

Achieving relationship satisfaction: household gender equality and mattering

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the dynamics of relationship satisfaction (RS) among married couples and its crucial significance for mental health and psychological well-being. Survey data encompassing variables such as the general mattering scale, gender inequality in Household Chores scale, Kansas marital conflict scale, and relationship assessment scale were gathered from 128 married individuals aged 18 to 65 in urban areas of Malaysia and Indonesia. Participants furnished demographic information including age, gender, and marriage duration. The study variables were assessed through the scales mentioned earlier. The findings, derived from bootstrap analysis involving 5,000 samples at a 95% confidence interval, revealed that the extent of partners' involvement in household chores significantly predicted their perception of gender equality in domestic responsibilities. This perception, in turn, fostered an elevated sense of mattering, thereby contributing to heightened relationship satisfaction. Importantly, the general mattering scale served as a significant mediator in the relationship between partner's household involvement and relationship satisfaction. In summary, couples benefit from partners engaging in domestic chores, resulting in an enhanced sense of mutual significance, greater relationship satisfaction, and improved mental well-being. Marital conflict frequency and intensity did not emerge as significant factors in this relationship.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of relationship satisfaction on the mental health of married individuals is widely acknowledged [1]. Positive outcomes, such as emotional support, security, and companionship are associated with satisfying marital relationships, while negative emotions, stress, divorce, and mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and even suicide ideation are linked with dissatisfying marital relationships [2], [3].

A systematic review suggested that marital distress is a risk factor for various mental health problems, including depression, anxiety [1] and substance abuse, and can cause other marital issues like separation, divorce, and neglected children with further psychological risks. In this study, we aim to investigate the various elements of relationship satisfaction and their interactions to gain a better understanding of how relationship satisfaction can be achieved and maintained, thereby improving the overall mental health of married couples. One of the most significant risk factors for deteriorated relationship satisfaction is marital conflict [4], [5]. Marital conflict can negatively impact the positive interrelationship between spouses and cause feelings of

undervaluation, resentment, frustration, and emotional distance, which can also affect offspring [5]. The social exchange theory [6] suggests that marital satisfaction is linked to the perceived benefits and costs of the relationship, and that both spouses must work towards fulfilling each other's needs to maintain satisfaction [7], [8].

It is essential to understand the elements within a marital relationship that can lead to internal conflict between spouses to minimize the possibility of conflict and maintain relationship satisfaction. Marital conflict has been reported as a significant factor of lower relationship satisfaction among married couples, with the similarity of self-control levels between spouses moderating the effect [9]. Marital conflict has also been found to interact with parenting stress and work-life balance, especially when spouses feel that their contributions to the household are not adequately valued [10]. When spouses do not feel that they matter to each other, marital conflicts are more likely to occur, leading to reduced relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the sense of mattering to others is a factor that contributes to relationship satisfaction and overall mental wellbeing [9].

Relationship satisfaction is a crucial aspect of mental health among married individuals [1]. A satisfying marital relationship can provide a sense of security, emotional support, and companionship, leading to positive mental health outcomes [2]. On the other hand, a dissatisfying marital relationship can cause negative emotions, stress, divorces, and mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and even worse, suicide ideation [3]. In this study, several elements of relationship satisfaction are studied, and the interactions among one another are analyzed to obtain better knowledge how relationship satisfaction can be obtained and sustained in order to improve the mental health quality of married couples. One of the most logical risk factors of deteriorated relationship satisfaction is the internal conflict between the couple itself.

Marital conflict (MC) is one of the most common risk factors of the relationship problems between spouses [4]. It can reduce the sense of positive interrelationship towards between spouses and triggered the sense of being undervalued by their spouses, and create a sense of resentment, frustration, and emotional distance that might even affect their offspring [5]. The negative association between marital conflicts and relationship satisfaction has been reported in several studies. The social exchange theory [6] suggests that marital satisfaction among married individuals is linked to the perceived benefits and costs of the relationship [7], [8]. In other words, the theory explained that both spouses in a marital relationship should attempt to provide to fulfill the need of each other and sustain the fulfillment in order to keep the relationship satisfying for both parties. In the light of that, it is important to obtain further understanding on the elements within marital relationship that can trigger internal conflict between the spouses. While the cause of marital conflicts might highly vary, in the context of this current study, we would like to focus on the theory of social exchange; that the sustainable balance between what was taken and what was given would minimize the possibility of the conflict, and eventually improve and maintain the relationship satisfaction as a part of the overall mental health. Related to that, other factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction were also reported to be factors of mental wellbeing. One of them is the sense of mattering, or the sense that we matter to others [11]. Marital conflict was reported to be the significant factor of lower relationship satisfaction in married couples, significantly moderated by the similarity of self-control levels between the husband and the wife [9]. In predicting relationship satisfaction, marital conflict was also reported to be interacting with parenting stress and work-life valance among married individuals [10], especially when they believe that their spouses did not acknowledge their contribution to the household as significant or adequately matter. In other word, when a husband or a wife does not consider themselves matter to their spouse, they would likely to have marital conflicts. Acknowledging the evidences that relationship satisfaction and healthy marriage are highly related to individuals' mental health, this current study aims to investigate the married couple dynamics that lead to the relationship satisfaction, which is considered the major predictor of mental well-being.

