



The Social Production of Career Anxiety: Gendered Aspirations in Urban India

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Abstract: This study examines career anxiety among young urban Indian women as a psychosocial phenomenon produced at the connection of gender norms, familial collectivism, institutional cultures, and neoliberal precarity. Drawing on Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory, ten semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with postgraduate women across psychology, policy, and research disciplines. Analysis revealed three entangled themes: financial independence as moral duty, anxiety as inhibiting and motivating, and self-care as a privatised response to structural conditions. Findings demonstrate that career anxiety is as a constitutive texture of everyday aspiration and reveal career formation as a negotiated agency. The findings call for institutional frameworks that move beyond models of individual adaptation toward redistributive accounts of care, ambition, and recognition.

Keywords: *Career Anxiety, Psychosocial, Gendered Aspirations, Urban, Mental Health*

1. Introduction

This study understands career anxiety in young women as a response to the conflicting demands of modern femininity, professional life, and institutional care. Using a relational and psychodynamic lens, the study situates women's distress within the cultural and symbolic conditions that produce it, rather than locating it solely within the individual. Anxiety is

accordingly approached as a form of communication that expresses conflict, pressure, and contradiction.

Modernity reorganises how time, desire, and possibility are experienced, and the inner conflicts it generates are negotiated privately. In late modernity, Kristeva (2018) observes, subjects are compelled to perform coherence in a world that produces fragmentation, caught between intensified expectations and diminished symbolic containment. This fragmentation produces conditions lived quietly as anxiety, indecision, and a recurrent sense of insufficiency.

This tension is most visibly inscribed on the figure of the modern urban Indian woman. As Kakar's psycho-social analysis of *Indian-ness* suggests, within the expanding urban middle class, women become the primary bearers of cultural negotiation, who are asked simultaneously to embody tradition and absorb modernity. Workplaces intensify this, functioning as charged symbolic environments where women's perceived deficits are measured against organisational benchmarks historically aligned with masculine norms (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1975). Bias, more than overt discrimination, operates through shared interpretive frames that circulate across institutional life, shaping how women are evaluated and how they evaluate themselves.

Femininity, is repeatedly mobilised as a stabilising moral category, organised, as Narayanan (2023) puts forth, around managing consequences, preserving respectability, and anticipating social judgment. Career paths demanding risk, mobility, and sustained self-investment become psychologically difficult to inhabit, their pursuit activating archaic identifications lived as exhaustion, hesitation, and diffuse anxiety.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 *Career anxiety under neoliberal conditions*

Contemporary accounts of career anxiety situate it firmly within the conditions of late-capitalist labour. Kawabata (2023) argues that precarity capitalism generates a typical form of ontological insecurity, that is, a chronic erosion of self-recognition and social solidarity. Under conditions of exaggerated reflexivity consolidated from the 1980s onward, individuals are compelled toward relentless self-monitoring, continuous skill-upgrading, and meritocratic performance, as the structural ladders once promising stable return on such investments have been with time dismantled. On this account, career anxiety is the subjective face of systemic precarity. A fear-driven competition that traps individuals, including those who nominally succeed, in cycles of comparison, inadequacy, and psychic dislocation.

Chakraborty (2024), drawing on decision-making and self-efficacy frameworks, similarly identifies how present ideals of merit, individual choice, and the myth of a singular "true calling" intensify career anxiety by privatising what are fundamentally structural contradictions. The pressure to perform work-life balance while remaining professionally competitive, to be simultaneously ambitious and self-effacing, reproduces anxiety as a personal management problem rather than a political one.

These accounts illuminate, but also partly obscure. Precarity capitalism is not a gender-neutral phenomenon. When young women in urban India describe anxiety about career trajectories, they are navigating not only unstable labour markets but also the moral weight of familial expectation, the gendered devaluation of the fields they enter, and the psychic cost of ambitions that exceed what their relational worlds can easily accommodate.

