

## Shifting from ‘Marriage-First’ to ‘Career-First’: The Role of Family Pressure, Peer Networks, and Generational Cohort in Urban Indian Women’s Life Scripts

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### Abstract

Urban India is undergoing a socio-cultural transformation that has impacted the aspirations, priorities, and life pathways of women. This has resulted in a slow transition away from the traditional ‘marriage-first’ orientation to a more ‘career-first’ orientation (Kumar & Kumari, 2023; Pautunthang, 2024). Historically, marriage was the most important life script for women, while education and employment were secondary to domestic and family roles (Roy & Mukherjee 2013). Despite this, women have received access to higher education, urbanization, globalization, opportunities, and digital exposure have redefined their perception of success, independence, and identity (Bhosale, 2026). In this context, the present study looks at how family pressure, peer networks and generational cohort differences shape evolving life priorities of urban Indian women. This research employed a quantitative and exploratory approach and collected data through a structured questionnaire from 368 urban Indian women belonging to the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts. The research tries to find out how traditionalism and modernism influence women’s decision on marriage and career prioritization in the Indian context. Data analysis was performed using SPSS applying descriptive analysis, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis and ANOVA to check the relationship among various variables and test the hypothesis. Women’s perception towards marriage and employment opportunity has undergone a significant change. The majority of respondents were in favour of having financial independence, establishing a career, and personal development before marriage. The analysis shows that family pressure has a negative influence on women’s career-first orientation while peer networks and social exposure encourage independent decision-making and acceptance of late marriage positively. There was also a major difference across generations, as the respondents of Generation Z exhibited comparatively greater support for autonomy, self-development, and career firstness than the respondents of the Millennials. Regression analysis revealed that peer networks were the strongest positive predictor of career-first orientation while the family traditional expectations remained as constraining social effects. The study shows that urban Indian women are gradually reconstructing conventional gender roles and life scripts with respect to altering socio-economic realities. This emerging career-first orientation reflects not just the economic aspirations of women but also the transformation that is happening in the identity, autonomy and consciousness of women in contemporary urban India. The study adds to the discussion on growing female autonomy, modernity, and transformation of family structure by showing how urban women negotiate traditional expectations and emerging job aspirations.

**Keywords:** Marriage First, Women empowerment, Career First, Women Life, Family Pressure.

### 1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important events in a woman’s life as per Indian society. (à Ralte, 2025) For many decades, the social construction of women’s identity operated around a social role, that of a daughter, wife, and mother. Therefore, education and employment were seen as secondary options to improve marriageability, rather than an end in itself (KÖU & BAILEY, 2017). Within patriarchal social structures, women in particular have been

noticed to follow a pre-determined life sequence in which marriage is given a centrality and a non-negotiable position (Kōu & Bailey, 2017). The family expectations, caregiving roles and social norms of ideal femininity often overshadowed the career ambitions, professional development and financial autonomy (Buddhapriya, 2009). Nevertheless, the life scripts of urban Indians are getting increasingly challenged and reconfigured as the socio-economic transformation in urban India over two decades implies (Shah et al., 2025)

The rapid growth of cities and rising presence of women in workplaces has transformed the aspirations and priorities of urban Indian women (Borpujari, 2024). Women have started to imagine other identities rather than being just homemakers because of education and economic opportunities. New-age urban women prefer first self-development, financial independence, emotional autonomy, and professional fulfilment before marriage. Accordingly, the mainstream course, “marriage-first” is transforming into “career-first”, especially among educated women of metro and semi-metro areas (Pautunthang, 2024). Women no longer see marriage as the end goal of life. They are ever so increasingly seeing marriage as just an option that can be chosen later once other goals are achieved.

Changes in India are not just physical, but also mental and emotional in nature. The meaning of success and adulthood for women is rapidly changing due to many different reasons. These include the emergence of dual-income families, change in the modes of consumption, enhanced exposure to a global lifestyle, and more. Millennials and Generation Z, more specifically, prefer to pursue higher education, professional stability, entrepreneurship and freedom before settling into marriage (Kumar & Kumari, 2023). More and more independent women are depicted in the media, corporate sector, politics, academics, and entrepreneurship. These images strengthen alternative ideas of successful femininity that do not center on marriage or motherhood. However, social complexity and emotional negotiation characterize the transition from ‘marriage-first’ to ‘career-first.’ Urban Indian women still living or functioning in a socio-culture which has deep-rooted expectations regarding marriage and family. Women’s familial pressure still plays a powerful role regarding what is considered the “appropriate” age for marriage, career choices, mobility, and lifestyle. Parents and relatives consider delayed marriage a social risk because it reduces chances for marriage, complicates social acceptability and going against tradition. As a result, many women feel torn between their personal and family aspirations.

