A comparative study of stress and mental health among single women farmers in rural and tribal communities of Andhra Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture remains the backbone of the Indian economy, yet the severe psychological toll on its most vulnerable workforce, single women farmers, remains largely invisible. This study explores and compares the personal stress levels and mental health status of single women farmers operating within rural and tribal ecosystems. Utilizing an ex-post facto and comparative research design, data were collected via purposive sampling from 240 single women farmers (120 rural respondents from Bapatla district and 120 tribal respondents from Alluri Sitarama Raju district) in Andhra Pradesh. Standardized Telugu translations of the personal stress scale and the mental health inventory were administered and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent t-test. The findings indicated that while the majority of both groups experienced moderate stress and average mental health, rural single women farmers suffered from significantly higher stress levels than their tribal counterparts. Correspondingly, tribal women exhibited significantly better overall mental health scores than rural women. Tribal respondents consistently outperformed rural respondents across all six dimensions of mental health, most notably in group-oriented attitude (38.3% good) and positive self-evaluation (30.8% good). The striking disparity in psychological well-being highlights the protective role of tribal community cohesion, trust and collective coping mechanisms, which shield individuals from severe distress. Conversely, rural single women farmers faced extreme vulnerability driven by systemic isolation, heavy socio-economic workloads and financial burdens. Targeted institutional support, agricultural formalization and localized mental health interventions are urgently required to safeguard these women.

Keywords: Single women farmers; Mental health inventory; Personal stress; Tribal community cohesion; Rural agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture occupies a distinctive and enduring position in the Indian economy and continues to provide direct and indirect employment to nearly half of the country's population (Singh 2026). Women constitute a vital component of the agricultural workforce and make significant contributions to both agricultural production and rural livelihoods. Their roles encompass a wide range of farm activities, including sowing, weeding, harvesting, threshing and post-harvest processing. In addition, women play a crucial role in allied sectors such as animal husbandry, fisheries and horticulture (Thabah et al 2026). Despite their substantial involvement in agricultural activities, women farmers are frequently perceived merely as helpers rather than farmers in their own right, resulting in their labour remaining unpaid, undervalued and largely invisible (Maurya and Yadav 2026).

Psychological well-being is an important determinant of individual productivity, health and quality of life. Stress is closely associated with mental health and stressful life events are recognized as significant precursors to various psychiatric disorders (Cohen et al 2007, Hammen 2005). Stress is a natural

physiological and psychological response that enables individuals to cope with challenges or threats. While acute stress is generally temporary and may enhance performance and resilience; chronic stress results from prolonged exposure to stressors and can lead to persistent activation of the body's stress response system, adversely affecting both physical and mental health (Montgomery and Gouvea 2024).

Among all occupations, farming is widely recognized as one of the most stressful due to its dependence on unpredictable environmental and economic conditions. Farmers routinely face numerous challenges, including climate variability, crop failures, pest infestations, labour shortages, indebtedness, rising input costs, fluctuating market prices and uncertainty regarding agricultural income. Studies conducted worldwide identify farming as one of the most hazardous occupations, with modern intensive agricultural practices contributing to elevated stress levels, depression and instability among farming communities (Padhy and Raju 2019). Furthermore, farmers often experience social, economic and political marginalization, while mental health concerns remain inadequately addressed in rural areas despite their substantial prevalence (Das 2011). The physical demands of farming, combined with financial and personal challenges, can contribute to stress, anxiety, depression, marital conflict and addiction (Padhy and Raju 2020).

The burden of stress is often greater for women farmers than for their male counterparts. Women smallholder farmers are particularly vulnerable because they constitute a large proportion of the world's poor and are more dependent on natural resources that are increasingly threatened by environmental change (Eastin 2018, Regasa and Kebede 2024). The agricultural sector is facing mounting challenges from climate variability and environmental degradation, which significantly reduce crop productivity and threaten livelihood security. Climate-induced events such as droughts, floods and heatwaves are expected to intensify in the future, further aggravating yield losses and food insecurity, especially in developing regions that rely heavily on rain-fed agriculture (Abebaw 2025, Wakweya 2025). Women farmers, particularly those managing farms independently, are disproportionately affected because they often have limited access to adaptive resources, institutional support and decision-making opportunities.

In addition to agricultural responsibilities, farm women frequently shoulder substantial domestic and caregiving duties. This dual burden creates considerable time pressure and workload stress, which may result in both physical and psychological health problems. Such stress can negatively affect agricultural sustainability by reducing productivity, impairing decision making, weakening resilience to environmental challenges and causing neglect of essential farm operations (Chatterjee and Acharya 2020, Nichols and Davis 2024, Sunitha et al 2018, Hamermesh and Lee 2003, Gray and Lawrence 1996). Despite their critical contribution to agriculture, the challenges faced by women farmers remain insufficiently recognized and research examining the sources and consequences of stress among farm women is limited (Ansari and Sunetha 2014).

