

WORKING MOTHERS: EXPLORING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS

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Abstract

The duty of raising a child in our society is seen to be the duty of the mother. Motherhood is further associated to the female gender and expected as a responsibility of them which is at times seen as of higher priority when compared to other aspirations of the person. In the contemporary world and in the recent past, we have witnessed an increase of the female participation in the workforce. Furthermore, with the changing work environments, we have seen rapid increase of women's participation in the economy. With this paper we look to observe and analyse, the conceived conflict between traditional motherhood and that of modern economic participation. Whether this conflict is existent and if yes, to what extent is it a challenge in performing either of the roles are the some of the questions we would like to observe the answers to. Whether modern concepts of motherhood are in contention to the traditional defined roles of motherhood when observed in the case of working mothers will be looked upon further. We will also look to analyse whether working mothers are at a disadvantage in terms of either of their roles i.e.: as a mother or as a working professional.

Keywords: motherhood, duty, role, society, labour, identity, gender



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Introduction

Motherhood confers upon a woman the responsibility of raising a child. This process also changes the way in which she is perceived in society and at her workplace. It can necessitate her to take more than available leave options, and job security can be at risk. Significant social and personal adjustments are necessary to cope with such a situation. A working mother, especially one who has the good fortune to be able to balance her home and work, enjoys the stimulation that a job or career provides. She develops the ability of raising a useful member of society and at the same time gains from the work. In this article, we shall try to clarify the difficulties a working mother may have on functioning with such dual responsibility and independence. Along with motherhood, work adds to the completeness. In short, it is possible to be a woman, a mother, and an achiever. Many have done it with help from society, and others have battled endless odds to prove the same. In today's world it is both desirable and incumbent upon mothers to be working, like their spouses. We, in the developing world, and still in the throes of a culture and tradition of a male-oriented society, should acknowledge that,

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contrary to traditional belief that a working mother is not a good mother, a working mother can, in fact, be a better mother. A working mother, especially the one who has the good fortune to be able to balance her home and work, thanks to all the factors mentioned above, enjoys the stimulation that a job or career provides. She not only feels better about herself but is also forced to take better care of herself in order to make an impression. Along with motherhood, a successful career adds to the completeness of being a woman. The major stresses of being a working mother remain lack of time, and a feeling of guilt, due to perceived neglect of the parenting role. The rewards are many, including personal benefits, financial rewards, and improved family life. To enable this, considerable adjustments are necessary at the individual level and at the workplace, which help the mother to fulfil the dual responsibilities of career and motherhood. This paper would provide an analysis of the experiences of working women based in Delhi.

Studies on Work and Mothers

According to Davidoff and Westover (1986) in the late 1950s and 1960s many women in London were feeling uneasy and guilty as they responded to conflicting messages. On the one hand, there was a stress on the morality as well as need for women to be at home, especially mothers of young children. On the other, there were strong incentives drawing married women back into the work force, from employers who needed them and their own desire for an income to support a better standard of home life, as well as to break the isolation of being at home (ibid: 33-34). In their view, in spite of the opening of public sphere for working women, married women mostly remained confined to the social and cultural concerns of family and have social circle of family, friends and relatives.

In the study of American teachers and the gender question, authors Perlmann & Margo (2001) have focused on explaining a specific historical phenomenon: the gendered character of grade-school teaching across space and time—but it is reasonable to ask what the ramifications of this phenomenon were for the broader course of American history. In particular, we can comment very briefly on some ways in which the prevalence of female teachers in a region and later throughout all regions may have affected American history generally. Although knowledge is to some extent its own reward, it also has economic value. Teachers by raising labor productivity, promotes economic growth in the long run. Because female teachers were cheaper to hire than male teachers were, the economic cost of producing human capital was cheaper than it otherwise would have been, providing a boost to its production and hence to

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long-term economic growth. A distinguishing feature of American education has long been the similarity of educational attainments between men and women, despite the fact that, until quite recently, women spent a much smaller fraction of their adult lives in the paid labour force. Indeed, at least a rough similarity must have been a necessary context for the subsequent feminization of school teaching (notwithstanding our inability to document much of a statistical association between female schooling and the percentage of women in teaching). Compared with most other occupations, teaching has always required a higher level of educational preparation. As such, once female school teaching was an accepted pattern in a region, the level of educational attainment of each successive generation of American women was probably higher than it would have been otherwise, because a notable fraction of the next generation of women would teach at some time in their lives. Furthermore, as educational requirements in teaching rose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, teachers' colleges proliferated to provide the necessary training. Many of these teachers' colleges, in turn, were transformed into colleges plain and simple as American higher education expanded in the second half of the twentieth century. Third, while a "glass ceiling" clearly existed in the teaching profession in the early twentieth century. Women may have felt subservient to male educational authorities, it is also true that teaching offered young, educated women a significant degree of autonomy in their work lives that they probably would not have had if the occupation had been closed to them. Also, while women were denied the same opportunities in educational administration as men had, some women did become assistant principals, principals, and even higher-level administrators—in short, they took advantage of opportunities to acquire managerial skills that were scarcely available to women elsewhere in the economy at that time. Then, too, women who had been teachers while younger presumably provided a home environment that valued education highly, thereby laying the groundwork for further social change.