At the same time, the peer networks have also emerged as important agents of socialization in urban areas. Women’s definition of success, autonomy and life planning is increasingly shaped by professional peers, educational communities, friendship circles, and online social networks (Venkatesan, 2025; Younger et al., 2015). Being with peers who pursue jobs, postpone marriage, go abroad for higher study or live unconventional lives, makes alternate life trajectories look normal. Social media platforms compound the influence of such models creating aspirational spaces for women where they come across narratives of empowerment, entrepreneurship, travel, financial independence, and self-growth. Peer validation often serves as a counterbalance to conventional family expectations in this context (Rimal et al., 2015; Takhar et al., 2021). The life scripts of women has also been amended because of generational cohort differences. Women from older generations were taught to fit within a framework of rigid gender structures built around sacrifice, domesticity and early marriage. On the other hand, younger urban women grew up at the time of economic liberalisation, technological advancement and expanding educational opportunities. Accordingly, their notions of marriage, relationships and career are vastly different from their predecessors. This new generation is creating new negotiations within families, where old meets new. Most times there is conflict, some compromise, and some adaptation.

There has been considerable research on women’s education, presence in the workforce, postponed marriage, and gender roles in India. However, not many have explored comprehensively how urban Indian women are reshaping their life priorities through family pressure, peer influence, and generational change, through their life narratives. The existing literature often takes marriage and career to be separate components rather than considering them as interlinked parts of women’s evolving life scripts. Further, the manner in which women negotiate these competing expectations through psychological and social processes is unexplored. Within this framework, the present study aims to analyze the marriage first to career first orientation among urban Indian women. The research study seeks to understand how family pressure, social network of peers and cohort of generation impacts decision, aspirations

and perceptions of marriage and career among women. Through an exploration of these dynamics, it hopes to contribute to the debates on gender, modernity and social change in present-day urban India.

## 2. Literature Review

The change in urban Indian women from a “marriage-first” to “career-first” life course is one of the biggest socio-cultural changes in today’s India. In traditional Indian society, marriage was treated as the most significant event in the life course of a woman whereas education and employment were largely seen as marginal or secondary achievements that could enhance marriageability rather than life-changing events in their own right. Nevertheless, due to rapid urbanization, globalization, growth of higher education, spread of digital connectivity, changing aspirations and increasing female workforce participation the life scripts of women are changing. Modern city women also negotiate identity, autonomy, economic independence, emotional fulfilment, and professional ambition before marriage (Pautunthang, 2024). There’s huge contention over this shift within families and communities, where traditional gender norms continue to hold sway.

Sociological theories help explain this transformation. According to Role Theory, women had prescribed social roles in relation to care of children and spouses. According to Parsons, the husband’s role is instrumental while the wife’s role is expressive. Yet, feminist theorists contended that gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Liberal Feminist Theory highlighted access to education and jobs as routes to women’s empowerment, while Socialist Feminist theorists associated women’s domestic duties with larger systems of economic and patriarchal control. Theoretical perspectives continue to be useful for explaining why educated urban women refuse to marry early when it jeopardizes their careers.

The parents of Beck have devised a new theory of individualization that will study the changing patterns of marriage of urban women. Modernization transforms the identity of a society based on choice instead of duty, says theory. In urban India, we have begun seeing a shift wherein women have started focusing on self-development, career making, and financial independence before marriage. Though, Indian society does not fully accommodate western individualism; women often negotiate between self-interest and collective family interest. This results in what academics call a “negotiated modernity”, whereby women desire autonomy without completely giving up on family.

According to the Life Course Perspective, demographic timing or mechanisms further affect women's choices as far as education, work and marriage. Prior generations of Indian women were conditioned to have a straight life path in relation to education, marriage, motherhood and domesticity. On the contrary, younger urban groups consider career building a necessity before marriage. The order of life events has thus changed. Research on generational cohorts finds that the Millennial women and Gen Z women are likely to postpone marriage for educational qualification, career ambition, urban lifestyle, and global storytelling of women’s empowerment (Sharma, 2026). With the increase in dual income urban households, women’s work ambitions have become normalised to some extent, although domestic expectation remains highly feminised (Daida, 2025).