The construct mattering was first coined by Rosenberg and McCullough in 1981 [12]. It refers to an individual's sense of being significant to others. Within the context of marital relationships, it is crucial for individuals to feel that they matter to their spouse in order to maintain relationship satisfaction [13]. This sense of mattering is also positively associated with one's unconditional self-acceptance [14] positive emotion [15], and life satisfaction. Furthermore, it was reported that the sense of mattering is a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction [16], and this relationship is partially mediated by life satisfaction. The mediation relationship is also moderated by the secure attachment style, as individuals with low-to-moderate secure attachment style are more likely to be satisfied with their relationship when they feel they matter enough to their spouses. However, individuals with a secure attachment style are more likely to be satisfied with their life when they feel that their attachment to their spouse is secured, and as a result, they are more satisfied with their relationship. It is important to note that the extreme sense of mattering within a marriage can led to negative outcomes, such as high demand of validation, attention, and perceived fairness, or an overwhelming sense of responsibility for every task in the household [17]. Additionally, the sense of mattering is influenced by various factors, including the perceived social support [18], [19]. Within a marital relationship, individuals are more likely to believe they matter to their spouse when they perceive that they are supported and treated fairly [20]. A fair distribution of household chores is an example of perceived support and fairness [21]. When both spouses

participate equally in domestic chores, it empowers the individual to feel that they matter more to their partner. Therefore, gender equality in domestic chores is essential for promoting a sense of mattering within a marital relationship. Contextually, the sense of mattering to one's partner is crucial for maintaining relationship satisfaction [13] as it is positively associated with unconditional self-acceptance [14], positive emotion [15], and overall life satisfaction. The mediation relationship between the sense of mattering and relationship satisfaction is moderated by secure attachment style, whereby individuals with low-to-moderate secure attachment style tend to be more satisfied with their relationship when they feel they matter enough to their spouses [16]. When attachment to one's spouse is secured, individuals tend to be more satisfied with their life, and in turn, more satisfied with their relationship [18]. The sense of mattering is influenced by various factors, such as the perception of being supported one's spouse [18], [19]. Married individuals tend to feel more empowered and valued when their partner participates equally in household chores and practices gender equality in the distribution of household tasks [21]. This conditional relationship between mattering and relationship satisfaction highlights the need for further research to better understand the role of mattering in the context of marital relationships [17]. The concept of gender equality may be perceived differently among different groups of society, with younger generations and urbanites tending to embrace the idea more readily [22], [23]. On the other hand, older generations and those from rural areas tend to view gender roles more traditionally, with men being responsible for financial matters and women managing household chores [24], [25]. This difference in perception can lead to variations in how gender equality is viewed, particularly in relation to marital conflicts [22], [23]. However, despite these demographic differences, research suggests that perceiving gender roles as fair is linked to feeling valued in one's marriage [8]. It should be noted, though, that the definition of fairness may vary according to demographic factors [26], [27]. For example, urbanites may consider a woman working outside the home while her husband manages the household as a manifestation of gender equality, whereas in more traditional societies, gender equality may simply mean that the wife manages the household while the husband is solely responsible for financial matters [22], [23].

