

#### For example,

"Sometimes we behave like second-class citizens because we are made to believe so, and we don't realize that we are being marginalized by the judgmental review of society."-a participant shared.

#### Another participant narrated,

"Whenever we as parents sit to tutor our child, my husband always picks science and math group for himself and suggests me that I should teach humanities subjects. Even I sometimes accept that the humanities are appropriate to be taught by women".

Again, when it comes into social circles, it keeps invalidating the efforts and challenges that come with academic achievements, causing women to question the value of their success.

#### For example, a participant illustrated

"When I share my academic success with friends in a social circle, they often say, 'you are lucky to have such an easy life', completely dismissing the hard work I have put in. Even they said, 'you are going to be too educated to find a husband', as if my work is tied to being marriageable rather

than my achievements".

This quote reflects how social gas lighting can undermine women's confidence by suggesting that their academic success could negatively impact on their personal lives.

Approximately, majority of the participants felt social gas lighting daily.

#### **For instance, sixth participant elucidated,**

"When I tried to discuss my research at a social event, I was told, 'you are always in your head; you need to be more present,' making me feel like my intellectual pursuits were unwelcome".

Similar patterns of invalidation, minimization of women's achievements, and pressure to conform to traditional roles have been documented across different cultural contexts, where microaggressions subtly undermine women's confidence and sense of belonging (Basford *et al.*, 2014; Gartner & Sterzing, 2016; Hovey, 2019; Jones *et al.*, 2016; Nadal, 2010) [2, 8, 11, 13, 20].

#### **Impacts on mental and physical health**

This item draws attention to the effects that participants' physical and mental health has due to gender microaggressions. Their academic performance and general well-being were impacted by the ongoing exposure to microaggressions. All ten students said that their mental health suffered because of those inconspicuous remarks.

#### **For instance, this quote reveals their agony:-**

"I started feeling anxious all the time, and it affected my sleep. The pressure of constantly proving myself was overwhelming".

In addition to mental distress, five participants reported physical health concerns including obesity, ovarian cysts, loss of hunger, lethargy, and insomnia. Some of them also reported that it impacted their academic performance. They suffered issues like lack of concentration, confusion, and dilemma in their career path.

#### **Restricted mobility due to endangered physical safety**

Several participants stated that they avoid remaining outside late because they feel uncomfortable, especially in the evenings. They are instructed to get home by 9:00 p.m.

#### **One participant noted,**

"I tried to finish all my work before 6 pm, even if I have more work to do, I prefer to leave rather than to take the risk. It is frustrating because I feel like we women are missing important opportunities to collaborate and learn with the rest of our male peers".

The fear of being in danger after dark significantly restricts the mobility of female students. This sense of vulnerability with added mental stress is not just a personal issue but a reflection of broader societal challenges in ensuring the safety of women in public and academic spaces.

#### **Suggestions and Recommendations from participants**

Participants offered several suggestions for addressing gender microaggressions and fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment, such as Gender Sensitivity Training and Awareness Program, Support Group of Female Students, Enact the Legal Marriage Age for Women at 24, Policy Changes, Counselling Program for Parents before starting a Family, and Curriculum Changes.

Participants offered several suggestions for addressing gender microaggressions and fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Gender Sensitivity Training and Awareness Program-Participants emphasized the need for mandatory gender sensitivity training that would raise awareness about gender biases and microaggressions. "Universities should conduct regular workshops on gender sensitivity to educate everyone about subtle forms of discrimination".-Suggested by a participant.

Support Group of Female Students-A participant recommended, "A support group can help us navigate challenges and empower each other to overcome gender barriers".

Empower women through education and employment: Empowering women through education and employment will break stereotypes and create more opportunities for future generations.

Enact the Legal Marriage Age for Women 24-Participants argued that delayed marriage would give more time to pursue higher education and become independent.

Policy Changes-Participants suggested revising policies to ensure that women are represented equitably in decision-making processes.

Counselling Program for Parents before starting a Family-Participants suggested that this would help to address and minimize gender discrimination between siblings. Through family upbringing, future generations' hidden bias will be minimized.

Role of Mass Media and social media-Mass media should promote gender equality through advertisements and feature films.

