

Working Women in Urban Sikkim: A Study on Changing Roles and Relations

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

I

Gender assumed to be a social construct was seen as performing a vital function in the society wherein the performance of gender appropriate roles aided in minimising conflicts, tensions and in promoting solidarity and stability of the society as argued by the functionalists. This social construction of gender roles was functional in the traditional societies. However, with the change in socio economic realities along with the social transformation, this idea came to be contested. Gender appropriate roles came to be, what Merton terms, as a dysfunction for the working women because she had to shoulder the burden of being an earner as well as a caregiver. Further, taking various other perspectives, the structuralists see gender as something imposed upon us through social structures which thereby locates individuals or groups in a hierarchical power relation while the post structuralists like Giddens and Bourdieu see structures as a determining factor but they also argue that "agency" such as women themselves can play a crucial role in reinforcing change within the social structure.

Yet, despite these discourses on gender, the notion of gender roles continues to persist. This is largely because in our interaction as communicators and agents, our actions in creating new rules and in reproducing the old ones for the structure continue to be guided by the patriarchal norms in which we have been socialised in. Structural change is taking place but the normative values are changing at a slower pace. This has brought in situations of dilemma, some sort of a conflicting situation for the working women today especially in a traditional society like India where the patriarchal ethos is strongly embedded.

Even though, women have always been a part of the work force, the nature of the jobs discharged by them has changed from time to time and from society to society. In the earlier societies, men and women had distinct responsibilities and roles in family and work and these were accepted as functional. However, with the advent of women into paid work, it came to be understood that work and family roles could no longer be separate but rather, they intersected in complex ways. Expansion of urbanisation, education, rising costs, higher standards of living are introducing major changes in the women's roles and relations. Today, paid work no longer remains a male domain yet housework and child care, tasks which are undervalued, taken for granted and discounted continue to be the sole responsibility of the women folk. Traditional gender roles especially pertaining to the private sphere continue to persist largely due to the patriarchal social structure that guides our social and cultural norms in the society. This patriarchal social structure forms our life world wherein we continue to draw what Alfred Shultz termed as the "recipe knowledge" from the stock of previous experiences and view traditional gender roles as our scheme of reference. This recipe knowledge is imbibed during our socialisation process wherein we unquestioningly accept the gender division of labour. Similarly, the penetration of a patriarchal habitus in our everyday life is so deeply embedded that we become unconscious of our undervalued gender roles.

History states that the women's movement came to be restricted because of her reproductive capacity to give birth and nurse the baby. This responsibility came to limit her ability to hunt and engage in dangerous occupations. Men, on the other hand, hunted and provided food and protected their families and their role was seen as crucial for the survival of the family. This division of labour came to influence the work that women and men did in the future and the significance that came to be

attached it. This form of economic dominance leading to the subordination of women can also be located in many concepts and theories such as feminism, patriarchy, Engels and Marx's idea of economic inequality. Movement of women into paid employment in the public sphere began only after the industrial revolution in Europe and the two world wars. Overtime, with education becoming more accessible to women as well, the number of women in paid work began to rise and diversify into various professions like such as law, medicine, finance, politics etc.

In the Indian context, we find that stratification in work prevails on the basis of age, gender and caste. In fact, the problem becomes more complex as women in the Indian society do not constitute a homogeneous category since there exists an intersectionality of caste, class, religion, region and ethnic diversity.

Historically, there are studies which supports that women in ancient India enjoyed an equal status with the men in the society. But, they came to be confined to the domestic world after the arrival of the Muslim conquerors and the introduction of the purdah system. However, the position of women changed and their participation in the public world was encouraged during the colonial rule in India followed by the Nationalist Movement in India. Gradually, women came to gain entry into the world of formal education, politics, and employment. Moreover, the Constitutional provisions of equality of opportunity and non discrimination in matters of employment and wages, the expansion of education for women, increasing economic pressure especially among the middle classes were some other factors which contributed to such trend of wider participation of women in the formal work sector.

However, the transition has not been smooth and has brought with it a lot of challenges. Earlier studies have shown that women tend to prioritize family over work

hence, when faced with having to make a choice between career and family, family is always given priority. We can attribute this choice to the influence of the patriarchal socialisation of the women or what Bourdieu addresses as the habitus which is the cognitive mental structure that determines and influences an individual's thoughts and action. Thus, more often than not, her role is oriented more towards family matters rather than self-fulfillment or career goals. Therefore, the modern Indian women, many of whom are now employed, are caught in a dilemma between the modern challenges of life and the traditional expectation of being responsible for the family and home. To balance the two roles, women need a lot of support from the family, workplace as well as the society. The inability to balance these two roles may result in conflicting demands to fulfil her work and family responsibilities leading to stress or what is termed as role conflict.

