

Women, Work, and Motherhood Ideology

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Abstract

'The economic and political spheres are alien spaces women have to enter, The 'home' is natural realm where woman already exist.(Chaudhuri, M. 2003,359)

Traditionally women's place has been in the 'private sphere' an area of life, supposedly removed for most of the part from the stress and scrutiny of the world of the work and men doing most of the so-called valued , productive and important works.

The relationship between women, work and motherhood is complex and dynamic. On one hand, today there are more paid jobs, education and career opportunities than ever before. On the other hand, motherhood is still considered and continues to be the mainstay of women's lives and institution of family. It is basic to the origin of ideology about women. Socialization in contemporary society is still stereotypical and girls are brought up internalizing the primacy of motherhood in their lives. The view that mother's role comes naturally still persists.

The paper is an attempt to address the questions concerning urban educated mothers and the role of motherhood ideology in relation to their choice of work

Keywords: *motherhood ideology, gender role strategy, patriarchy, public space, private space*

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Over the past decade, we have witnessed expansion of literature on motherhood dramatically. This has occurred as a consequence or reflection of social, economic and ideological changes within the contemporary society and has resulted in changes in institutional setting and social meaning ascribed to it. (*Crouch and Manderson, 1993*)

This serious concern has been there in the academicians to understand the linkages between biology, history, culture and social construction of motherhood. This serious discussion, debate and discourse about motherhood – its ideology, practices, confinement, value and socially constructed meaning of child-bearing, child-care and its responsibilities, reproductive technologies and choices, single motherhood, the choice not to have children and surrogacy have lately preoccupied the sociologists.

Social and economic division between men and women led to the theory of ‘separate sphere’. Woman’s place has been in the ‘private sphere’, where she performed “invisible” (Oakley 1974) and unpaid labour, an area of life removed from stress and scrutiny of the world of work and man’s in the work world outside the home. The separate spheres theory fostered the belief that men and women are naturally predisposed to different tasks. Women were assumed to be the inherently nurturing and loving, a perfect combination for their domestic roles. Men were thought to be naturally rational, aggressive and calculating – perfectly suited for the world of work. For a woman to be truly feminine, she had to devote herself to home and family. Thus, the ideal, glorified role for women focused entirely on less socially valued domestic role. In addition to caring for the home, women came to be seen as primarily responsible for child rearing. This devaluation reflected the difference in power between the public and private spheres (*Sidel, 1990*)

Since then motherhood has continued to be basic to women’s lives and organization of the family and fundamental to genesis of ideology about women. Women are conditioned and socialized into believing that becoming an ideal mother is primary in their lives and they are heavily burdened by initial mothering responsibilities and experiences. But, the view that mother’s role ‘comes naturally’ still persists.

The ideology that a woman can attain her ultimate happiness through her mother’s role is socialized into her at a very young age. The internalization of motherhood ideology is ensured through the socialization. This process makes a woman believe that motherhood demands selflessness and devotion to the children and sacrifice of one’s own needs and aspirations. The power of this very ideology makes women feel guilty who choose to work outside the home. Especially if they do not need to work for the economic need but for a desire to continue pursuing their own interest and career. Although mothers who work purely for economic need are

also not free from the guilt.

According to Hoffnung (1995: 167) motherhood ideology is made up of certain qualities.

1. Ultimate fulfillment as a woman is achieved by becoming mother.
2. The body of work assigned to mother's caring for child, home and husband fits together in a non-contradictory manner.
3. To be a good mother, a woman must like being a mother as well as all the work that goes with motherhood.
4. A woman's intense, exclusive devotion to mothering is good for her children.

As in most of the societies, there exists, the motherhood ideology and women who are mothers or who bear children, have a different cultural position than who do not have children. The centrality, meaning and value of motherhood varies from society to society but the construction of woman is generally incomplete without the role of mother whereas men's role as workers, farmers and producers is more important. The role of father is just a fraction of it. Having a baby is thought to be essential if a woman is to be whole, because the experience of pregnancy and motherhood are 'the core of woman's being' (Newman & Grauerholz: 2002: 345)

The Context

The narrow conception of women is well known throughout the world. In Indian Context the stereo typical construction of female identity is very closely related to motherhood cutting across the class and cultural differences. It is considered inevitable destiny for women and happiness can be achieved only through it. 'Motherhood is a highly valued state, with infertility or absence of reproduction being condemned as failure of feminine project'. (Niranjana 2001:66)

Centrality of motherhood is evident in ancient literature and Hindu mythology. "Among traditional Hindu beliefs, motherhood enters into a symbiosis with the world of goddess, thereby drawing upon the mythical world. According to this mythical world, the mother goddess is called Shakti (energy), an imputed power is attributed to motherhood. Yet, mothering is so far one of the most disempowering of social roles" (Bagchi, 2006, 14). It represents mother as an epitome of unquestioning surrender and sacrifice. Historical construction of Jija Bai and Putli Bai again reinforce the concept of ideal mother. This glorified construction of motherhood often determines values and norms of maternal behaviour and offers an ideal type for the masses 'kuptro jayate kwachidapi mata kumata na bhawti'.