2.2 The moralisation of femininity and its psychic costs

Layton's (2004) concept of normative unconscious processes is useful here. She argues that neoliberal cultures psychologise structural barriers, altering that inequality into internalised shame. Women who encounter the limits of what institutional cultures will permit experience these limits as personal inadequacy in insufficient assertiveness, insufficient preparation, insufficient resilience. This interiorisation is actively produced through the discourse of individual responsibility that neoliberal institutions, therapeutic cultures, and self-help frameworks consistently reinforce.

Narayanan (2023) offers a psychoanalytic account on how moral regulation operates on women through internalised norms that come to feel like character. In her analysis of urban middle-class Indian women, femininity is organised around managing consequences, preserving respectability, and anticipating social judgment. Career paths that demand risk, mobility, sustained self-investment, and the tolerance of uncertainty become psychologically difficult to inhabit. Because such paths activate archaic identifications, with caregiving, sacrifice, and domesticity, that are consolidated early and reawakened through everyday speech, institutional cultures, and familial response. A low-grade but cumulative psychic stress, constitutive of the ordinary texture of aspiration.

This moral economy organizes the economic life. And in doing so, underlines career anxiety. When a profession becomes associated with women, as psychology and counselling have in urban India, its prestige and remuneration decline in tandem, because care and emotional labour, coded as naturally feminine, are simultaneously moralised and economically trivialised (Ryan & Morgenroth, 2024). Women entering such fields inherit a double bind. They are drawn to work that aligns with internalised norms of feminine suitability, and in performing

that they must assert the intellectual legitimacy of work that the wider institutional culture has already devalued. Career anxiety here is a rational affective response to a field whose structural devaluation mirrors the devaluation of femininity itself.

2.3 Psychodynamic dimensions: guilt, recognition, and the regulation of ambition

The psychodynamic tradition offers a further layer of analysis that neither structural nor cognitive accounts of career anxiety typically reach. Klein's (1946) theorisation of unconscious guilt is instructive: achievement does not only produce fear of failure, it can generate anxiety about success, specifically, unconscious fears of envy, retaliation, or the loss of love that visibility and ambition might invite. Something regressive and more interior is also at work. A psychic regulation of desire that operates below conscious intention.

Benjamin's (2018) framework of recognition deepens this reading. She argues that subjects develop within relational fields that are built by recognition, which is, the capacity to be seen as intentional, agentic, and affectively meaningful. Where recognition is systematically withheld or conditional, subjects may adapt by calibrating their agency to the limits of what the relational field can tolerate. For young women navigating families, institutions, and professional cultures that condition recognition on compliance, restraint, and relational accommodation, ambition is continuously negotiated. What appears as hesitancy, self-doubt, or indecision may more accurately be understood as the psychic residue of relational fields in which the full expression of desire has been repeatedly rendered costly.

These frameworks converge on a phenomenon: the entanglement of moral and economic pressures in the production of career anxiety. This study now proceeds to interrogate this nexus, presenting the findings generated through the iterative application of grounded theory methodology.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative design informed by Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory, which directs theory to emerge through iterative engagement with data while acknowledging the researcher's role in constructing meaning. Data centres reflexivity, context, and the emotional texture of experience. Claims of neutrality are hence rejected. The study traces how career desire and anxiety take form across personal, familial, and cultural domains.

Ten urban Indian women pursuing postgraduate education participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Participants were purposively selected to reflect diversity in

disciplinary background and career aspiration, spanning psychology, policy, research, and related fields. Interviews explored career aspiration and indecision, familial and social expectations, experiences of encouragement and constraint, and personal understandings of ambition, success, and independence.

As a young woman trained in psychology and situated within comparable institutional environments, the researcher shared experiential commonalities with participants. These proximities supported rapport and candid disclosure, while also requiring sustained reflexive attention to how shared positioning may have shaped conversational direction and interpretive emphasis.

