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## Working mothers and parenting: health status in India

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### Abstract

The research has investigated working mothers' roles within the context of work-family and has reported on such inter-role conflict between women's health issues and parenting through secondary data. Studies on the impact of employed mothers on their children have yielded conflicting results, some positive and some negative. It observed that the children of working mothers are socially more participative than children of non-working mothers. The study found children of working mothers to be less stable, get easily upset and affected by feelings. The study also says employed mothers as careless and slightly emotionally unstable in the early years but independent during later years as compared to the children of unemployed mothers. In all these worries the woman has no time left to look after her health. A large number of working mothers complain of frequent headaches, back pain, circulatory disorders, fatigue, emotional and mental disorders.

**Keywords:** Health, parenting, dual responsibility, inequality and social construction

### Introduction

The origin of the Indian idea of appropriate female behaviour can be traced to the rules laid down by Manu in 200 B.C.: "by a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing can be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a girl must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent".

Women were denied voting rights, property rights, and educational rights for a long time. Women from the infant stage to their old age women get an unfair deal in the matter of health. Their health concerns receive a low priority resulting in women bearing pain and discomfort in silence for long periods of time without seeking relief. The sex ratio in India speaks volumes about the neglect. It is not just the poor, who for want of resources and with the inherent preference for a boy is guilty of bias. Even in well-to-do families, parents tend to spend more on the health care of boys than on girls.

A report published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India in 2018, observes that India ranks 130 in 2018 among 189 countries in terms of the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI), 130 in terms of Gender Development Index (GDI) and 127 in terms of Gender Inequality Index. Women work longer hours than men and carry the major share of household and community work that is unpaid and invisible. Also, women generally work in the informal sector where wages are lower and they are not covered by labour laws. Women workers are also engaged in piecework and subcontracting at exploitative rates. Thus, this article highlights the family and parenting stress and health status of working mothers.

### Labour force participation of women in India

Labour force plays a central role in economic development. In developing countries, there is an increased participation of women in the labour force. This increase in women has been an integral feature of the era of rapid economic growth. Rising inflation and urbanization are the economic factors in the explanation of increased female participation in the labour force.

India has 397 million workers, of whom 123 million are women. Of them, 106 million are in rural areas and the remaining 18 million are from urban areas. Only 20 percent of the women labourers work in urban areas. 38.2 percent of women are economically active individuals.

They earn 66 percent of men's salary for equal work. The socio-economic condition in India has contributed to the need for dual income in middle-class families. The literacy rate among women is 39.3 percent and they make up 28 percent of the labour force which constitutes educated employed women (Catalyst, 2011). In India, there has been a steady increase of women labour force. As a result of the policies of liberalization and privatization, the most important development all over the world, especially in developing countries like India, has been the growing informalisation of the labour force.

With increasing informalisation of the labour force, there has been an increase of the women participants in the labour force in many developing countries. Though the international trend shows a rise in female labour force participation during the last two decades, it is not seen in the national census and labour surveys because of the under remuneration of women's work. Curtailment of state provisions in child care, community care and social security increases the dual burden of employment and family responsibilities for women in general.

The entry of women in the formal sector made the laws, rules, and regulations to get amended to provide for the reproductive functions of women that might interfere with their occupation. The laws thus formulated tended to protect and enhance women's domestic roles and project the care for home and family as natural tasks of women. Consequently, formal labour is not the redefinition of a woman's role, but the addition of a new role while the conventional role of mother/wife remains intact. Women became the targets of crèche facilities and childcare benefits so that they could work in the formal labour. Section 48 of the factories act, 1948 requires employers to provide suitable room or rooms for the use of children less than six years old in the event that they employed 30 or more women workers.