The situation is particularly complex in tribal communities, where agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood. Tribal agriculture is predominantly rain-fed and highly vulnerable to climatic and economic uncertainties, with limited access to irrigation facilities, modern agricultural inputs and market linkages. Although several livelihood promotion and skill development programmes have been introduced, their effectiveness is often constrained by inadequate alignment with local needs and realities. Tribal women, who occupy central roles in household management, agriculture and community life, face additional challenges related to education, healthcare, land ownership and participation in leadership and decision-making processes (Nayak and Deswal 2024).

Mishra and Tripathi (2020) indicated that rural women exhibited significantly higher psychological well-being than urban women, although both groups generally showed a moderate level of well-being. The better well-being among rural women may be attributed to a comparatively peaceful lifestyle, lower environmental pollution, reduced stress and stronger social connectedness in rural settings. In contrast, urban women may experience greater stress due to a fast-paced lifestyle, higher environmental pressures and increased social and occupational demands. Sarkar et al (2025) highlighted the significant stress experienced by farm women in the Coochbehar and Alipurduar districts of West Bengal and reported that majority of respondents reported medium levels of stress, with environmental concerns, time pressure/workload and lack of rural amenities being the major contributing

factors. External stressors and interpersonal relationships play a role, albeit to a lesser extent.

Although considerable research has focused on agricultural development, rural livelihoods and women's empowerment, comparatively little attention has been paid to the psychological well-being of single women farmers. Existing studies have largely concentrated on economic conditions, agricultural productivity and physical health, while issues related to stress and mental health remain underexplored, particularly among tribal women farmers. Understanding the nature and extent of stress and mental health challenges experienced by rural and tribal single women farmers is essential for developing targeted interventions, support systems and policies aimed at improving their well-being and strengthening the sustainability of their livelihoods. Therefore, the present study seeks to examine and compare the stress levels and mental health status of single women farmers in rural and tribal communities.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Bapatla and Alluri Sitarama Raju districts of Andhra Pradesh. A comparative and ex-post facto research design was adopted for the study. A total sample of 240 single women farmers was selected, comprising 120 rural respondents from Bapatla district and 120 tribal respondents from Alluri Sitarama Raju district. The respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using standardized Telugu versions of the personal stress scale (Cohen et al 1983) and the mental health inventory (Jagadish and Srivastava 1983). The personal stress scale was used to assess the level of stress experienced by the respondents, while the mental health inventory was employed to evaluate their mental health status. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequency and percentage. Based on the obtained scores, respondents were categorized into low, moderate and high levels of stress and mental health to facilitate comparison between rural and tribal single women farmers.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Stress levels among rural and tribal single women farmers

The distribution of respondents according to their stress levels is presented in Table 1a (Fig 1). The findings revealed that the majority of both rural and tribal single women farmers experienced a moderate level of stress. Among rural respondents, 59.1 per cent fell in the moderate stress category, followed by 26.7 per cent in the high stress category and 14.2 per cent in the low stress category. In comparison, 56.7 per cent of tribal single women farmers reported moderate stress, while 31.6 per cent experienced low stress and only 11.7 per cent reported high stress.

The results indicate that stress was more pronounced among rural single women farmers than among their tribal counterparts. A higher proportion of rural respondents experienced high stress (26.7%) compared to tribal respondents (11.7%), whereas, a greater proportion of tribal respondents fell under the low stress category (31.6%) than rural respondents (14.2%). These differences may be attributed to variations in socio-economic conditions, livelihood patterns, social support systems and coping mechanisms. Rural single women farmers often face multiple challenges such as economic insecurity, heavy workload, family responsibilities and limited social support, which may contribute to higher stress levels. Similar observations were reported by Nichols and Davis (2024), who found that women farmers experienced elevated stress due to time pressures, workload burden, economic constraints and difficulties in balancing farming and household responsibilities.

The comparison of mean stress scores between rural and tribal single women farmers is presented in Table 1b. The mean stress score of rural respondents (Mean = 53.30, SD = 9.40) was higher than that of tribal respondents (Mean = 48.69, SD = 10.44). The calculated t-value (3.59) was significant at one per cent level of significance, indicating a statistically significant difference in stress levels between the two groups. The findings suggest that rural single women farmers experienced significantly greater stress than tribal single women farmers.