Analysis followed constructivist grounded theory procedures. Initial line-by-line coding of interview transcripts was followed by focused coding to synthesise recurring patterns into broader analytic categories, including class and identity, social reaction, psychic containment, and manifestations of anxiety. Constant comparative methods were employed across interviews to examine how similar processes were articulated across different accounts. Memo-writing served as a central analytic practice, enabling reflexive engagement with emerging concepts and their theoretical implications. Analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached.

4. Discussion

Interviews with ten postgraduate women experiencing early career transitions in urban India revealed career anxiety as neither a private psychological state nor a straightforward response to economic uncertainty. Across accounts, moral obligation and economic precarity appeared as mutually constituting forces, each intensifying and giving meaning to the other. Three analytic themes organise the findings: financial independence as moral duty, anxiety as inhibitor and motivator, and self-care as privatised structural response.

4.1 Financial Independence as Moral Duty

The most consistent pattern across interviews was the framing of financial independence as ethical obligation. Sree articulated this: "I don't want to depend on my parents for more than 22 years." The phrasing is significant as dependence is uncomfortable, but more importantly, morally unsound, a failure of filial duty timed against a self-imposed deadline. Muskan extended this logic outward: "I wish my parents could retire... I want to give back to them." Independence here becomes repayment, tethering the economic project of career formation to an intergenerational moral economy.

This orientation toward familial reciprocity is embedded in a cultural context where intergenerational interdependence carries authentic relational meaning, the desire to care for one's parents reflects gratitude, and widely is shared. What complicates it is the layer of gendered unevenness beneath for some. Acute consciousness that their parents had chosen to invest in a daughter's education within a social world that routinely questions the value of doing so is noted in a few participants. The obligation to achieve was justificative, a need to retrospectively defend a decision that their families had made against prevailing misogynist logic.

This moral framing intensified rather than clarified career anxiety. Because financial security carried ethical weight, as proof of gratitude and as validation of familial sacrifice, the ordinary uncertainties of postgraduate life registered moral precariousness. Sree described feeling "very uncomfortable" declining social plans due to lack of income. Prolonged dependence during career flux was experienced as lag, as moral failing.

For first-generation learners, the stakes were explicitly collective. Shikha feared that personal failure "won't just be my personal setback" but would retrospectively validate relatives' scepticism that "higher studies for girls leads to complications." Economic success in this way acquired legitimacy beyond the individual with dependence inviting gendered judgment at the level of community. Career anxiety, in this register, was the felt experience of carrying both one's own future and the credibility of women's education as a social project.

Psychology was repeatedly described as "underpaid," and one participant directly connected its feminisation to its devaluation: "females being the majority of this field is also one of the factors." When a profession is coded as feminine extension of domestic care, emotional labour becomes naturalised and therefore economically trivialised. Women entering such fields inherited a double bind. Drawn to work aligned with internalised norms of feminine suitability, while demanding a performance to assert the intellectual legitimacy of work the institutional culture had already devalued. The moral duty to achieve financial independence collided with the structural reality of fields that would not deliver it, generating a particular intensity of career.

4.2 Anxiety as Inhibitor and Motivator

A second pattern concerned the dual function of anxiety. Inhibition appeared most clearly in academic and professional settings. Pari described class participation paralysis in possessing ideas yet hesitating, fearing they "might sound foolish." Anushka, navigating elite policy spaces, found that assertiveness read as competence in men became "intense" in women and analytically grounded doubt felt hazardous. Both participants identified their hesitancy as

hyper-vigilance toward differential evaluation in response to environments where women occupied space at greater relational cost. This reframes what institutional cultures frequently misread as confidence deficit.

Same anxiety that inhibited visible participation drove intensive preparation. Anushka responded to institutional intimidation through over-preparation: "I read more, refine my arguments, and try to compensate for insecurity with competence." Shikha maintained "strict routines and daily study targets" to justify familial faith. Muskan advanced through "baby steps." Anushka deployed colour-coded spreadsheets and timelines. Shikha noted that "if I excel, the doubts lose their power."