Indian society is pluralistic and complex but as far as construction of ideal mother is concerned, it remains quite the same in the midst of this plurality. 'The ambivalence that surrounds motherhood appears to have a transcultural spread'

(*Bagachi, 2006: 14*). Even in Islam, the concept of woman as a wife and mother remains the locus of gender construction. Ahadith States that ‘the woman who is pregnant and breast feeding the baby for as long as necessary and dies in the process will receive a reward equivalent to that of a martyr.’

However, what has not so often noticed is that the traditional philosophy of woman deprives her not only of many significant roles and experiences but of full personhood as well. (*Verma: 1995: 409*)

The ideal construction of motherhood is being challenged and the boundary of ‘Private’ and ‘Public’ is gradually getting blurred as increasingly more women and mothers who once stayed home to manage home and raise children have started entering the labour market all over the world. The issues related to women and their role as mother has undergone many changes during last few decades.

There are more paid jobs, education, career and other opportunities than ever before. Keeping this in mind, women today are postponing the age at which they get married and bear their first child. They are even planning fewer children for allowing them to obtain more education and quicker re-entry into the work place. Even through different process of change are visible in Indian society but employed women/mothers with young children are faced with traditional role of wife and mother that still remains primarily their responsibility with scrutiny of and negative attitudes from family members and society. The economic and political sphere are alien spaces women have to enter, the ‘home’ is natural realm where women already exist. (*Chaudhuri: 2003: 359*)

This paper tries to address some of the questions concerning urban educated women/mothers and role of motherhood ideology in relation to their choice of work. These question are not new but still relevant because even today motherhood is put forward as the natural and primary destination and responsibility of women. The main objective of this paper is to explore why mothers who are well aware that they can be gainfully employed choose to stay at home mother for child rearing and how mothers, on the other hand, who choose to work out side their home, make strategies and negotiate some arrangements, for balancing and weaving work and family that are satisfying them and to their families?

Perspective: To understand the maternal employment decision along with functionalist perspective, other perspectives have been used, as no single perspective is able to satisfactorily explain all the variations. According to functionalist perspective women are ‘naturally’ more suited to staying at home and taking care of children whereas men are naturally more suited to involvement in the labour force (*Parsons and Bales 1955*)

This perspective argues that men and women have evolved both biologically and socially towards distinct spheres of specialization. As a result men have come to dominate the instrumental sphere, whereas women have taken over the expressive sphere. Instrumental role refers to the activities associated with providing for the basic needs of the family. In contrast, the expressive role refers to meeting the emotional needs of the family. As women's lives have been dominated by pregnancy, child bearing and lactation throughout human history. However, several recent developments have changed in biological components of motherhood (Klein, 1984). According to this argument these maternal requirements leave women with little time, energy and opportunity to engage in other activities.

Therefore, to understand the maternal employment functionalist perspective helps to know that how effective are strategies devised by working mothers to minimize work-family conflict. Because from this view point motherhood is an institution and motherhood ideology is essential. If socialization is proper and adequate the broader goals of society will be achieved.

According to basic presumption of gender perspective, society is hierarchical in nature, where opportunities power and resources are allocated unequally. Due to this gendered inequality, women tend to suffer as relation and roles also get gendered. Most often, women are relegated to 'private sphere' that is the work of home and child care. Motherhood ideology plays most important role in the decision about maternal employment because every mother holds/responds to motherhood ideology. The ideology about the appropriate role of the mother gets internalize during the course of socialization and influence her life choices and decisions including employment .

Gender, race and class perspective focuses on the intersection of gender, race and class on women's economic behaviour. The core argument is that women have worked throughout the history, but the conditions of their work have varied. Nevertheless, their contributions have been important in the production as well in reproduction.(*Boserup, 1970*)

Throughout the Indian history women have worked in agriculture, small family business, as domestic helps etc. Some of this work has been paid and some unpaid, but all of it has contributed to the economy of the family. Furthermore, "women have given birth to and raised new workers, without financial compensation and with little social recognition (Amott and Mattaei, 1996, 0335). I would argue, that social position of women directly affects their choice for paid job along with motherhood ideology.