Partner involvement in household chores and perceptions of gender equality in the distribution of domestic tasks are significant factors in the development of mattering, which in turn can predict relationship satisfaction and reduce marital conflict. The idea of gender equality might sound ideal for specific groups of society, such as the urbanites, especially the gen-z, and the younger millennials [24], [28], while certain other groups might have different perspective towards the same concept [24], [25]. The older generation, especially the baby boomers and the Gen-X tend to see gender roles in a more distinct ways, where financial responsibility of the family should be held by the men, and the house chores should be solely managed by the women of the house. This perceptual difference in gender roles led them to further difference related to gender equality, especially when it comes to marital conflicts. Older generation, or younger generation in rural areas tend to perceive that marital conflict would not likely to occur when each spouse is loyal to their gender role, regardless the perceived balance [25]. In the context of Malaysia, especially among the traditional rural area, marital conflicts were seen as the effect of the gender equality, where men are involved in domestic chores and women work to earn financial compensation for the family [22], [23]. While mixed direction among demographic constructs is detected, most of the studies indicated that the perception of the fairness of gender roles would likely to lead married individuals to feel that they matter to their spouses. It is the definition of fairness that might be different among generations, social economic status, and other demographic factors. Among urbanites, it was reported that the concept of working women and husband homemakers is considered as gender equality, despite the latter is not as prevalent as the former [22]. On the other hand, among non-urbanites and other societies with less-exposure to current issues and contemporary values, gender equality might mean that both the husband and the wife do their distinctively different task without interfering with each other's tasks; which means that the domestic chores should only be handled by the wife. Regardless the difference between groups in interpreting gender equality, the higher perception of equality has always been reported with lower occurrences of marital conflicts [8].

In conclusion, the aforementioned literature suggested that the involvement of partner involvement in domestic chores and perceive gender equality in household tasks distribution is a significant element in this study and the aforementioned variables were reported to play significant roles in the development of mattering, which eventually predict relationship satisfaction through marital conflict. Based on the previous paragraphs, we draw the triple serial mediation hypothesis as illustrated in Figure 1.

As illustrated in our Figure 1, we hypothesized a model to explain the development of the relationship satisfaction in the context of our study. First of all, the social exchange theory [6], as well as the rest of the literature suggested that the relationship satisfaction (RS) can only be significantly developed with the minimum amount of marital conflict within the household. The conflict can be minimized when each spouse developed the sense that they matter to each other, and such sense of mattering can be predicted by the sense of gender equality in the division of domestic chores between the spouses. Finally, married individuals, especially mothers and wives, would likely to develop the sense of gender equality in domestic chores when

their spouses involve themselves in doing and being responsible in the household chores. Thus, our study is conducted to test the hypothesis that gender equality in house chores, mattering, and marital conflict perform serial mediation on the association between partner involvement in house chores and relationship satisfaction.

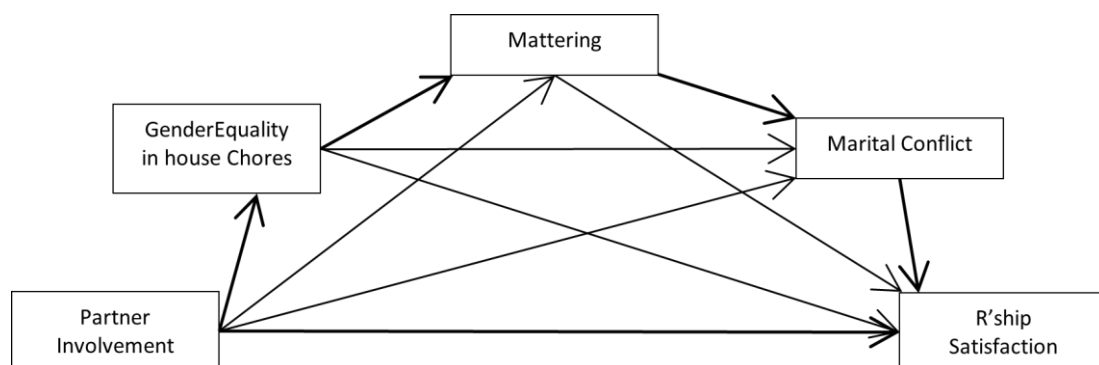


Figure 1. Triple serial mediation hypothetical model

2. METHOD

2.1. Population and samples

This current study was conducted with overarching aims to improve and sustain mental health and psychological wellbeing of married urbanites. G*power sample size calculator suggested 120 sample size to attain the power of 0.95 (95% probability of detecting the true effect or relationship when it exists). The respondents' candidates were selected through online communication and social media with inclusion criteria as adult married individuals over 18 years of age and live together with their spouses. A sample of 128 married individuals (55 men and 73 women) aged between 18 and 65 years from urban area in Malaysia and Indonesia were recruited as the urbanite population in both countries represent rather similar norms, subcultures, and tendencies, as proven in several meta-analysis studies related to the context of this current study, while the non-urbanite populations can be really distinct between the two countries [26], [27], [29]. The urbanites in both countries are also similar in terms of gender equality perception and family values [30], [31]. On the other hand, despite living in the same country, urbanites and rural dwellers in both countries observe different social values. Rural married couples would likely to have clear distinction between men and women's roles in the households and gender equality [22].