Participants were largely able to diagnose this dynamic themselves. Several described converting anxieties into structured effort while recognising that this conversion addressed the symptom and never the structure. One participant noted being "constantly negotiating between what feels meaningful and what feels safe," capturing the inhibitor-motivator tension precisely.

Familial anxiety compounded this. Participants consistently positioned themselves as affective shock absorbers for parental concern. Pari "mostly reassured them, even when I'm not reassured myself." Shikha vowed to "never share too much stress, always appear grateful and confident," framing emotional containment as reciprocal duty. As parents had sacrificed materially, she owed them emotional tranquillity in return. Harsha described remaining "conscious of not causing worry," managing "what I share and how I share it" with strategic intentionality. The verb "manage" signals that emotional expression was no longer spontaneous but calculated.

This produced a consistent mind-body split. Harsha's mind stayed "composed for longer" while her body registered stress first. Leg pains, exhaustion, somatic echoes of deferred processing. Anxiety was compartmentalised, rationalised, or channelled into hyper-productivity, shifting from episodic response to ingrained habitus. Managing others' anxiety about one's career became indistinguishable from managing one's own.

4.3 Self-Care as Privatised Structural Response

A third pattern concerned how participants engaged with discourses of self-management in relation to structural conditions they could simultaneously name and not politically act upon. Across interviews, anxiety was frequently reframed as something to optimise, regulate, or convert into individual disciplined action.

Self-care practices of journaling, painting, morning walks, dancing, solitude were described as grounding mechanisms, and their value was genuine. Yet these practices suggest emotional turbulence was processed individually rather than externalised institutionally. One

participant explicitly stated she avoided sharing stress to prevent causing concern. Self-care operated within relational ethics of containment and was less about indulgence and more about not burdening others.

Participants described competitive hierarchies, underpaid sectors, and gendered evaluation regimes with analytical precision, then returned to the language of personal discipline as the operative response. The need to "work harder," "prepare better," and "be disciplined" coexisted with awareness of sustaining barriers. Structural stress became interiorised responsibility.

Career formation unfolded within this paradox. Where structural critique coexists with disciplined self-management, producing what the data suggest is best characterised as negotiated agency.

5. Conclusion

Eventually, these patterns produce what the data characterise as negotiated agency. Career formation that is structurally aware, relationally burdened, and adaptive without being emancipatory. Participants were not passive recipients of cultural scripts. They are active, often analytically precise, navigators of conditions not of their making. And it is precisely this combination of lucidity and constraint that the concept of negotiated agency is intended to hold.

The findings carry implications beyond their immediate context. Institutionally, what reads as hesitancy or indecision in women must be reinterpreted as rational affective calibration to environments that exact a higher relational cost from women's visibility and ambition. Frameworks that treat career anxiety as either cognitive distortion or structural determination fail to capture the moral-economic entanglement this study foregrounds. A psychosocial account, one that takes seriously both the interior life of aspiration and the structural conditions that shape it, remains necessary.

What this study surfaces is the cumulative task of women who must navigate personal aspiration while serving as living proof that their education was worth the investment. This burden is carried within institutional environments that have not reorganised themselves to receive women, papering over systemic gaps without addressing structural exclusion. The result is negotiated agency, a coherence performed in conditions that do not yet adequately support it.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview guideline

1. About You

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and what you are doing these days?

2. Family and Upbringing

- What kind of messages did you grow up hearing about education, work, or success?
- Are there expectations from family that feel supportive or stressful?

3. Relationships

- Have relationships or dating experiences affected how you think about your future.

4. Caring for Others

- Do you feel responsible for taking care of others emotionally or practically?

5. Making Your Own Choices

- Can you share a time when you made a decision mainly for yourself?
- What makes decision-making easier or harder for you?

6. Feelings, Worries, and Confidence

- Are there things you worry about when you think about your future?
- Do you ever doubt yourself or your abilities? In what situations?
- What helps you feel calmer or more confident?