Other concept which is important to understand mother's choice in relation to employment is gender role strategy.

Gender Role Strategy

Gender role strategy is very closely related to motherhood ideology. It refers to an individual's beliefs about appropriate roles for men and women in relation to child care, division of household work and employment. Hochschild (1989) argued that gender role strategy is important in the decision about balancing work and family. There are three types of gender role strategies –

- (i) Traditional Gender Role Strategy – It is a belief in the theory of separate sphere, and it is men's duty to provide economically whereas women's duty is to take care of the children and the home.
- (ii) Egalitarian Gender Role Strategy – It is the belief that men and women should share equally responsibilities of provider and of nurturer. According to this strategy jobs of the husband and wife are equally important.
- (iii) Transitional Gender Role Strategy – According to this strategy women should pursue their career and occupational interest and men should engage in family and housework along with their wives. This strategy prescribes that although women can pursue employment, their husbands' jobs are more important. Even though, men can take on some of the responsibilities at home, but this responsibility ultimately belongs to their wives.

Gender role strategy is quite important in balancing work and family and in evaluation of and satisfaction with the arrangement. My argument is that couples try to reach solutions that are consistent with their gender strategies. The happiest couples are those who are successful in matching their gender role strategy and work, family solutions.

Other concepts which are important and taken care of are economic need, rational choice, structural factors (opportunities, availability of child care and its cost, size of the family and spouses attitude) Human factors (Human Capital – qualification and work experience) motherhood ideology and economic class of the mother.

As it has been discussed that Indian society and culture holds an ideology that prescribes ideal behaviour for mother and tries to maintain status quo. Because it reinforces inequality in gender relations and benefits those in control of political and economic resources. If strategies are counterproductive, the behaviour may be considered deviant.

This paper is based on the premise that each mother responds to the motherhood ideology of society and balancing and weaving work and family is still a mother's responsibility even with educated and qualified women. Therefore, maternal employment decisions are influenced by motherhood ideology.

Robert K. Merton (1975) developed a theory to study delinquent behaviour.

He argued that society sets some cultural goals and institutional means to achieve them. However, sometimes cultural goals and institutional means are not compatible. Thus individual develops alternative means for attaining culturally defined goals.

Merton's categorization can be used with some modifications to apply to the situation of mothers. In this situation, there are two cultural goals – caring for and nurturing one's own children and providing a comfortable living to them. Applying Merton's theory mothers can be categorized into four groups on the basis of their acceptance, alteration or rejection of these cultural goals and strategies they devise and use for achieving these goals.

Therefore, using Merton's strain theory (1975) mother can be categorized into four groups on the basis of their believes in motherhood ideology and its outcome.

Sample and the Setting

The study was conducted in the city of Sahranpur, U.P. A total sample of 150 mother was drawn. Of these 75 were teachers, 25 each from primary school, Higher Secondary and Degree Colleges who had their younger child less than 10 years of age. This sample was drawn only from Govt. and Govt. aided institutions whereas 75 mothers who although had proper qualification but decided to be stay at home mothers were selected using snowballing method of these 19 (12.66%) opted for paid job after their younger child started going school.

Discussion: The question were asked about the childhood, socialization, gender role, about the respondents mother's attitude to work and family, their ambition for marriage and/or career, education or job decisions, role of home maker and about the importance of motherhood. On the basis of responses, the mothers are categorized into four categories using Merton's (1975) concept.

The first group of mothers with a very strong adherence to intensive motherhood ideology. Centrality of intensive mothering reflects clearly, as they decide to be stay-at-home mothers. According to this ideology, primary duty of the mother is to cater to the needs of the children. They strongly believe in the doctrine of separate spheres. Hence, they construct their economic needs accordingly. For them looking after the children and catering to their needs is basic to the mothers role. They stick to traditional construction of ideal mother with traditional gender role strategy. For this group of mothers 'motherhood provides..... with personal fulfillment not only because it is culturally valued but also because it provides woman with an exclusive emotional attachment to another person, her infant' (*Kakar and Kakar, 1982: 76*). Therefore, total 78 (52%) mothers with intensive motherhood orientation are termed as traditional/conventional mothers.