2.2. Data collection

The participants were recruited to respond to the demographic questionnaires, such as their age, gender, and duration of marriage, and in order to collect the data related to the variables of this current study, they responded to the scales as follows: i) Gender inequality in household chores scale [32], a scale dichotomous scale that consisted of two subscales namely subject involvement and partner involvement in household chores scales, with sample item such as does your partner shop for groceries for the household?" ii) The Kansas marital conflict scale (KMS) [33], another dichotomous scale with the sample item such as "6. Is your spouse willing to really hear what you want to communicate?" and the relationship assessment scale (RAS) [34], a Likert scale to measure relationship satisfaction with the sample item such as "4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?" "Another likert scale type questionnaire to measure the sense that one matters was also included. The scale is called general mattering scale [35] with sample items such as "How much would you be missed if you went away? The data collection materials, sampling method and analysis method have been cleared by the Ethic Review Board of the Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences, University of Cyberjaya with the serial number UOCFPPS/ERB/1301001 before the scales were distributed to the respondents.

2.3. Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted by using Bootstrap method with 5,000 samples with 95% confidence interval. This method is chosen as it works well with less sample size without normal distribution [36], instead of using the actual sample, this method resamples (simulates) the association among the collected data to create many (5,000, in the context of this study) hypothetical datasets, before conducts analysis to each dataset to estimate the distribution of the mediation effect, without assuming that the data are normally distributed. This feature makes it more robust to violations of normality and other assumption tests when compared to other

traditional methods to analyze mediation or serial mediation analysis, such as multiple linear regression or Sobel test [37].

The execution of the Bootstrap method to analyze the serial mediation was conducted by employing the PROCESS Macro model 6 by Hayes [36], [38], where variables to analyze were described as follows:

- Predictor variable (X): Partner involvement in domestic chores
- First mediator variable (M1) Sense of gender equality in house chores
- Second mediator variable (M2): Sense of mattering
- Third mediator variable (M3): Marital conflict
- Outcome variable (Y): Relationship satisfaction

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Testing of the triple serial mediation hypothesis

PROCESS Macro model 6 for multiple mediation was ran to analyze our hypothetic model. This analysis was chosen as it caters the serial mediation, where it is hypothesized that X predicts M1, which predicts M2, which predicts M3, which predicts M3. Additionally, all mediator variables were hypothesized to predict the outcome variable, and at the same time, mediate each other. As can be in Figure 1, there were several mediation analyses (direct and indirect paths) to be analyzed. The results of this complex analysis are divided into two parts; the first part is the analysis of the direct effect of X on Y, or the analysis of the contribution of Partner Involvement on Relationship Satisfaction, while controlling for all the mediators. The second part is the series of analyses of indirect effects. There were 7 indirect effects to be tested with bootstrap analyses, and the results is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	P	LLCI	ULCI
3444	2149	1.6028	1116	-0809	7697

Table 1 depicts the path of X on Y controlling for all the mediators. It can be seen that the direct effect was not significant ($p=112$) in other words, the satisfaction with relationship does not have anything to do with individuals' perception that their spouses actively involve themselves in domestic chores. Results of the second part of the data analyses are depicted in the next Table 2. Before looking further into Table 2, it is important to see how the indirect effects in this study are termed, sequenced, and analyzed in the list:

Ind1 PARTINV	→	GEDC	→	RELSAT				
Ind2 PARTINV	→	MAT	→	RELSAT				
Ind3 PARTINV	→	MARCON	→	RELSAT				
Ind4 PARTINV	→	GEDC	→	MAT	→	RELSAT		
Ind5 PARTINV	→	GEDC	→	MARCON	→	RELSAT		
Ind6 PARTINV	→	MAT	→	MARCON	→	RELSAT		
Ind7 PARTINV	→	GEDC	→	MAT	→	MARCON	→	RELSAT

The list explains the acronyms used in the previous subsections in explaining the results of the indirect effects.