Curriculum Changes-Not only in primary level, but also the gender equality education should be included in higher education. It will remind students and minimize their biased & stereotype thinking.

#### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of gender microaggressions among postgraduate and scholar female students in West Bengal, India. The research aimed to understand how these students face microaggressions in both academic and social spheres, how these experiences affect them, and the suggestions they offer to minimize subtle insults, discrimination and foster a more gender-inclusive society. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews, the findings reveal several key themes, including preconceived notions, dialogue disaster, impacts on physical and mental health, and endangered physical safety. The theme of Preconceived Notions is explored through two sub-themes, Presumed Incapability and Stereotyping Gender Roles.

In this study, participants frequently encountered situations where their abilities in math, science, technology, statistics, and hardware were questioned or undervalued based on their gender. Alongside assumptions about their competence, stereotypes related to traditional gender roles also heavily influenced how participants were treated. Nine out of ten participants in this study, reported societal expectations that women should prioritize marriage, maternity and caregiving over career ambitions. These resonate with a study (Diaz-Espinoza, 2015) [5] where, women in engineering, gender microaggressions, generated an academic climate where female students sensed they "had to prove" their ability to

be accepted, reflecting the same patterns of presumed incapability and gendered expectations identified in the present study (Diaz-Espinoza, 2015) [5]. Likewise, Gartner (2021) noted in his study, women in male dominated fields like STEM, faced biases that question their intellectual abilities and contributions (Gartner, 2021) [7]. Correspondingly, Gartner & Sterzing (2016) conducted a study and found that particularly in male-dominated fields like STEM, women participants faced biases that questioned their intellectual abilities and contributions during university life and also reported being pushed towards traditional gender roles, such as caretaking or women-dominated occupations (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016) [8]. Similarly in The Gendered Microaggression Inventory study (Yang & Carroll 2016) [35], feelings of marginalization and intellectual challenge were prominent with items reflecting how women experienced disrespect and assumptions of inferiority due to their gender. In the same way, McCormick, Barthelemy, & Henderson (2014) shows in a study that in physics and astronomy, women are told that they are worse at spatial cognition and should adhere to traditional gender roles, such as taking care of babies instead of pursuing careers in science which reinforces the notion that their presence is in direct conflicts with established female gender roles (McCormick *et al.*, 2014) [17].

While the experiences of these women illustrate the impact of presumed incompetence in academic choices, this theme is not confined to gender education settings only. Furthermore, this extends to corporate settings in India. Likewise, Paranjape (2021) found that participants reported being perceived as only suitable for administrative roles, reflecting assumptions of low competence (Paranjape, 2021) [28]. In addition, one participant recounted how their mentor questioned why she was single and suggested she should focus on marriage and family instead of her professional ambitions. This reveals how gender stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of women's roles and capabilities in the workplace, beyond academia. Likewise, to understand the impact of gender norms in workplace, a study in California also revealed that women are basically considered primary caregivers for children and elderly family members (Andrea Michel, 2020) [18]. These preconceived notions are not limited to academics or the workplace. They are evident in other areas as well, such as athletics. In a study on female athletes in the U.S. (Kuskan, 2016) it is found that women were often assumed to be inferior athletes than men (Kuskan & Ho, 2016) [14]. Media focuses more on their appearances than their achievements, which affected their confidence and physical fitness. If we talk about the significant impact of microaggression on mental and physical health of women, in this study, majority of participants experienced anxiety, stress, and insomnia due to the constant pressure to prove themselves in academic and social settings. This mental strain also manifested in physical health issues such as obesity, ovarian cysts and lethargy and further impacted their academic performances, leading to difficulties with concentration, decision-making and clarity in their career paths. This finding is supported by existing research, which has documented the psychological toll of microaggressions on women, particularly in environments where they feel constantly undermined or devalued (Sue, 2010) [30]. Correspondingly a study on sexism and gender microaggressions found that these issues negatively affect women's mental health, self-esteem, and identity

development (Nadal & Haynes, 2012) [25]. That is why microaggression is described as "a thousand little cuts" (Yang & Carroll, 2018) [34] which can lead to significant issues, including depression, sleep disturbances, substance use disorders, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Likewise in Spain a study on female university students and reported that female students are often expected to prioritize caregiving and household chores, leading to "role overload" (Martínez-Ruiz & Hernández-Amorós, 2023) [16] exhaustion, and interpersonal stress. Also, a study on dental hygiene professionals in New England highlights significant emotional and mental health impacts of gender microaggressions, with women reporting lasting consequences such as depression, anxiety and shame (Hovey, 2019) [11].