The comparatively lower stress levels among tribal respondents may be associated with stronger community cohesion, collective coping strategies and greater social support within tribal communities. The present findings are supported by Chaudhary and Shourie (2019), who reported that higher levels of perceived social support were associated with better coping ability and lower psychological distress among farmers, emphasizing the protective role of community support in stress management.

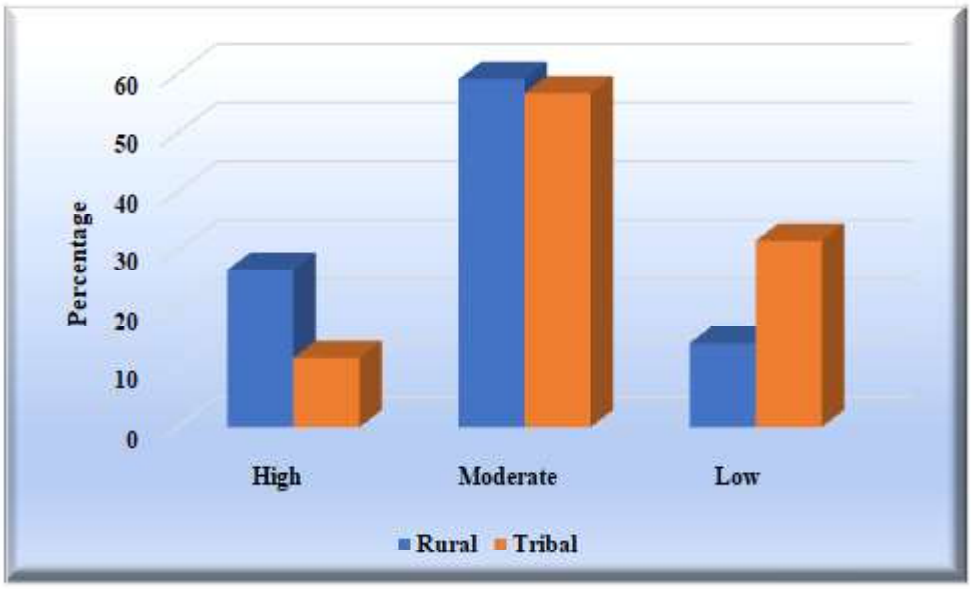

Fig 1. Personal stress among rural and tribal single women farmers

Table 1a. Distribution of respondents according to stress levels of single women farmers

Stress level	Respondents (N = 240)			
	Rural (n = 120)		Tribal (n = 120)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
High	32	26.7	14	11.7
Moderate	71	59.1	68	56.7
Low	17	14.2	38	31.6

Table 1b. Comparison of stress levels between rural and tribal single women farmers

Single women farmers	n	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Rural	120	53.30	9.40	3.59**	0.0004
Tribal	120	48.69	10.44		

**Significant at 1% LoS

Mental health levels of single women farmers in different dimensions of mental health

The distribution of rural and tribal single women farmers according to different dimensions of mental health is presented in Table 2. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents in both groups fell under the average category across all dimensions of mental health. However, tribal single women farmers generally exhibited better mental health profiles than rural single women farmers, as reflected by a higher proportion of respondents in the good category and a lower proportion in the poor category across most dimensions.

In the dimension of positive self-evaluation, the majority of rural (60.8%) and tribal (57.5%) respondents were categorized under the average level. A greater proportion of tribal respondents (30.8%) reported good positive self-evaluation compared to rural respondents (17.5%), while poor positive self-evaluation was observed among 21.7 per cent of rural respondents and 11.7 per cent of tribal respondents. The findings suggest

Table 2. Distribution of respondents according to mental health levels of single women farmers

Dimension	Level	Respondents (N = 240)			
		Rural (n = 120)		Tribal (n = 120)	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Positive self-evaluation	Good	21	17.5	37	30.8
	Average	73	60.8	69	57.5
	Poor	26	21.7	14	11.7
Perception of reality	Good	19	15.8	34	28.3
	Average	78	65.0	72	60.0
	Poor	23	19.2	14	11.7
Integration of personality	Good	17	14.2	31	25.8
	Average	81	67.5	74	61.7
	Poor	22	18.3	15	12.5
Autonomy	Good	14	11.7	22	18.3
	Average	89	74.2	92	76.7
	Poor	17	14.1	6	5.0
Group oriented attitude	Good	24	20.0	46	38.3
	Average	72	60.0	64	53.3
	Poor	24	20.0	10	8.4
Environmental mastery	Good	20	16.7	35	29.2
	Average	76	63.3	72	60.0
	Poor	24	20.0	13	10.8

comparatively higher self-confidence, optimism and self-worth among tribal women farmers.