The Theory of Planned Behavior also helps in understanding the rationale behind changing marital decisions. Sung et al. (2021) argue that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape behavior. Research suggests that the urban Indian woman may have a positive attitude toward prioritizing a career, but pressure from the family and society still influences her decision-making (Böhmer & Schinnenburg, 2020). Peer groups and social benchmarking are more and more mediating these norms as seeing a peer circle of professionally successful unmarried women normalizes delayed marriage and strengthens the confidence of women in pursuing career-driven identities (Kumar et al., 2025). As per Gautam et al. (2025), social media lends visibility to life choices such as independence, entrepreneurship, global mobility, and delayed marriage among women. Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital helps us understand why the increasingly “career-first” orientation is becoming more visible among educated urban women. Higher education, fluency in English, awareness of corporate culture, and access to global media generate varieties of symbolic capital that are reshaping femininity and success (Metz-Matthews & Metz-Matthews, 2023). Previously, marriage was seen as only provision for social security, however with achievement of a career, it in itself becomes a marker of status and identity (Maslak &

Singhal, 2008). Urban middle-class families are investing more and more into the education of their daughters, but contradictions emerge when such daughters delay marriage, or when they ignore domesticity in favour of their profession (Kōu & Bailey, 2017). Existing studies consistently show that education delays marriage and alters the aspirations of women (Vikram, 2023). According to Singh, Shekhar and Gupta (2023), women's age at first marriage has significantly increased in India from 1992 to 2021 with higher education and urban residence being strongly associated with delayed marriage. Research shows how educational attainment makes the urgency around marriage timing traditional. A similar finding emerges from research on multigenerational educational mobility by Siddiqui and Goswami (2024) whereby women residing in urban locales display more upward mobility on education. This generates new aspirational hopes to alter what is considered an acceptable trajectory in life for one's daughter. According to recent research, when women marry has an increasing link with participating of women into labour force and continuity of their career. According to the research conducted by Afridi, Bishnu, and Mahajan (2022), urban Indian women continue to experience enduring structural hindrances to labor force participation despite having a heightened academic qualification. The loss of continuity between educational achievement and sustained employment is frequently encountered by young educated women because of marriage and caregiving expectations. The contradictions of the expanding educational opportunities versus the enduring dueling patriarchal labors. Barhate et al. (2021) found that although educated urban women are more qualified than unqualified women, they have lower levels of workforce participation due to marriage, indicating marriage is a significant turning point.

More direct inspection of the link between marriage and career disruption has taken place in qualitative studies. Barhate et al. (2021) studied career discontinuities faced by married Indian women after marriage. These women have low autonomy over their career choices and depend on spousal or family support for continuity. The research found that women often adopt traditional ideas about gender and see themselves as mothers and wives, leading them to abandon work. Scholars have also studied how family structures continue to affect women's autonomy. Jayaraman and Khan (2023) conducted a study which found that married women were less likely to pursue employment when living with other generations in urban India. Moreover, the likelihood of their employment participation was less when traditional family norms impacted the decision-making autonomy of women. The structure of a joint family intensifies surveillance on women's choices in work and education, reinforcing marriage expectations even among urban educated families. The evolving attitudes around marriage and career choices are further evident in research on changing family relationships and generational attitudes. Megha and colleagues (2024) found that there are significant intergenerational differences in how marriage and women's employment and autonomy are perceived. While older women regarded changing gender roles with scepticism, young women viewed the prioritization of careers and late marriages as empowering and a form of self-realization. According to their analysis, today's urban women are now more inclined to being emotionally compatible, having shared responsibilities and professional respect in marriage instead of being made to conform to traditional domestic roles (Gilbertson, 2014; Netting, 2010). A different stream of literature investigates the relationship between social status and occupational prestige and women's employment decisions. Recent studies in urban India indicate that professional careers, particularly high-skilled occupations, have become more socially respectable for women (Fernando & Cohen, 2013). It should be noted that this respectability is conditional. Women are motivated to become professionally successful only to the extent that success does not endanger family honour, marriageability, or caregiving (Kar, 2017) As such, urban women often have to bear a "double burden" of achieving success at their jobs and performing idealized domestic femininity (Böhmer & Schinnenburg, 2020). Peer social networks significantly assist women in their efforts to enrich their lives. The modern urban professional milieu creates communities where behaviours like late marriage, independent living, global mobility and career prioritisation become normative (Kumar et al, 2025, Pautunthang, 2024). Unlike earlier generations where it was the family that the individuals looked to as a primary reference group, today the women increasingly seek emotional validation and means of self-identification through their peers(Singh, 2022). The presence of unmarried successful peers lowers stigma of late marriage in women and helps them challenge timelines of marriage(Kumar et al., 2025). The impact becomes even more pronounced when you consider the role of digital peer communities, which foster aspirational narratives of self-growth, entrepreneurship, travel, and earnings (Dhavan et al., 2023).

