REAL SHEE POWER

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The Guilt That Still Calls You a Bad Daughter

Primary Findings from a Survey of 100 Urban Indian Women on the Costs of Being a “Good Daughter”



Research conducted by Real SHEE Power

Delhi-NCR · Mumbai · Pune · Bangalore

Research Series on the Lived Realities of Indian Women

Executive Summary

What does it cost an Indian woman to remain a “good daughter” even after becoming an independent adult? This exploratory study examines familial expectations among 100 urban Indian women across four metropolitan regions.

75% Feel like a bad daughter when resisting expectations

71% Experience strong guilt when setting boundaries

81% Strongly want to break their mother’s cycle

68% Find saying no or prioritising themselves very difficult

The findings suggest that recognising inherited expectations does not necessarily eliminate the emotional cost of resisting them.

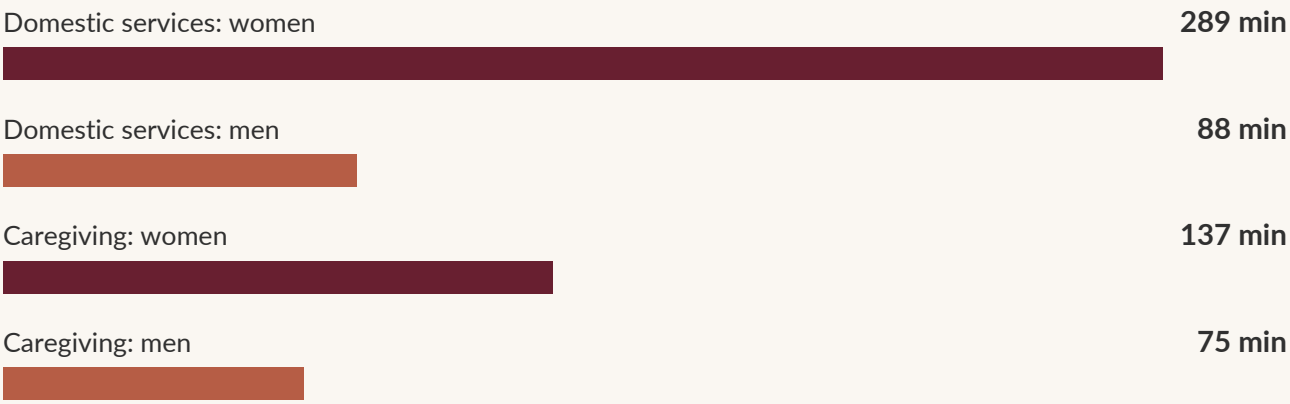
01
Introduction and Research Focus

The ideal of the “good daughter” rewards responsibility, adjustment, emotional management of the household and the consistent prioritisation of family needs, frequently at the expense of a daughter’s own boundaries and well-being.

This study examines how pressure to be a good daughter translates into guilt, difficulty saying no and selective self-sacrifice, and how these experiences relate to birth order, marital status, regret about past compliance and hopes for the next generation.

The Structural Backdrop

The 2024 Time Use Survey provides context for unequal domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Among participants in these activities, the reported daily averages are:



Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Time Use Survey 2024. Average minutes per day among participants.

02
Research Methodology

Study design

Exploratory questionnaire-based study of 100 women in Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Pune and Bangalore.

Sample

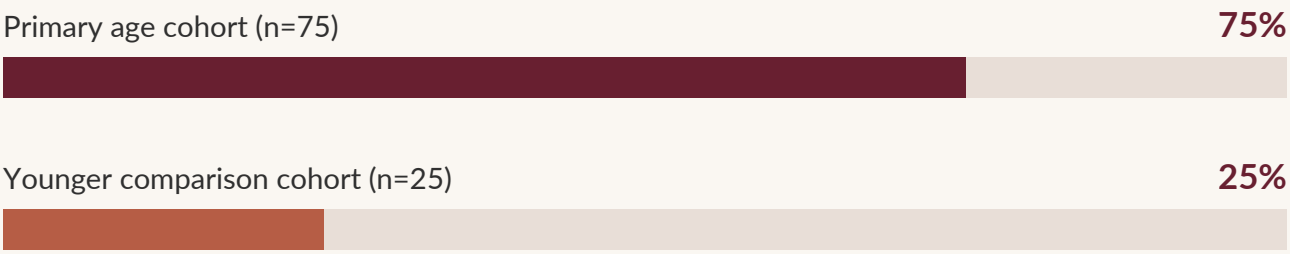
75 respondents in the primary age cohort (25–35) and 25 in the younger comparison cohort (15–25), as reported in the study. The sample includes 25 married women and seven mothers of first-born daughters.