### Dual responsibility

The major problems for working wives arise out of the dual responsibilities of the working women's housework and the office work. Even though the employment of women is accepted, most of her in-laws and majority of the husbands have not accepted the changing life pattern. They are not prepared to share the responsibilities of the household and of looking after children. These duties are still considered to be exclusively of the wife. It is a common sight that the women get up early in the morning, prepare breakfast, cooks the lunch, dresses the children for school and goes to the office. In the evening when she returns, house job is waiting for her. She prepares tea and serves husband and children, attends pending household work and prepares dinner. If it is a joint family the mother-in-law or sisters-in-law feel that they work for the whole day in the house when she is in the office. Now it is her turn to work. If she is not doing enough work at home they criticize and abuse her. They even comment loud that she is not earning for the family and is not obliging elder at home. At times her share of work is kept apart. Sometimes they remark that she has a chance to go out in the name of work, while the other sisters-in-law are totally confined to home. They are jealous of her freedom and the status she enjoys. Even derogatory stories are fabricated to hurt her. If the husband is sensible and sympathetic and does share some work to help her he is blamed as a "henpecked" husband. The in-laws do not like

his attitude and criticize him also. However, even such husbands are only a few.

Promila Kapur (1970) in her work has highlighted the ability to manage dual roles. She noted that generally working women happily accept and manage dual roles but the conflict is felt by those who feel torn between loyalty towards their job and loyalty towards their husband and children. She also maintains that "Intense conflict is possible when there is a clash between two equally important roles with corresponding aspirations.

Krishna Chakraborty in her study, the *conflicting worlds of working mother* found that employed housewives all over the world have to face this problem of adjustment among their varied role expectations. Their position requires them to play a dual set of roles one as homemakers, wives and mothers, and the other as employees. Being simultaneously confronted with the dual demands of home and work, they are liable to face adjustment problems. At home, in addition to biological functions, they have other duties which they are expected to perform because of the prevailing cultural norms and values. These new circumstances and responsibilities require a redefinition and reallocation of roles, duties, and responsibilities, not merely for them but also for every member of the family. Unless and until it is achieved there is no chance of lessening the overload on working house-wives, and therefore, mitigating the severity of their problems. Whether it is out of their own choice or economic necessity that they have taken up employment outside, adjustment between their roles obligations is not an easy task. It requires not only ability and goodwill but also physical endurance and psychological acceptance.

### The conflict between the two roles

In addition to the above-described burdens on the women, the dual role also demands of her two different sets of values. Difficulties arise because often these two roles make a simultaneous demand on a person whose physical capacity, energy, endurance and time have definite limits. Often the fulfillment of these two roles requires qualities of different and diverse kinds one requiring co-operation and self-negation and the other calling for competition and self-enhancement. Women's business functions require such qualities as efficiency, courage, determination, intelligence, sense of reality, responsibility and independence. In the professional sphere, they are expected to act in a 'business-like' manner, to be straight forward and non-sentimental. In addition to these characteristics, and partly in conflict with them, a woman who is a wife also expected to be sweet, soft, sensitive adaptable, gentle, unassertive, domesticated, yielding and in most cases, not too intelligent.

Hence a kind of conflict arising from a lack of adjustment between two competing roles is likely to be faced by those persons who have to comply with dual obligations at a time. This problem would not arise if job and home were considered as two mutually exclusive fields of life. The typical woman is dedicated to her family. She may feel that one way of serving her family is by earning additional money. At the same time, she might feel that her husband would prefer her staying at home and rendering more domestic service for her and the family, her children need her presence at home, further her presence at home would have prevented the emergence of some of their family problems. She wonders whether the additional money which she may earn by working outside and which might not be

large after meeting additional expenses is really worth and sacrifices. Often she is heard to make statements like a working woman cannot be outstanding both at home and in the job, she had to make a choice or 'it is hard to stay happily married while working', or the 'quality of motherhood will suffer when the mother engages in a full-time job outside.' Further religious rituals and customary practices are expected to be preserved and perpetuated by the women. Despite her heavy work burden, more than the men, are the loud wearies of the rituals. Thus the problem of adjustment of working women becomes more serious.

In fact, carrying out almost all responsibilities single-handed by the women are over-strained and get exhausted. The illusion of having new experience and variation from the drudgery of the routine house-work soon fades away. All the aspirations are shattered. All these make a combined effect on her nature. They get irritated in trivial matters; get angry with children and husband. The home (family) which is expected to be better than paradise, get disturbed and thus happiness and peace vanish.