With regard to perception of reality, the majority of rural (65.0%) and tribal (60.0%) respondents fell under the average category. Good perception of reality was reported by 28.3 per cent of tribal and 15.8 per cent of rural respondents, whereas, poor perception of reality was observed among 19.2 per cent of rural and 11.7 per cent of tribal respondents. The findings indicate that most respondents possessed a moderate ability to realistically assess situations and cope with life challenges. The results are supported by Kurniyawan et al (2023), who reported that an appropriate coping mechanism for solving psychosocial problems experienced by farmers is necessary. The forms of coping strategies applied are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping strategies.

In the dimension of integration of personality, the majority of rural (67.5%) and tribal (61.7%) respondents were categorized under average level. Good integration of personality was higher among tribal (25.8%) than rural (14.2%) respondents, while poor integration of personality was reported by 18.3 per cent of rural and 12.5 per cent of tribal respondents. The findings suggest better emotional stability, adjustment and coping ability among tribal women. These findings are consistent with Deegan and Dunne (2022) who reported that increased social support was associated with higher psychological well-being.

Regarding autonomy, most rural (74.2%) and tribal (76.7%) respondents experienced average levels. Good autonomy was reported by 18.3 per cent of tribal compared to 11.7 per cent of rural respondents. Poor autonomy was observed among 14.1 per cent of rural and only 5.0 per cent of tribal respondents. The results suggest that tribal women farmers may possess greater confidence, adaptability and independence in decision-making. George and Essac (2024) also found that resilience was positively associated with self-confidence, adaptability and autonomy among women.

In the dimension of group-oriented attitude, the majority of rural (60.0%) and tribal (53.3%) respondents were categorized under the average level. A substantially higher proportion of tribal respondents (38.3%) reported good group-oriented attitude compared to rural respondents (20.0%). Poor group-oriented attitude was observed among 20.0 per cent of rural and 8.4 per cent of tribal respondents. The

stronger group-oriented attitude among tribal women may be attributed to greater social cohesion, community participation and interpersonal trust. The findings are in line with Pretty and Ward (2001), who emphasized that social cohesion and community participation strengthen cooperation, trust and collective action.

In the dimension of environmental mastery, the majority of rural (63.3%) and tribal (60.0%) respondents fell under the average category. Good environmental mastery was reported by 29.2 per cent of tribal and 16.7 per cent of rural respondents, whereas, poor environmental mastery was observed among 20.0 per cent of rural and 10.8 per cent of tribal respondents. The findings suggest that tribal women farmers may be better able to manage environmental and life challenges through stronger adaptive coping mechanisms and social support. Masten (2001) also highlighted the role of resilience and adaptive coping in enhancing individuals' capacity to effectively manage environmental demands and maintain psychological well-being.

Overall, the findings reveal that while most single women farmers exhibited average mental health across all dimensions, tribal respondents consistently demonstrated relatively better mental health outcomes than rural respondents. This may be attributed to stronger social networks, community support systems and collective coping mechanisms prevalent within tribal communities.

Mental health scores of rural and tribal single women farmers

The distribution of respondents according to their overall mental health status is presented in Table 3a (Fig 2), while the comparison of mean mental health scores between rural and tribal single women farmers is shown in Table 3b.

The findings revealed that the majority of both rural and tribal single women farmers exhibited an average level of mental health. Among rural respondents, 63.3 per cent were categorized under average mental health, followed by 21.7 per cent under poor mental health and only 15.0 per cent under good mental health. In contrast, 59.1 per cent of tribal respondents reported average mental health, while 26.7 per cent exhibited good mental health and 14.2 per cent fell under the poor mental health category.

The results indicate comparatively better mental health among tribal single women farmers than among rural single women farmers. A higher proportion of tribal respondents (26.7%) reported good mental health compared to rural respondents (15.0%), whereas, the proportion of respondents with poor mental health was greater among rural (21.7%) than tribal (14.2%) women.

These differences may be attributed to variations in social support, community cohesion and coping mechanisms. Tribal communities often maintain stronger interpersonal relationships and collective support systems, which may contribute positively to psychological well-being.

The comparison of mean mental health scores further supports these findings. Tribal single women farmers recorded a significantly higher mean mental health score (Mean = 151.80, SD = 34.07) than rural single women farmers (Mean = 144.41, SD = 3.26). The calculated t-value (2.37) was significant at 5 per cent level of significance, indicating a significant difference in mental health between the two groups.