Recruitment and data collection

Participants were reached through Real SHEE Power community networks, targeted outreach and snowball sampling. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire, with short follow-up conversations in a subset of cases. Participation was voluntary.

Research scope

The study focuses on metropolitan settings and is not nationally representative.



Sample distribution. Source: Real SHEE Power primary survey (N=100).

Core Research Questionnaire

Selected questionnaire topics, summarised for publication.

01. Feeling like a bad daughter when going against family expectations.

02. Difficulty saying no or putting oneself first.

03. Elder-daughter protective roles and emotional closeness with younger siblings.

04. Lengths respondents would go to protect younger siblings from similar trauma.

05. Guilt about eating before husband or children (married respondents).

06. Desire to break the cycle witnessed in one’s mother.

07. Guilt when setting boundaries.

08. Overall burden of good-daughter expectations.

09. Relative difficulty of protecting others versus oneself.

10. Regret about not fighting more for oneself earlier.

11. Preference for daughters to say no or comply with parental wants (mothers of first-born daughters).

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Key Findings

The findings reveal a gap between the desire for personal autonomy and the ability to exercise it without guilt.

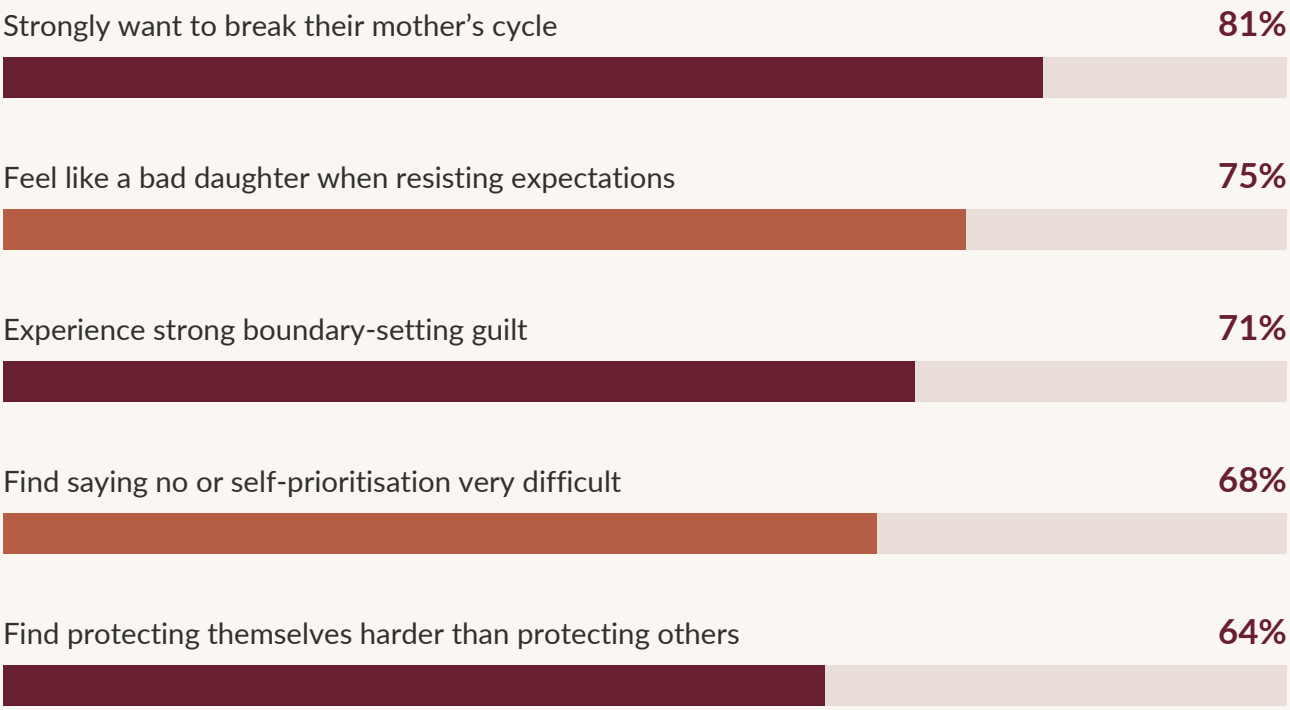

Figure 1. Core findings from the Real SHEE Power survey (N=100).