Numerous significant gaps still exist despite the literature's growing corpus. Most Indian studies examine marriage timing, women's employment or educational attainment separately and not in a larger "life script" framework. Research on how urban women cognitively reconstruct the order and meaning of adulthood milestones is limited. Moreover, existing studies focus considerably on the structural determinants like education, caste and labour participation but relatively less attention has been given to the psychological negotiation of family pressure and individual aspiration. Furthermore, while generational change is often recognised, we rarely compare attitudes towards marriage and work prioritisation between generational cohorts. The experiences of Gen Z women are significantly disconnected from those of Millennial women, but the literature has treated urban women as homogenous. Furthermore, due to their increasing significance in defining women's it is necessary to do an extensive study of digital socialization and peer networks. Many Indian studies still over rely on family influences while overlooking professional and social peer ecosystems. Fifth, literature focuses on married women and career disruption after marriage while fewer studies include unmarried women from urban centres who willingly delay marriage for career progression. In this manner, three different (theoretical) clusters can be constructed in order to understand career-first orientation's proactive decision-making processes. All in all, previous research concentrates on labor participation statistics rather than performing an in-depth analysis of subjective experiences such as identity conflict, emotional negotiation, guilt, social judgment, resistance strategies, and more.

All these gaps imply that a thorough investigation is needed to understand how urban Indian women are redefining life priorities in changing contexts. The urban Indian women in the proposed study therefore seek to understand how some women are transitioning from "marriage-first" to "career-first" orientation. In other words, the researcher is studying the role of family use, peer networks and in shaping women's life scripts. Generational cohort differences. A study of this nature can contribute to contemporary gender deliberations by bringing sociological, psychological and cultural angles to bear on a formulation of women's changing aspirations in urban India.

### **3. Research Gaps**

The existing studies on women empowerment, delayed marriage, labour force participation and changing gender roles in India have gone a long way in understanding the socio-economic transformation of urban women. Nonetheless, different conceptual and contextual gaps remain underexplored. A significant gap in the literature is the over-emphasis on structural indicators like age at marriage, educational attainment, and workforce participation, while less focus has been on the psychological as well as social negotiations behind these choices (Parida & Bhagavatula, 2023). India is blessed with cultures and traditions. It has rich culture like anywhere else in the world. Our spices are used worldwide and everybody now loves Indian food. Moreover, while family influence is researched very extensively in women's choice of life, the recent growing influence of peer networks and digital socialization on the aspirations of women does not receive adequate scholarly attention (Francesca et al., 2017). Success, independence and related life tracks are determined by reference groups and peer-networks in the current urban settings of professional circles and social media (Yadav & Yadav, 2025). Nonetheless, there is a lack of empirical research on how social media affects women's choices on marriage and career (Francesca et al., 2017). Another notable gap is the comparative study across generations (Megha et al., 2024). In addition, most of the studies have been done on married women and post-marriage career disruption. Very few studies explore unmarried urban women who focus on professional growth and self-development (Kumar et al., 2025). Consequently, there is a need for a study that spans family pressure, peer pressure and generations cohort which study the changes in the life script of urban Indian women.

### **4. Research Objectives**

1. Study the changing choice of urban Indian women from "marriage-first" to "career-first".
2. Analyse how family pressure influences women's career aspirations and marriage-related decisions.
3. Explore peer networks and social exposure impact on women's perception towards prioritizing a career and delaying marriage.

4. Compare the attitudes about marriage, career and the women's priority in life across generational cohorts in urban India.

## 5. Research Methodology

This research design used in the present paper is quantitative and exploratory to study how the orientation of urban India women is shifting from "marriage-first" to "career-first" life script. This study tries to evaluate: The influence of family pressure, peer network and generational cohort on the priorities of women in marriage, career and agency. A structured and empirical method is appropriate since the study attempts to identify the relationship between social and psychological variables concerning women's decision-making. The sample of the study will be urban Indian women living in metro and semi-metro cities who are either pursuing higher education or working in professional occupations.

The study mainly targets the women from the Millennial and Generation Z age cohorts, broadly in the 21-40 years age group as they are the first to take on career-building and marriage-related decision-making. To ensure a wider range of urban experiences, women from various educational, occupational, and socio-economic backgrounds will be included. Around 368 respondents are the proposed sample size for the study to ensure the study's reliability and statistical validity. The researcher will identify the respondents through purposive and convenience sampling technique, as the study will be confined to educated/urbane women who can provide meaningful response on the issues of career aspirations, marriage perception, family expectations, and peer pressure. Data collection will be conducted using a structured questionnaire in online and offline modes for wider reach. The literature study identified the independent and dependent variables of the study based on the gap analysis. The dependent variable of the study is the "Career-First Orientation," which refers to women's preference of giving preference to professional growth, financial independence and self-development before marriage.