The second group mothers do not adhere strongly to intensive/dominant

motherhood ideology. These mothers believe that as mothers they can handle the responsibilities of provider's as well as nurturer's. For them, providing economically and pursuing a career is equally important as raising the children. "So looking after your own interest and intellectual pursuits is not selfish – it may in fact, make a woman a better mother".(Barnett and Rivers, 1966. p.37). They feel entitled to work because for them mothering is something more than just taking care of the children. Because "naturalness, the old notion of femininity seems to have is due to long cultural conditioning (Verma, 1995, 410). The intensive motherhood is not acceptable for these mothers since work has become so important to mother's identity. They firmly believe that simply being at home all day does not qualify one as a good mother (Lindsey, 1997: 197). As this category of mothers do not accept the intensive motherhood ideology are termed as unconventional mothers, who devise alternative ideology with egalitarian gender role strategy to balance and weave family and work.

The third group of mothers accepts the motherhood ideology and their entitlement to work force participation. They try to work out options and strategies so that they can achieve both goals simultaneously, as both the goals are important for them. If they can not realize both the goals, they experience stress. Structural factors- like job availability and child care are important to this group of mothers because for mothers who opt for paid work, most problematic situation is to coordinate work and child care. Hence, affordable and quality child care is needed to reduce the level of stress and guilt experienced by these mothers. Feminist writer Veena Mazumdar (2005) relates regarding her own experience in her article "I was experiencing a lot of confusion and guilt being unable to do full justice to my two responsibilities – as a mother and as a professional university teacher. (Mazumdar, 2005 p.60). But Barnett and Rivers (1996) and Hochschild (1997) have observed that all the mothers do not experience equal level of guilt or role-conflict. As this groups employment decisions using binary choice are well adjusted with the situation, they can be termed using Merton's (1975) terminology pragmatists mothers. Their strategies include use of paid childcare, cost-benefit analysis, substituting mother's care with fathers. They adhere either to traditional or transitional gender role strategy.

The final category of mothers also conform to intensive motherhood ideology but they devise some strategy and arrangement to remain employed. Caring for one's own children and for one's own home is important for this group. They desire constant parental care for their children. For them, child care is more important than economic need but they redefine child-care as family team work, they actually prefer shared parenting. The role of father becomes very important, as this group does not

depend on commercial child care. Their child care options include getting help from the family and some times neighbours and distant relatives. Although this group of mothers do not feel guilt for their choice, they experience strain and stress specially with their innovative ways of balancing work and family. Their strategies involve co-parenting or family parenting, cost benefit analysis and non-overlapping work schedule. For devising innovative ways with these mothers are termed as innovators.

Like motherhood, parenthood is also an ideology as well as a social practice. As all the women/mothers are socialized in a manner that they respond to motherhood ideology, men also tend to respond to norms and values of separate sphere and patriarchy. The behaviour of men as well as women is evaluated accordingly. Women are usually not recognized and appreciated for fulfilling their ideal type because it is considered their duty. But they are publicly criticized for deviating from the ideal construct. On the contrary, men are recognized for whatever little help they provide. This reflects and recreates the notion that reference group for men and women have still not changed and intensive motherhood ideology dominates.

This paper has attempted to focus on the role of motherhood ideology plays in relation to maternal employment. Maternal employment is one of the important changes that is not only changing the structure and nature of the family but also the work place.

Since woman was expected to be primarily only a wife and mother and subordinate all her interests to those to husband's and children (*Sundaram: 2005, 102*). The glorification of mother ideal that classics and modern literature as well as mass media constantly amplify, also helps reinforce dominant motherhood ideology. Claims made in public forum by experts, laypersons, politicians and high profile mothers also reflect the belief that motherhood is still the essence of woman. As the data suggests that motherhood ideology is still a very important factor in relation to maternal employment as largest group adheres to intensive motherhood ideology. However a shift away from conventional to being pragmatic or innovator reflects some change in ideology. Although small percentage of unconventional mother suggest that total rejection of motherhood ideology is still far from becoming a reality.

I would like to conclude it with an apt remark by Nirmala Banerjee 'I would therefore, suggest that to a large extent the Indian household patriarch considers women.'....mainly as a flexible resource at his disposal: he utilizes it for any of an infinite number of functions including some of those in the public arena. But he retains the power to keep them vulnerable in the latter by controlling their basic access to.... mobility and choice. This is done by ensuring that the ideology of the family orientation (read motherhood) of women is not disturbed in any way."

(N.Banerjee 1999, 331)

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