The central finding

Women may reject inherited expectations intellectually while continuing to experience them emotionally.

The Difficulty of Saying No

68% Find saying no or putting themselves first very difficult

For many respondents, saying no is an emotionally charged decision shaped by the fear of disappointing loved ones and violating inherited expectations of goodness.

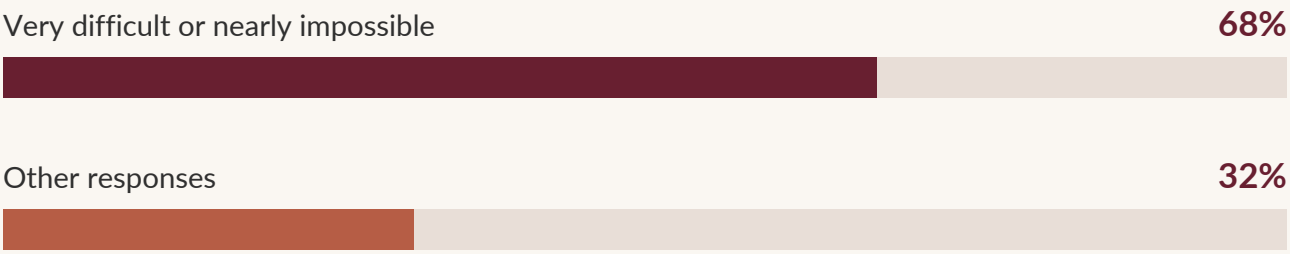

Figure 2. Difficulty saying no or putting oneself first (N=100).

Self-protection versus protecting others

64% say protecting themselves feels significantly harder than protecting younger siblings or future children.

Regret about past compliance

67% answered “maybe yes” when asked whether they regretted not fighting more for themselves earlier. The remainder answered no or “can’t say”.

Who Gets to Eat First?

76% 19 of 25 married respondents

Among married respondents, 19 women reported feeling guilty frequently or always about eating before their husband or children.

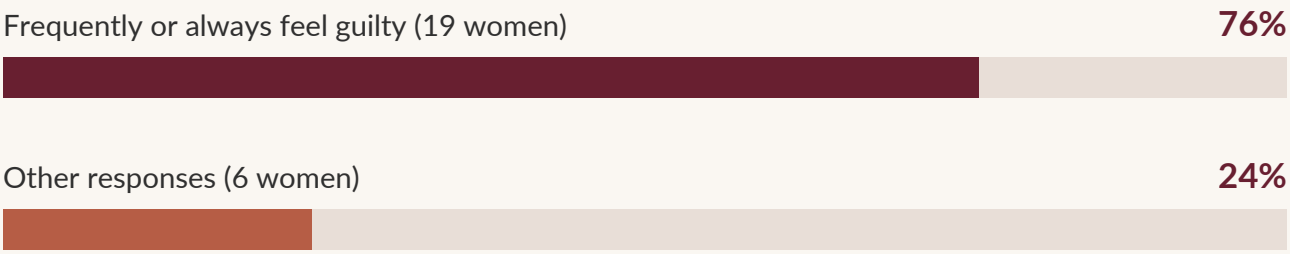

Figure 3. Guilt about eating before husband or children (n=25).

The everyday embodiment of hierarchy

The finding illustrates how the prioritisation of others may extend beyond major life decisions into ordinary routines and bodily needs. It raises questions about how women learn to rank their needs in relation to those of family members. The small married subsample should not be generalised to all married Indian women.

The Generational Divide

Women in the primary age cohort reported a substantially higher heavy burden of good-daughter expectations than the younger comparison group.