Variables that are **independent** include Family Pressure and Peer Networks. Family Pressure is how parents, relatives and family expect you to marry at a certain age and stick to the norm. Peer networks are influences from friends, colleagues, social groups, and cyber communities that affect the aspirations and choices of women. Differences between Millennial women and Generation Z women can manifest in marriage and career preferences. This is referred to as Generational Cohort. Furthermore, certain demographic variables age, academic qualification, occupation, level of income, and marital status will also be taken as control variable in order to understand variations in response across the different social classes.

The analysis of the stated data has been done with the help of statistical tools like descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and comparative analysis using SPSS or similar ones. A) The application of Descriptive statistics will help in understanding the respondent profiles and their behavioral pattern. Furthermore, regression analysis will be studied to understand the extent of family pressure, peer influence and generational difference on the career-first orientation of urban women. The research would provide further insights into the evolving social identity of urban Indian women. Most importantly, it will add to the contemporary discourse on gender, modernity, career aspirations, and changing family forms in India.

### 5.1 Hypotheses of the Study

**H1:** The career-first mindset of urban Indian women gets considerably impacted negatively by family pressure.

**H2:** Peer networks positively affect the career-first orientation of the urban Indian women.

**H3:** There is a difference between urban women of Millennial and Generation Z in their preference for career first and marriage first life.

**H4:** Family pressure, peer networks, and generational cohort have a substantial impact on the life script preferences of urban Indian women concerning marriage and career prioritization.

5.2 Data Analysis and Interpretation

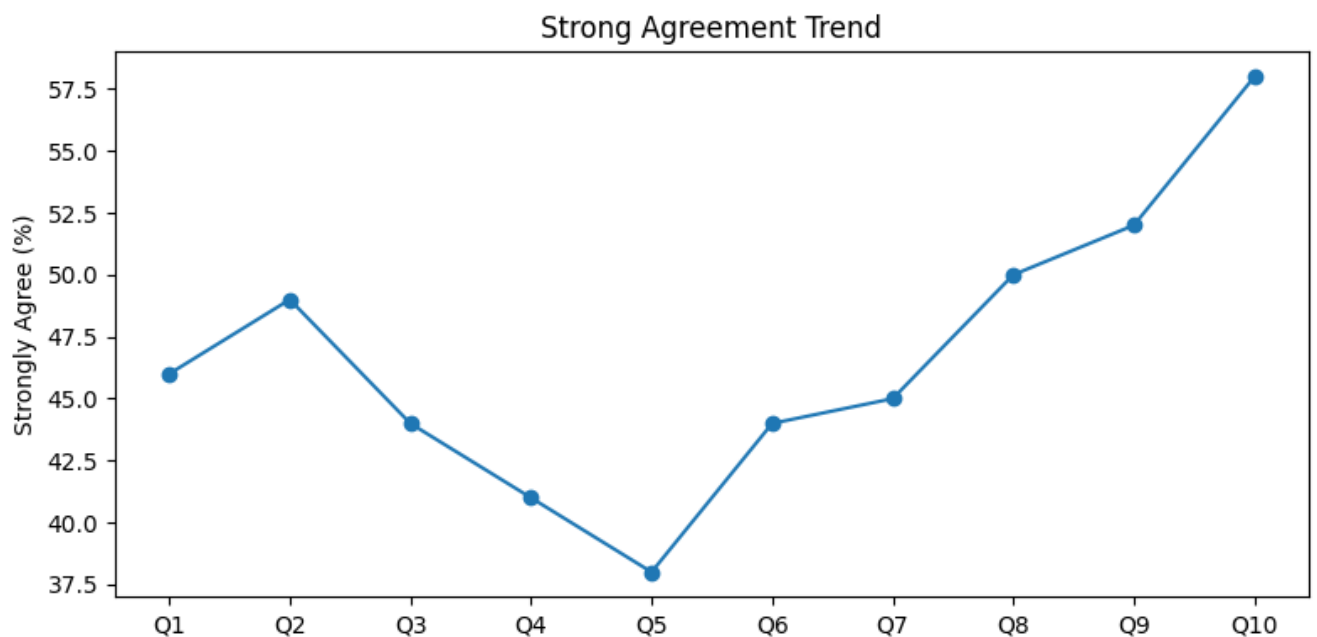
The study was conducted on 368 urban Indian women to examine the shift from “Marriage-First” to “Career-First” orientation. *The evaluation of the data collected with the help of the organized questionnaires. And they were assessed using tools like SPSS including Descriptive Analysis, Reliability Analysis, Correlation Analysis, Regression Analysis, ANOVA, and Hypothesis Testing.*