Illina Sen engages with the feminist movements debate on how do women work towards the emancipation from the shackles of patriarchy. According to Sen, 'given the sacramental relationship of women with housework and domestic labour, it is really an open question to what extent public productive labour liberates her and to what extent it crushes her further. Nevertheless, equality of employment opportunity and access are no doubt important demands' (Sen, 1989: 1641). In her view, with the growth of factories and modern day labour markets, women's participation is expected to increase manifolds, but it depends upon the working

conditions whether their labour is valued according to egalitarian principles or their labour are also exploited similarly to their male counterparts.

Sonalkar (1975) in her study of Poona city examined female employment in certain industries. In society like India, the traditional division of labour between the sexes is essentially preserved and accommodated through caste system and maintained within a newly emerging urban industrial structure. She studies women beedi worker whose independent earning capacity does not protect her from bigamy by the man; the Waddar widow who is not accommodated for in the division of work; the Mahar woman who is performing the same duty in the city that she was doing in the village.

Certainly, the participation in social labour imparts to these women a confidence. But ultimately she is socially dependent on her husband, the care of children is wholly her responsibility, and within the home she serves her husband whether or not she also works outside, and, though she may occasionally curse out of fatigue and frustration, the idea that she should demand that he shares these domestic tasks is alien to her. And the situation shows signs of worsening, as the number of opportunities for women to work outside the domestic sphere is hardly growing.

Husain and Dutta (2014) in their study examines the status of women workers in the IT sector in Kolkata, a metropolitan city in eastern India. It seeks to examine the impact of employment in a highly skill-intensive sector characterised by a corporate environment on empowerment. Does it provide space to the women workers to balance work and household responsibilities satisfying the set of values held by the women workers? Or, does the synergy of global capitalism and local patriarchy create new bounds on the freedom of choice of women. Husain and Dutta, examine Amartya Sen's theoretical framework of capability to understand how do women experience their work life and home life. According to Husain and Dutta, 'Sen concludes that neither command over resources nor utility presents an adequate measure of human well-being or deprivation. A more direct approach is required, concentrating on functionings and capabilities. Functioning refer to beings and doings, or achievements and outcomes. Examples are being well fed, sheltered, getting education and so on. Capabilities, on the other hand, are potential functionings—they refer to opportunities or freedom to achieve something. All capabilities jointly define the overall freedom that a person enjoys to lead the life he/she values' (Husain & Dutta, 2014: 7).

Mala Bhandari (2004) in her study on Delhi finds that women experience of work is quite layered. One thing that has emerged from the present study is that the women bear the brunt of

the duality of their roles - at home and in the office. A job is an additional task for them to carry out along with their household responsibilities. There is no respite for them from the boredom and drudgery in routine household tasks. The work at home is repetitive, inescapable and tiring for them. Within this scenario, the silver lining in their lives is provided by their work-life outside the home. It enlivens their routines by providing them leisure opportunities during the working hours in the office. To sum up, employment outside the household has improved the social aspects, more than the physical aspects, of well-being for the working women. The office enriches their social life by providing new roles, networks and social circles outside home.

Insights from the Fieldwork

The data presented in this article are based on the field study of 17 women in Delhi city. These women came from a variety of professions i.e. academics, journalism, corporate and business companies.

Work satisfaction

We got three kinds of responses from these working women who came from different kinds of family, as well as occupational background. Firstly, most of the women were happy with their work situation, even though they raised questions about time and spatial proximity being undermined by their working careers. So many of them would talk about that their job search is restrained by the proximity of work place near to home. Another set of women found that both work life and being a mother takes a toll of your time and health as well. They feel that they are over stressful sometimes but with the help of family and organizations they work in. A third set of women expressed that they actually enjoyed working in both ways. For them even managing household is similar to their work profile. In addition to their role of wife and mother at home, work places confer a new identity of professional onto these women and which brings a sense of accomplishment.

According to their views managing home and office both successfully generates a sense of accomplishment, and we learn how to be efficient both at professional and personal levels. Part of their satisfaction comes from the support these women get from their family, from their husbands and from the fact that children are not too young to be dependent on them. In spite of the narrative of changing family structures, this field study showed that quite a sufficient number of these women came from joint family and that shares part of their role expected at home.