7. Independence and the Outside World (Public Life)

- What does being “independent” mean to you?
- Do you feel different expectations placed on you because you are a woman?

8. Closing

- Is there anything important about your experience that you’d like to add?

Table 1

Coding Process Across Interview Transcripts

Participant Verbatim	Initial Code	Focused Code	Theoretical Category
“They don’t have anyone to look up to.” (Tripti)	Lack of precedent in family	Absence of role models	First-generation navigation of careers
“Psychology... a lot of people question it.” (Tripti)	Field questioned by others	Humanities viewed as risky	Gendered hierarchy of career fields
“If I think too much about the future, it becomes overwhelming.” (Harsha)	Avoiding overwhelming future thoughts	Managing uncertainty through preparation	Strategic containment of career anxiety
“It’s more like a background hum.” (Harsha)	Persistent underlying worry	Diffuse anxiety	Career anxiety as latent affect
“I try to appear prepared even when I’m unsure.” (Harsha)	Performing confidence	Competence used to reassure others	Emotional labour in managing family anxiety
“Women should be articulate but not confrontational.” (Harsha)	Gender expectations in public spaces	Behavioural calibration	Gendered regulation of professional voice
“My mind stays composed... my body reacts first.” (Harsha)	Stress felt physically first	Somatic stress response	Embodied experience of anxiety
“Every time I walk into a lecture hall it feels ordinary but historic.” (Shikha)	Being first woman in family to attend college	Intergenerational breakthrough	Symbolic weight of first-generation mobility
“No one at home knows about internships or CVs.” (Shikha)	Navigating career processes alone	Lack of cultural capital	Self-constructed career pathways
“If I don’t succeed, relatives might say higher studies for girls leads to complications.” (Shikha)	Fear of validating stereotypes	Representational burden	Intergenerational accountability
“Performance becomes my shield.” (Shikha)	Achievement used as defence	Success as legitimacy	Competence as protection against scrutiny
“I soften my ambitions so they don’t sound threatening.” (Shikha)	Moderating goals in conversation	Self-presentation management	Relationally governed ambition

“I filter what I share with my parents.” (Shikha)	Managing information shared at home	Emotional filtering	Gendered emotional labour
“When do you think you will get settled?” (Sree, recalling family question)	Pressure about settling down	Marriage timelines shaping career	Marriage as temporal regulator
“I don’t want to depend on my parents for more than 22 years.” (Sree)	Urgency for financial independence	Economic autonomy motivation	Independence as moral obligation
“Psychology is underpaid.” (Sree)	Low pay in field	Structural insecurity of profession	Institutional precarity
“My parents feel proud but they still worry about stability.” (Smita)	Mixed pride and concern	Ambivalent parental support	Approval and containment
“Success means good marks and a stable job.” (Smita)	Success defined as stability	Economic security prioritised	Instrumental framing of career success
“NGO work feels meaningful but uncertain.” (Veena)	Meaningful yet unstable work	Idealism vs stability tension	Ethical vs economic career dilemmas
“Policy spaces are very hierarchical.” (Anushka)	Difficulty accessing influence	Institutional gatekeeping	Structural barriers in professional spaces
“Sometimes I wonder if I belong in these elite spaces.” (Anushka)	Self-doubt in elite settings	Imposter feelings	Institutional intimidation
“I had very bad fights after choosing psychology.” (Muskan)	Conflict over career choice	Resisting family expectations	Defiant career autonomy
“People treat psychology like a joke.” (Muskan)	Field trivialised socially	Devaluation of emotional labour	Feminisation of professional fields
“I reassure them even when I’m not reassured myself.” (Pari)	Reassuring family despite uncertainty	Emotional self-suppression	Managing family anxiety
“I worry my work might not make a real impact.” (Anuradha)	Concern about meaningful contribution	Impact anxiety	Moral dimension of career aspirations