5.3 Descriptive Analysis of Respondents’ Responses

SA= Strongly Agree, A= Agree, N= Neutral, DA= Disagree, SDA= Strongly Disagree

Statement	SA %	A %	N %	DA%	SDA %
Career establishment is important before marriage	46	34	10	6	4
Financial independence increases women’s self-confidence	49	33	9	5	4
Women should achieve professional goals before marriage	44	36	10	6	4
Family members pressure women for timely marriage	41	37	11	7	4
Marriage can interrupt women’s professional growth	38	35	14	9	4
Peer groups encourage women to focus on career growth	44	36	10	6	4
Social media influences women’s aspirations	45	33	11	7	4
Delaying marriage for career growth is acceptable	50	29	9	7	5
Younger women are more career-oriented	52	28	8	8	4
Women should have freedom in deciding marriage timing	58	23	7	7	5

There is fairly overwhelming agreement on financial independence, establishment of a career and delayed marriage. The results indicate urban Indian women are increasingly chosen career-first.



The graph reflects a strong positive attitude toward women’s autonomy, career growth, and independent decision-making.

5.4 Reliability Analysis (Cronbach Alpha)

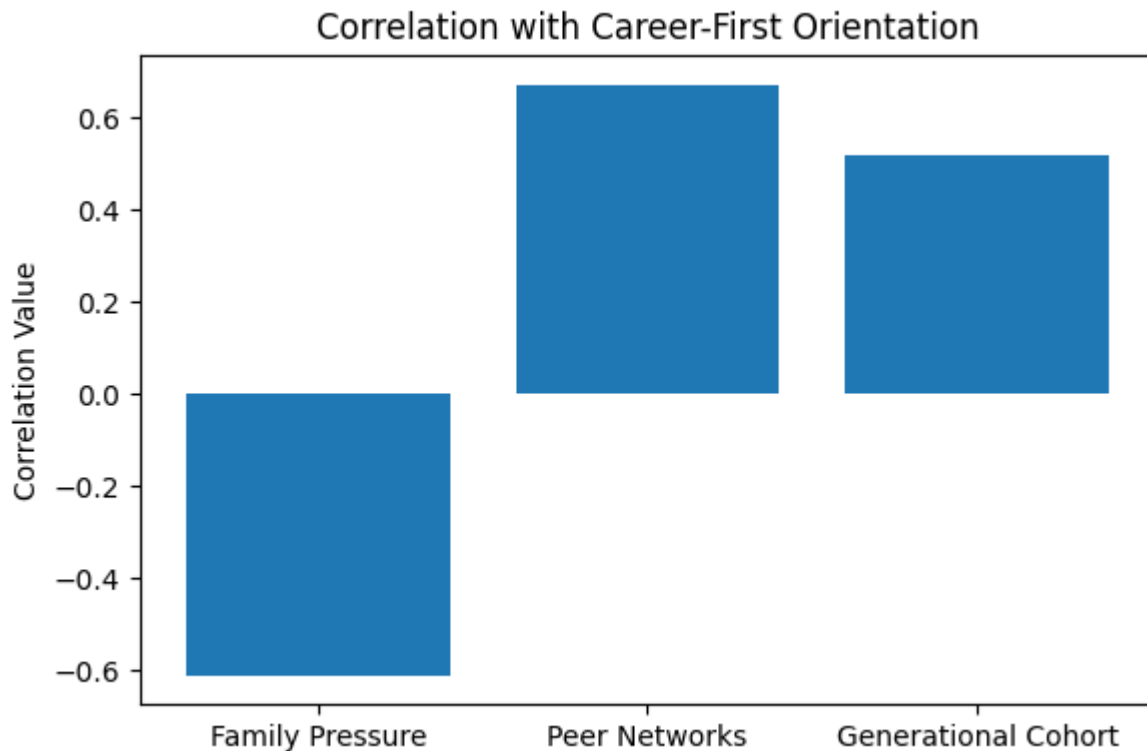
Construct	Cronbach Alpha
Family Pressure	0.82
Peer Networks	0.79
Career-First Orientation	0.86
Generational Cohort	0.77

All Cronbach Alpha values are above 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire(Kılıç, 2016).

5.5 Correlation Analysis

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Sig. Value
Family Pressure	-0.61	< 0.001
Peer Networks	0.67	< 0.001
Generational Cohort	0.52	0.002

Interpretation: According to the findings presented above, family pressure was greater than peer network and generational cohort in determining career-first orientation.



Interpretation: The peer network is positively most significantly associated with orientation towards career-first, and family pressure is negatively associated with women's career priorities.

5.6 Multiple Regression Analysis

Independent Variable	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Family Pressure	-0.48	-6.22	0.0
Peer Networks	0.56	7.14	0.0
Generational Cohort	0.31	3.96	0.001

**Interpretation:** According to the results of the regression analysis, peer networks had the highest positive effect on career-first orientation, while family pressure negatively affected career-first orientation of women.