The ideas of multiple responsibilities also create problems for working women. On the one hand, they want to be efficient workers and try hard to fulfill the job-duties and at the same time, they also want to be good wives, good mothers, and better home managers. She wants to maintain her status in society and be respected by the other members of the family. Her sincerity towards all the responsibilities itself is a cause for the trouble. After finishing the home-job she runs to the office. If she is late, she will be in tension. The office authority would blame her for insincerity. If she has to put on some overtime work, she is late to home and she is worried about the children coming from school.

In some houses, of course, the working of women is appreciated. They are treated with great respect, her burdens and feelings are understood. Development of her personality and emergence into an enlightened status is encouraged. In such families working women have a comfortable position. They enjoy their work and aspire to do their best to be outstanding in their fields. But unfortunately, this type of situation is found rarely.

### **Impact on marital relations**

The whole drama of the life of an Indian woman is played around the husband and his relations. Even though a man is well educated and dressed in western style, has a look of modernity and even advocates women's emancipation, when it comes to his relationship with his wife, he is still like a traditional husband, with age-old orthodox, attitude towards his wife. He may be a staunch exponent of equality of women with that of men. But at home, he enjoys domination over his wife, who has to meekly obey him without question. He is not able to accept his wife arguing the truth. He likes his wife's earning, but it defiles his ego to accept her as his equal. He is not able to even accept the fact that his wife can efficiently handle man's job. He enjoys seeing her as weak, docile and always dependent on him. The problem becomes more difficult when the earning of the woman is higher than the husband's or she is more able and efficient in her work. He tries to hide his feelings of inferiority complex, by manifesting it in actions that express exaggerated superiority over her. This breeds very oppressive conditions for the woman, who is neither able to give up nor face this oppression day in and day out. Thus working women face a severe problem when their salary is

more than that of her husband. Aware of the man's ego and the stereotyped notions of a woman being less than a man, women take extra care of their husband's feeling, never express their superiority and deliberately adopt a low self-image and low posture. But the husbands are always conscious of the fact, and this aggravates the oppression of women.

### **Restrictions on movement**

It is observed that in some cases the freedom of movement of the working women is also restricted. She is allowed only to go to the place of work. If she is late by half-an-hour, she is answerable. She is not allowed to go elsewhere along. If she wants to go, she is accompanied by younger sister-in-law or someone else. Some women express that if they have to work late in the working place, they are misunderstood by their husbands or by the in-laws. She is badly rebuked and a big fuss is made of it. Some women complain that even if they are physically unwell and badly exhausted and could not respond to the husband's sexual needs they are not only misunderstood but are alleged to have illegitimate relations with some co-workers or the boss. They are inhumanly treated, tortured and even beaten. Women feel hurt by such humiliating actions of the husband towards them especially when their integrity is questioned. There are examples where the husbands have illegitimate relations with other women and to hide their fault, they put on allegations on women and blame, so the latter may not question them.

### **Problem for residence**

A single woman, married, unmarried and widowed if alone, faces a problem of residence in India. Except in some of the big cities, there is no provision of working women's hostels. It is difficult to have a rented house in a limited income, the house owner looks at the single women with suspicion and is not willing to rent it.

Thus, the working women, whether married or unmarried employed in organized or unorganized sector face a variety of problems at home level. Almost all of these problems are not of her own creation but due to the society's traditional outlook. Society in India does not favour the employment of women as they are still looked upon as reproductive and not productive actors. It also relegated women to a secondary position and confines them to play the role of home-maker. The responsibility of solving these problems, hence, should belong to the man and society, though the working woman often tends to believe herself to be responsible. A changed family relationship based on a changed and egalitarian power relationship within the family and between man and woman is the need of the hour.

### **Poor health**

The health of an individual is closely linked to his/her status in society. Women universally have lower status and are seen only in their reproductive roles. Women anywhere in the world have to suffer from some inbuilt disadvantages, compared to men, because of certain biological reasons. They have to put up with menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, child rearing, and menopause and their various complications. They are also vulnerable to sexual aggression and abuse. The different cultural, social and economic situations in India have given different focus to these biological disadvantages of women. These biological disadvantages affect the health of working women.