Thus tribal single women farmers demonstrated significantly better mental health than their rural counterparts. The relatively lower mental health status observed among rural respondents may be associated with continuous occupational burden, financial constraints, social isolation and limited access to psychosocial support.

CONCLUSION

This study brings to light a critical, long-ignored dimension of agrarian distress: the intersecting challenges of gender, singlehood and geography on the mental health of women farmers in Andhra Pradesh. While the volatile nature of rain-fed farming creates a baseline of moderate stress for almost all single women, the pathways through which they process and survive this stress diverge sharply based on their communities.

The statistical reality that rural single women suffer from significantly higher chronic stress and poorer mental health underscores a deep-rooted crisis. Deprived of institutional visibility and often labouring in isolation without structural safety nets, rural single

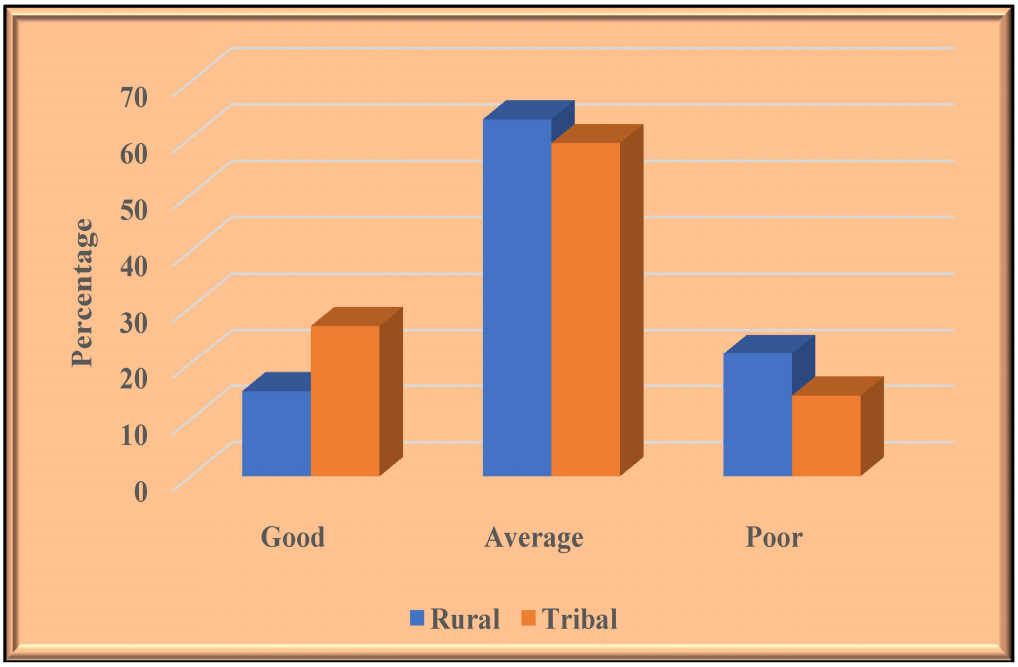

Fig 2. Mental health of rural and tribal single women farmers

Table 3a. Distribution of respondents as per mental health

Mental health	Respondents (N = 240)			
	Rural (n=120)		Tribal (n=120)	
	f	%	f	%
Good	18	15.0	32	26.7
Average	76	63.3	71	59.1
Poor	26	21.7	17	14.2

Table 3b. Comparison of mental health scores of rural and tribal single women farmers

Single women farmers	n	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Rural	120	144.41	3.26	2.37*	0.020
Tribal	120	151.80	34.07		

*Significant at 5% LoS

women bear a staggering, solitary burden. In stark contrast, tribal single women farmers demonstrate remarkable psychological resilience.

This resilience is not born out of easier economic conditions, as tribal farming is intensely vulnerable to climate anomalies, but out of a robust social fabric. Stronger group-oriented attitudes, community reliance, mutual trust and collective safety networks function as psychological cushions against systemic hardship.

Ultimately, agricultural sustainability cannot be achieved while the psychological well-being of its primary producers is compromised. Addressing this requires a shift from viewing single women merely as farm helpers to recognizing them as autonomous, vulnerable stakeholders.

To support single women farmers, policies must prioritize structural and emotional safety nets by establishing rural peer networks modelled after the collective, high-cohesion social frameworks of tribal

communities to reduce isolation. Simultaneously, the state must fast-track independent land ownership rights and credit access tailored for single women, directly alleviating the financial anxieties of insecure farm tenure.

Finally, embedding decentralized, culturally integrated mental health counselling and mobile stress-management units directly into agricultural clusters will ensure that psychological relief is both accessible and destigmatized.

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