**Summary:**  $R^2 = 0.64$ , which means 64 percent of career-first orientation can be explained by the independent variables.

5.7 ANOVA Analysis

Source	Sum of Squares	df	F-value	Sig.
Regression	412.38	3	48.72	<0.001
Residual	231.24	364		
Total	643.62	367		

Interpretation: Since the significance value is below 0.05, the regression model is statistically significant.

5.8 Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Decision
H1: Family pressure negatively influences career-first orientation	Accepted
H2: Peer networks positively influence career-first orientation	Accepted
H3: Generational cohort significantly affects life priorities	Accepted
H4: Independent variables collectively affect life-script orientation	Accepted

Interpretation: All hypotheses were accepted because all statistical significance values were below 0.05.

6. Results and Discussion

The This study shows that urban Indian women are shifting from a traditional “marriage-first” life script to a more contemporary “career-first” life script. Specifically, the research examined how family pressure, peer networks, and generational cohort differences influence life priorities of women. The data gathered from 368 respondents were analysed using statistical techniques through SPSS. The techniques used are Descriptive Analysis, Reliability Analysis, Correlation Analysis, Regression Analysis and ANOVA.

The findings revealed major transformation in aspirations and views of marriage and career among urban Indian women. Most of the respondents completely agree that establishing a career, being financially independent and professional growth must be prioritized before marriage. Over half the respondents supported women's right to choose their timing of marriage and opined that economic independence generates confidence and decision-making ability. The study showed that urban women increasingly view career development as not merely a supportive activity but as essential to one’s identity, self-worth and long-term security.

At the same time, respondents did point out that families still expect the respondents to marry on time and follow gender norms. A large percentage of respondents agreed that parents and relatives still influence the personal and professional decisions of women above a certain age. A number of respondents also expressed view that marriage

will probably interrupt career continuity on account of domestic duties and societal perception associated with married women.

The study results portray that regarding the advancement of education and modernization women these days in urban India compromising their choice due to patriarchal influences. The outcome of the reliability analysis revealed satisfaction of the constructs with Cronbach Alpha 0.70 and above. Hence, it confirms the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire. In other words, the scales measured family pressure, peer networks, career-first orientation and generational cohort was statistically reliable to conduct further analysis. Correlation analysis indicated that there exists a significant negative correlation between family pressure and career-first orientation ( $r = -0.61, p < 0.05$ ). This shows that increased family pressure would reduce the likelihood of women prioritizing career aspirations prior to marriage. The finding lends credence to the case against conventional family expectations as restrictive social forces that cloud a woman's autonomous and professional decision. The findings are consistent with previous studies which found that Indian families still see marriage as a significant event in the lives of women, despite their growing educational and professional opportunities (Böhmer & Schinnenburg, 2020; Kōu & Bailey, 2017). On the contrary, peer networks are significantly positively related to career-first orientation ( $r = 0.67, p < 0.05$ ). The respondents reported that friends, colleagues, professional circles and social exposure fostered independent thinking, delayed marriage acceptance and priority for career. The results show that peer groups in the urban context are increasingly becoming an alternative support system that normalizes women's work-related aspirations and self-development goals. Getting to know successful working women, professional communities, and digital social environments seems to bolster women's confidence to pursue non-traditional life paths.

The research also showed a positive and statistically significant connection between generational cohort and career-first orientation ( $r = 0.52, p < 0.05$ ). Compared to Millennial respondents, younger respondents, especially from Generation Z, supported much more financial independence, marrying later, and individual autonomy. There is a shift between generations regarding gender roles and women's life priorities in urban India, as this shows. More younger women are challenging what is expected of them in the society and how success is defined beyond marriage. According to the findings of multiple regression analysis, the independent variables are significantly influencing career-first orientation. Social life and professional environments emerged as a significant force shaping the aspirations and life-decisions of women. Indeed, social and professional peer networks emerged as the strongest positive predictor ( $\beta = 0.56$ ). Family pressure had a strong negative effect ( $\beta = -0.48$ ), which confirmed the family values and interference of traditional families on women's choice. The impact of generations group is beta 0.31. This illustrates as the cohort get younger the scripts of females are changing because of socialization.