Further women have a double disadvantage of discriminations because women bear a triple burden of reproduction, production, and domestic work. Each of these has its own problems and women have to perform all the three of them and being denied proper working conditions, results in their poor health.

It is well spread belief that the physical structure and maternal functions of

women place her at a disadvantageous position. Women have never shirked hard labour, whether it is farming, planting, transplanting, winnowing, weeding, harvesting, grinding, pounding, nothing holds them back. It has been seen that physically very strenuous work is done not by men but by women like head-loaders, handcraft pullers, construction workers, etc. Any "disadvantage" that women's maternal functions may cause is largely man-made. So these responsibilities have to be seen as vital functions to perform for which a woman must be adequately compensated. Male refusals to take on specific home and child-care responsibilities have also placed a dual responsibility of home as well as work place on working women. These responsibilities cause mental as well as a physical problem which ultimately leads to health hazards.

### **Physical health**

A large number of women workers complain of frequent headaches, back pain, circulatory disorders, fatigue, emotional and mental disorders. Poor nutritional status, anemia due to poverty and the cultural practices where women eat last and the increased workload due to domestic responsibility, leads to fatigue among women. Worry, responsibility, strong emotions, concentrated attention or precision required by some jobs like embroidery, assembly of electronic or electronic appliances, the setting of gems, jewellery, etc. and exhaustion caused by intellectual or mental activities also produce fatigue. Lack of basic facilities like toilets, restrooms, dining spaces, etc. at the workplace causes a lot of physical discomfort and mental stress besides leading to urinary tract infections and other diseases, particularly among pregnant women. Women working in some industries like construction, brick kilns, electronics, industry etc. suffer from gynecological problems, miscarriages, premature deliveries, etc. and give birth to babies with low birth weight or with birth defects.

### **Mental health**

Women are known to work in at least two shifts if not three. They have to do or take responsibility for almost all the household work, child care, caring the old and sick as well as earning for a living. In whatever way women try to combine these different equally strenuous roles, it gives rise to extreme mental strain.

Secondly, most women have to work in extremely insecure conditions. Socially too, women are extremely vulnerable. This exposes them to various forms of oppression, including sexual harassment, wife beating, and systematic violence, the sexual division of labour at home, in society and at workplace restricts their freedom of mobility.

Thus, the most common diseases of the women workers appear to be directly related to the environmental and living factors. If the employers look into providing them with good and clean houses with proper facilities of kitchen, water, and toilets along with making provisions for their safety at work, most of these diseases can be prevented. The employers can

also make arrangements for periodic medical checkups taking help of some, social welfare and government agencies working in the area to improve the health standards of these workers.

### **The absence of child care facilities**

Women working in the informal sector do not have any child-care facilities; even in the organized sector crèches are absent or ill-equipped. Most often women workers, particularly in the informal sector, are forced to leave their children at home, under the care of their elder children, or old people or neighbours. Simply because of lacking alternative arrangement by themselves and for this reason they do not generally take infants to the factory area. Women generally place their infants to another family member like a mother-in-law or minor children who are not working elsewhere. This causes great anxiety and emotional strain. Many even give up their livelihood that further deteriorates the matters in the context of financial constraints.

It is well known that employment has positive effects on the mother. There is an underlying assumption that the roles of mother and wife have relatively less stress, as they are natural roles, whereas the role of employee, being unnatural, is therefore highly demanding. This may question the ability of a woman to handle multiple roles without significant ill effects.

### **Sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is another serious problem faced by working women. Whether in the organized or unorganized sector, whether illiterate, low paid workers or highly educated and highly paid executives, a large number of working women face sexual harassment at workplace.

Sexual harassment includes physical contacts and advances, sexually coloured remarks, showing pornography and sexual demands, whether by words or actions. It includes anything from a remark to a physical advance that offends the self-respect of a woman. The list reads – "subtle forms which may include sexual innuendos, appropriate favour, blatant forms, leering, pinching, grabbing, hugging patting brushing against, touching and extreme behaviour amounting to attempted rape and rape."