- a. Ind = Indirect effect
- b. PARTINV = The perceived partner's involvement in domestic chores.
- c. GEDC = Perceived gender equality in domestic chores
- d. RELSAT = Relationship satisfaction
- e. MARCON = Marital conflict

Table 2 depicted the results of the analyses of the indirect effects. Table 2 indicated that the only significant indirect effects is the Ind 4 as the range between bootstrap lower limit of confidence interval (BootLLCI) and bootstrap upper limit of confidence interval (BootULCI) does not contain zero, both of the limits of confidence interval are positive. This result can be interpreted as partner involvement in domestic chores significantly predicts the sense of gender equality, which significantly predicts the sense of mattering, which eventually improves the relationship satisfaction. As seen in the previous list of indirect effects, the fourth indirect effect did not involve marital conflict, which means that as long as the sense of mattering is improved, married individuals would likely to improve their relationship satisfaction, regardless whether they have meaningful internal conflict or not.

Table 2. Indirect effect(s) of X on Y

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
TOTAL	3854	2390	-0745	8585
Ind1	-1667	1575	-4862	1407
Ind2	0982	2269	-3367	5624
Ind3	0932	0868	-0346	2973
Ind4	3543	1438	1004	6585
Ind5	-0261	0321	-1032	0225
Ind6	0070	0181	-0318	0462
Ind7	0253	0235	-0135	0797

4. DISCUSSION

Our results suggested that when one's partner actively shows their involvement in doing the house chores, one will perceive that the gender equality at home exists. This perception then led to the sense that one matters to their partner, and in turn, they would be more satisfied in their relationship. This finding shows that both the sense of gender equality, as well as the sense that one matters to their partner, are important elements that hold the key roles that determine the relationship satisfaction, as without these three mediators, the involvement of the partner in house chores would not predict relationship satisfaction. In a more traditional manner, it can be stated that no matter how hard the husband tries to involve himself in the household chores, the wife would not be satisfied unless she felt that the household chores are distributed equally between them, and that she matters to her husband. This part of our findings is consistent with the report that when one does not feel they matter to their partner, for example, being phubbed, they would not likely to be satisfied with their relationship, despite they have been married for quite some time.

4.1. Theoretical implications

This result aligns with the principles of the social exchange theory [6], which posits that participation in domestic duties may be considered a 'cost' that a married individual has to bear, whereas marital contentment may be regarded as the 'benefit' that they receive. This, in turn, leads to the perception of fairness, represented by the notion of gender equality, that contributes to relationship satisfaction. Our results supplemented the theory by suggesting that the perception of a fair exchange, characterized by the sense of gender equality, would not significantly anticipate relationship satisfaction without the being mediated by the sense of mattering. In other words, the partner's involvement in household chores must not only instill being seen as the form of an acknowledgment of gender equality, but it must also instill the sense that the individual matters to the partner. On the other hand, our finding nullified the mediation role of marital conflict in the equation. This is inconsistent with the previous study which reported that the intensity of marital conflict significantly predicted low level of relationship satisfaction [9], [10]. From this results comparison with the previous studies, we can conclude that when the sense of mattering plays more important role in mediating the association between the gender equality and relationship satisfaction.

4.2. Practical implication

The results of our study have significant implications for professionals working in the field of relationship psychology and policymakers. Mental health practitioners can use these findings to design interventions that encourage equity in household tasks, while also tackling concerns surrounding marital discord and overall relationship contentment. Policymakers can leverage these findings to create initiatives and regulations that promote parity in domestic responsibilities and diminish gender-based discrepancies, ultimately leading to better mental health outcomes for the populace.

4.3. Limitations and suggestions

Limitations of this study arise from the restricted range of participants and the temporal constraints. Specifically, the study's scope is broad, and it would have been preferable to focus on more specific subpopulations, such as married millennials, millennial mothers, stay-at-home fathers, couples with Gen-Z offspring, or unmarried couples who cohabit. This limitation must be acknowledged because groups with diverse demographics may yield distinct findings despite similarly being urban dwellers. Another limitation stems from the cross-sectional design, which captures data at a single point in time, rendering it inapplicable to different temporal or geographical contexts. Thus, future research should target narrower subgroups and incorporate diverse data collection methods.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the outcomes of this recent investigation offer significant comprehension regarding the intricate associations among gender roles, sense of significance, conjugal discord, perceived participation of partners in domestic tasks, and their influence on mental health results. The findings hold considerable theoretical and practical implications for mental health practitioners and policymakers, which could guide future research endeavors, interventions, and policy-making initiatives aimed at fostering gender equality, decreasing marital conflicts, and advancing mental health outcomes.




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