The model explained 64% of career-first orientation evidence ( $R^2 = 0.64$ ). Thus, the selected ones have strong explanatory power. The result of ANOVA also confirmed that the model is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), proving that family pressure, peer pressure and generation gap affect women's perception related to marriage and career. The results of hypothesis testing verified all the hypotheses. The findings confirmed that while family pressure has a negative influence on a career-first orientation, peer networks have a positive influence on the professional priorities of women. There were also large generational gaps between younger and older urban women in the way they view marriage and careers. The independent variables jointly affected women's life courses. The results of the study indicate a change in urban Indian society at large. As marriage continues to be socially and culturally important, most urban women seek to balance or even prioritize professional identity, self-development and financial independence over marriage (Pautunthang, 2024). It is seen in the study that the life scripts of women are changing from collective expectations to individual careers. Although, women are still negotiating between the modern and the traditional in terms of family, work, and social life, (Kōu & Bailey, 2017; Maslak & Singhal, 2008). In all, it speaks to the discourses of gender transformation, modernity and reconfiguration of social identities in India. The 'career-first' orientation of the urban women is not only an economic phenomenon, but also an unfolding of aspirations, social exposure, educational qualifications and generational consciousness in contemporary urban India.

### **7. Key Findings of the Study**

Research showed that life priorities of average urban Indian women saw major changes, indicating a gradual shift from marriage focus to career focus. According to the findings, most respondents felt that achieving financial independence, career success and personal development was essential prior to marriage. Urban women nowadays see establishment of career as means of identity, confidence, independence, long-term security rather than just a choice along with marriage.

The analysis also found that family pressure remains a powerful determinant in women's life choices. Women who make personal and professional decisions on their own terms and without deference to traditional expectations have potentially damaging social reputations. Respondents mentioned that despite getting education and going to cities, patriarchal norms are still entrenched in family setups and curtail women's freedoms.

Peer networks emerged as one of the strongest positive influences at the same time in shaping career-first orientation. In today's world, friends, colleagues, work environments and digital social exposure makes a delayed marriage normal, and empowers women to pursue their own life. On the generational differences, younger women, especially Generation Z respondents, were more supportive of career prioritization, delaying marriage, self-development and freedom than older cohorts, the study found. Statistical findings showed that women's career first orientation is negatively influenced by family pressure, while peer group influence and generational change positively influence the shifting of life priorities.

Consequently, the study established that urban Indian women are reconstructing traditional life scripts by mediating between modern aspirations and existing socio-familial expectations.

### **8. Limitations of the Study**

- Despite the major understanding of changing career-first scripts of urban Indian women, this study has several methodological and contextual limitations.
- The research did not include rural or semi-rural women, so the findings cannot be considered indicative of their perceptions and experiences.
- The design of the present study was cross-sectional which captures the responses of the respondents at a point in time but not the change in response over time.
- Though statistically sufficient for some of my conclusions, given the 368 respondents, the result may not apply to all urban women spanning across regions, cultures and social economic backgrounds in India.
- Women who were mainly educated and professionally exposed formed a part of the study barring the ones who were in informal sectors or had lower education.
- The study examined the role of selected variables such as family pressure, peer networks, etc. The researchers did not study other influencing factors such as religion, workplace culture, mental health, media, relationship and so on.
- The findings might not be generalized to the population of Indian women with the use of purposive and convenience sampling.
- The study focused not on people's actual long-term behavior but on their perception and attitude towards marriage and career choices.
- The research included a wide study of Millennial and Gen-Z generational differences, while a narrow study of subgroups in the generations was beyond the scope of the study.
- Due to the rapid changes in social and cultural milieu in future specific impacts in urban India may occur which may affect long run applicability.

## 9. Conclusion

This study analyses how urban Indian women are changing their life goals from getting married first to focusing on a career first. The evidence points that urban India is undergoing a remarkable change in women's aspirations, identity-building, and decision-making. The reconceptualization of success, independence, and adulthood by women has been facilitated by education, job opportunities, urbanization, and social exposure. The study showed that financial independence and career achievement are increasing being viewed as essential to self-worth and personal fulfilment. Marriage is still important, but it is no longer considered the most important event in the life of a woman (Pautunthang, 2024). As a result of these cultural shifts, many urban women want professional security and personal autonomy before marriage. This shows a growing trend towards individual choices and self-development in contemporary urban life. The move toward career-first orientations remains negotiated socially rather than entirely liberated. Societal pressures from family and patriarchal expectations still affect choices of women regarding the timing of marriage, continuity of career, and personal freedom (Böhmer & Schinnenburg, 2020; Sood, 2025). Women are experiencing both modernity and tradition under which several expectations are placed on them. The analysis of the study noted how peer networks and generational changes are increasingly empowering women to make their own choices and redefine acceptable life paths. The study shows that urban Indian women are actively reworking conventional gender roles and life scripts in response to changing socio-economic realities. The recent trend of prioritising careers over marriage is not only due to economic compulsion but also individual consciousness, greater social mobility, education and changed ideas of womanhood in contemporary India. This research contributes to the contemporary understanding of gender transformation by displaying how urban women negotiate their identity, aspirations, familial hopes, and autonomy in an evolving social landscape.

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