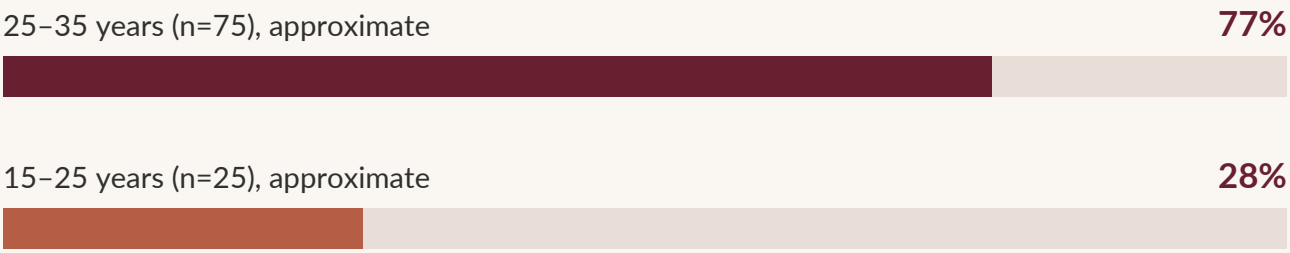

Figure 4. Reported heavy burden by age cohort.

A possible generational shift

The younger cohort reported greater awareness of good-daughter syndrome and lower emotional burden. Differences in life stage and family responsibilities may also contribute; the study cannot establish generational change over time.

85.7% 6 of 7 mothers want daughters to be able to say no

Among mothers of first-born daughters, six of seven preferred that their daughters be able to say no rather than simply comply with parental wants. This small subsample offers a directional insight, not a population estimate.

04
Discussion and Deeper Nuances

The Protectiveness Asymmetry

Many respondents find it easier to protect others than themselves. The capacity for care is not missing; it appears to flow outward more easily than inward.

Guilt as the Internal Gatekeeper

Despite the strong desire to break inherited patterns, feelings of guilt remain widespread. The findings suggest that internal moral expectations may continue to influence behaviour even when women question them.

The Elder Daughter Double Bind

Qualitative accounts describe elder daughters assuming quasi-parental roles, close emotional bonds with younger siblings and a determination to spare them similar trauma. Protection of the next generation can coexist with pressure to comply with the previous one.

Everyday Embodiment of Hierarchy

Eating-related guilt illustrates how the ranking of needs may become embedded in daily habits.

Generational Lag and Regret

The age differences, regret about past compliance and hopes for daughters point towards a possible shift in values. Women may wish to offer the next generation a freedom they continue to struggle to claim for themselves.

05

Six Insights From the Research

01 Care is abundant; self-directed care is harder.

Many respondents find protecting others easier than protecting themselves.

02 Guilt can act as internal enforcement.

Setting boundaries remains emotionally difficult even when their value is understood.

03 Elder daughters carry overlapping responsibilities.

Protective family roles can coexist with pressure to remain compliant.

04 Past compliance is being reconsidered.

67% express possible regret about not fighting more for themselves.

05 Women want to break inherited patterns.

81% want to break their mother's cycle; six of seven mothers of first-born daughters want their daughters to be able to refuse.

06 Age cohorts report different burdens.

Younger respondents report a lighter burden, although the reasons require further study.

06
Limitations and Conclusion

Limitations and disclaimer

This original Real SHEE Power research is limited to 100 women in four metropolitan regions and is not nationally representative. Community-network and snowball recruitment may over-represent women already engaged with gender and mental health discussions. The married subsample (n=25) and mothers of first-born daughters (n=7) are small. All data are self-reported. This exploratory study does not establish causal relationships.

Conclusion

The women in this study are not deficient in love or responsibility. Many are navigating an inherited definition of goodness that treats self-prioritisation as a form of failure. Many regret earlier compliance, and most of the small group of mothers of first-born daughters want their daughters to be able to say no.

The gap between what women want for the next generation and what they still struggle to claim for themselves is a central finding of this research and an invitation to deeper public conversation.

Research credits

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References and Citation

Primary source

Real SHEE Power primary survey of 100 urban Indian women in Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Pune and Bangalore.

Contextual source

Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India. Time Use Survey 2024. Official publication available through www.mospi.gov.in.

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