In the present situation, all the working women, regardless of their age, social status, physical appearance, post, and economic status, may encounter sexual harassment. The only difference between the higher level working women and lower level working women is that the women working at the bottom of the economic level are subjected to the mere gross expression of sexual harassment.

### **Other related problems**

There are other problems also. They are off-shoots of her being a working woman. The working woman is left with little time for relaxation or entertainment or social life. Apart from leading to her own overwork, and tension, she becomes the buff of social criticism. For the major part of the day, the woman is working in the office or in the workplace. After coming back she is busy with housework and her family. She has no time left to maintain relations with her neighbours, friends, and relations. She is not able to visit them freely and spend time with them or join them in common programmes. She is not even able to go to their help when they need especially at the time of illness,

marriages, deaths or other occasions and finally she has no privacy and private time even to breathe. This is often mistaken for arrogance due to earning and the friends and relatives criticize her.

The working woman has no time of her own. She needs rest. She wants to think of her problems or plan her future. She wants to read and write. She wants to undertake activities of her own interest, say creative arts. At times, she desires to be on her own not disturbed by anybody. There is no time for her. She cannot afford to be moody.

In all these worries the woman has no time left to look after her health. Still, she has to take care of her health and keep herself physically fit to work. She has to take nutritious food and proper treatment when needed. Again due to hard work and overburdened by responsibilities, she gets into rapid aging effects. The unending worries and tensions of modern life and the family also hasten the aging process and affect her health.

### Division of labour in traditional societies

The sexual division of labour thus refers to the process through which tasks are assigned on the basis of sex. The division of labour is one of the most fundamental ways that sex distinctions are expressed in social institutions. Many argue that sex and age represent the oldest forms of division of labour. Even at the dawn of the 21st century, however, sex continues to be the key basis on which tasks are divided. The distinction between the sexual division of labour and the gendered division of labour is significant. The former is the biological division of labour, which includes pregnancy and child labour. Allocation of work based on social constructions of appropriate work to be done by men and women with their feminine and masculine qualities in the foreground is what is termed as gendered division of labour. Such a division can not acceptable when it results in discrimination or creates disadvantages to either of the sexes.

The origins of the sexual division of labour, in fact, women historically have had primary responsibilities for the care of children. Children's dependence on their mother's care shapes the type of labour, women can perform (Collins *et al.* 1993). Conversely, men's greater average physical strength makes other activities more likely to be their responsibility. For example, in hunting and gathering societies, women were more likely to be gatherers and men to be hunters. While each set of tasks contributed to the group's survival by providing food that supplied necessary calories, women's labour provided most of the goods supplied (Lenski *et al.* 1995; Tanner and Zihlman, 1976).

An alternative explanation for the sexual division of labour views it less as a response to women's and men's differing childcare responsibilities than as a cultural practice that justifies the devaluation of women. In this view, the sexual division of labour is rooted in gender, not in sex. Gender differences in the responsibility of children are an important component of the family as a gendered institution and shape many aspects of women's and men's work and family lives.

### Conclusion

From the above discussion, we come to know that working women endure a number of hardships. However, vulnerability to economic and social hardships does not represent the whole of the lives of women. Their attitudes and actions in the households also demonstrate their power

or abilities; an ability to handle their responsibilities, an ability to work to overcome the obstacles that confront them and an ability to envision a better future. Bossard and Stroker (1954) in their "The Sociology of Child Development" report about the problems of children of working mothers. The problems that the study lists are: the mother is physically exhausted, the child feels lonely, the child feels neglected and rationalizes its antisocial behaviour, children take the undue advantage of mother's absence and the mother is unable to give full attention to the child. They further argue that adolescent children of working mothers are more delinquent and exhibit more psychiatric symptoms than the children of non-working mothers.

Finally if anything goes wrong she becomes bed-ridden or died, that family will not be her family soon after her death it will be another woman's family. Knowing all these facts, women are striving hard to adjust themselves with dual roles and try to make the family economically developed

Good health is the means for development of the family and nation by way of improved economic condition of the family, better quality of life; increased enrolment in education and ultimately improvement in production and economy of the country. Hence to achieve perfect health condition for all it is a must to sensitize and educate women, policy makers and government with the aspect of gender.

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