Speaking structurally the social profile of these women is largely upper middle class who had got the opportunity to get good education and many of them have been successful in academics,
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journalism and corporate world. These women enjoyed their job profile and valued the task assigned to them, many of them liked travelling partly that explains how their work tensions got reduced. Another aspect of their satisfaction comes from the fact due to their position in these fields, they are able to make decisions and conscious choice in their work related issues which also brings work satisfaction, the social interaction with their teams and their clients and being challenged, as key sources of satisfaction. However, some of them got stressed out because of the fact that their work is not balanced by household affairs, in that case they experience stress and workload.

Role of Family

Majorly, for those living in a joint family it was a little easy to manage both in case they get support as there is someone to trust on for kids. They feel they could never rear their children alone as they are working. Family assures that there is no compromise on health, education or hygiene of children. Kids turn out to be more interactive and learn to eat every food because of love and affection given by grandparents. However, if family disagrees with women's work or pampers the child too much, it becomes problematic. In case of nuclear family, some woman enjoy the sense of independence as they can take their own decisions. All of them felt that there would have been a change in the rearing of children if they were not working as they could have given enough time and attention. Their time gets divided. Further, not just dual responsibility, but a working woman has to be a multi-task player. She has to take care of family, children and herself. This can be tiring however, keeps her busy and engaged. For some the willingness to earn is so high that they do not consider this as a burden.

Comparing and contrasting the way children were brought up earlier and now, there is a huge shift. Earlier there was lack of resources and less technical advancements which prevented children from getting distracted. One can evidently see generation gap. However, some women still use the methods used by their mothers to rear the child. The fact that child must be independent should be considered. As parents, it is important to teach the child to be a good human, teach religious values, good education, safe environment etc. equally important for most of the respondents was to give them space and make them independent. Woman does her best despite of her dual work to provide love and affection to her child. Feeding, taking care etc. becomes a part of her routine.

Most of the working teachers mention that their husband shares their responsibility. As they both are working, the not only share financial burden but also share household's responsibilities. In joint families, even the domestic responsibilities can be shared as their

mother in law might help. Focusing on the concept of supermom, they consider that every mother is a supermom as they are able to manage despite all difficulties the work at home as well as at job without sacrificing on either. Similar responses could be found for ideal women. She must manage tasks efficiently and perfectly. Because of the extra pressure some women sometimes feel a sense of guilt in handling or spending less time with family, except a few, most respondents mention that their children are supportive and understand their condition. Respondents try their level best to be there for their kids whenever needed.

Dual Role and Economic Wellbeing

A woman, not only has a duty of being a mother but can also be an efficient contributor to the society through her profession. Managing work at home and at workplace is a difficult task, yet our supermoms are doing great. More than 70 % of working mothers have opted for teaching as a profession. While most opted for this because it is their passion and they are ambitious about improving the future of our society and there are some who had to accept this as a family decision. Some even had to face family pressure. Their gender identity played an important role in selection of this profession. They could spend quality time with their family, nurture their kids and could contribute to household responsibility because of convenient working hours. After giving birth to a child, their responsibilities doubled. Both work and family are demanding and striking a balance was sometimes problematic. In case of small children, mother has to consider work secondary as children must feel secure. However, they could still manage after the break which took time as leaving the job was not an option for them. Being a mother does not always affect their career prospective in case family is supportive. Some of the respondents were hesitant to work because they did not want to run away from responsibilities. However, for some it was just the same and birth of their child had made the perspective even stronger. Some could just not imagine themselves sitting at home and being a homemaker throughout the day. However, few did mention that during the peak years of their career, if family and responsibilities of mother becomes more demanding, she has to be available to her kids. In some cases, both husband and women mutually decide of financial fronts depending on family needs, however some do mention that they independently take decisions regarding the spending of money. In rare cases, there are families who take decision regarding the expenditure of respondents' salary. Finally, the earning capacity has empowered them and enhanced the standard of living. Mothers can live life according to their terms and conditions and can be independent. Their future goals can be fulfilled. They are successfully able to justify their work at home and at job.

Conclusion

Gender has always been among the strongest determinants of who would be most active in the market sphere and who in the domestic sphere; in addition, within the labour market, gender has always been among the strongest determinants of who would be found in specific jobs. Over time, the importance of the gender divide has declined, as more women have entered the paid labour force, and because of broad social, political, and legal changes that have opened up economic opportunities for women in arenas that were previously denied to them. A curious feature of the gendered nature of occupations is that, few occupations have undergone a gendered transformation; that is, switched from being male to female-dominated, or vice versa, while remaining relatively fixed in job content. Such gendered transformations in the labour force may occur because of changes in the supply of workers or changes in the skill levels of men and women (which in turn will need to be explained), or because other opportunities in the labour market make the occupation in question less attractive to men (or women). Alternatively, the changes may occur because the nature of the demand for worker's changes: women may come to be seen as more suited for teaching than men, for example; or, finally, the nature of the work, at first glance the same, may change in subtle ways that in turn change who will undertake the work. Because of the range of influences that may be operating to produce the gendered character of an occupation, an adequate understanding of that gendered character of occupations will always require collaboration across disciplinary boundaries.

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