Moreover, in the current study, participants reported social gaslighting, where their academic achievements were diminished or attributed to luck, leading them to doubt their abilities. These constant invalidations from social circles reinforced feelings of marginalization. However, it has been noticed that participants are open to talking about family, friends, peers and relatives outside of the academic sphere, but a few candidates did not want to comment on anything against their institutions or lecturers. Similarly in a study in Spain, it is stated that female university students avoid making attacking comments in their narratives against any institution or lecturers (Martínez-Ruiz & Hernández-Amorós, 2023) [16]. What is surprising is the fact, gender microaggressions do not only come from male or opposite gender, as in this study female students experienced microaggressions from female relatives and friends also. This resonates with Hovey's (2019) study, where women dental hygienists acknowledged that they had also perpetuated gender microaggressions toward other women, reflecting how deeply internalized gender norms can be reproduced within women themselves (Hovey, 2019) [11]. The theme of endangered safety challenges highlights a critical yet often overlooked aspect of the experience for female students, the pervasive fear of harassment or physical harm. Participants reported feeling unsafe after dark, which limited their ability to fully engage in academic activities that requested staying late on campus. This aligns with Gartner and Sterzing's (2016) argument that gender microaggressions can operate as a gateway to more overt forms of harassment, creating a climate of vigilance and caution (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016) [8]. Similarly, Kalra and Bhugra (2013) highlighted how women often internalize safety concerns and adapt their mobility to avoid possible sexual threats (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013) [15]. Together, these findings suggest that microaggressions do not merely affect emotional well-being, but also shape women's physical presence, access, freedom and mobility in our society.

In this study, almost every female participant reported that they were advised either by society, relatives, peers, or even by their family members that they should get married and have children within a time period, as their biological clock was ticking. In Western countries, the context and culture may be a little different, and therefore the studies conducted there found microaggressions coming from peers, society towards females, but the focus on marriage by family and relatives was not prominent.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the experiences of

gender microaggressions faced by postgraduate and female scholars from their surroundings. The findings reveal that these women navigate multiple forms of microaggressions, both within academic and social settings. This study underscores how family, peers, and societal norms continue to perpetuate dismissive comments, stereotyping, and social gas lighting, all of which reinforce traditional gender roles that marginalize women.

This study is significant as it will aid to raise awareness among female students about gender microaggressions and equip them to deal with them more effectively. It will challenge even men to recognize and reconsider their gender stereotypes and unconscious biases, promoting more respectful interactions. Additionally, this study can encourage women, not only men, to promote solidarity and refrain from committing microaggressions against one another. The research sheds light on the psychological impact of microaggressions on female students, which can lead to anxiety, stress, and mental challenges. This is a critical area for researchers and mental health professionals to address, creating avenues for better mental health support in academic institutions. Furthermore, the study calls for the development of support systems, such as peer networks and mentoring programs.

Addressing these social challenges requires broader societal reforms, including legal and policy changes aimed at empowering women through education and employment. These implications can be instrumental for educators, policymakers, and researchers in creating inclusive, supportive, and equitable environments for female students.

### Limitations of study and future directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of gender microaggressions among female postgraduate and doctoral scholars in West Bengal, it is not without limitations. The small sample size and the focus on a specific region limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Moreover, this study emphasized only ten female experiences of gender microaggression. Future research might focus on a bigger sample and also make a comparison with rural and urban female students facing microaggressions at home and educational institutions. In addition, this can be done along with the way in which gender microaggressions intersect with other factors such as ethnic background, age, profession, socioeconomic status and geographical locations. Future research could expand on this study by including a larger, more diverse sample and employing mixed method approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of gender microaggressions against women.

### Declaration of Conflict of Interest

None

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