Various studies highlighted that despite women being paid equal wages for equal work, wherein they also exercise and retain control over their earnings and expenditure, their role as care-givers continue to be their primary responsibility. The absence of the alternatives to family care has not affected the economy or the society largely because women continue to bear the double burden of family care and paid work (Women and Work Triple Burden, 1999). Consequently, if the women are not able to cope with the double burden, their withdrawal from paid work becomes a necessity and a compulsion. Otherwise they have to navigate and find their own solutions so that their role and responsibilities at the home front stays undisturbed and does not disrupt the routine of other family members. Studies by Ramu (1987, 1989), Rao and Rao (1988) have shown that men in India continue to be seen in a provider's role while women who work are regarded as secondary or supportive earners. Rather, Indian traditional norms tilt in favour of women being in domestic roles. In this

backdrop, the purpose of the present study is to examine the changing role of women in Sikkim, their experiences and challenges as well as factors that facilitate and hinder their varied roles and relations.

II

Sikkim being a multi religious, multi cultural and multi ethnic state has three predominant ethnic groups namely the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis. Although the Nepali community is a heterogeneous category, for the sake of convenience of this study, it has been taken as a homogeneous category because at certain points in history and in many existing literature on Sikkim they are seen as one category. However, care has been taken to give a fair representation to the different categories found within the broad Nepali community. All these predominant ethnic communities are patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal in its structure. Since the incorporation of Sikkim with the Indian Union, it has experienced a lot of changes in its social, cultural, economic, political and educational fields. An important indicator of this change has been reflected in the increase in the literacy rate and a shift in occupational trend towards the non-agricultural sector. Moreover increase in developmental activities mainly in the growth of administrative and commercial activities have led to a growth in urbanisation resulting in the increase of the urban population in Sikkim.

Various statistical parameters indicate that Sikkim has a positive representation of women in the literacy rates as well as in the state government employment sector. Although detailed information regarding their representation in various employment sectors is not available but Thapa (2014) mentions that the state has a policy of 30 % reservations for women in public employment, hence the indications are that they are

well represented in the administration and health services and are also making forays into the fields of engineering and forestry which conventionally were not women's domain. The state also has a substantial population working in the unorganised sector comprising of small scale enterprises and private business. Women in Sikkim face no social taboos in working outside their homes (Thapa, 2009), but the struggle in balancing family and work exists for the working women in Sikkim. The general assumption is of the Sikkimese women enjoying a high social status however, the different ethnic communities in Sikkim experiencing a strong patriarchal ethos comes in the way of balancing home and work for the working women. Largely influenced by patriarchy, working women have to deal with issues such as managing the house alongside caring for the children and the elderly in the family, fulfilling social obligations etc. More often than not these issues are translated into sources of stress and fatigue. The scenario in Sikkim as it is elsewhere in the country is dominated by patriarchal values when it comes to the traditional roles of women but at the same time factors such as educational achievement, urbanisation trend, rising expenditures and consumerism have pushed these women into new career roles. Therefore, the working women in Sikkim remain traditional in their domestic roles while trying to adjust to the increasing demands of time, energy and dedication to their career roles.

Thus, the modern working women today are juggling multiple roles while simultaneously adapting to vast social, economic and political changes. Negotiations and compromises between different roles, work and family are constantly being carried out on a day to day basis by women all over the world. The winds of modernity and technology have influenced the exterior part of our lives but our thoughts and values and outlook are still shrouded in traditional patriarchal values. Therefore, in recognition of being caught in this dilemma of modernity and tradition,

there is a need to study the working women's changing roles and relations. However, studies on women in Sikkim are at a very nascent stage and research on the working women in Sikkim is almost negligible.

This study has therefore, attempted to explore and understand the changing roles of the working women in urban Sikkim and examine if they face any role conflict and how do they balance the dual roles of home and work. Further, the study seeks to assess if various socio-cultural and economic variations play a determining role in work-family balance and identify if any traditional gender roles is being reproduced in the everyday work routine. The study explores how working women perceive themselves on being employed while also examining the problems and challenges and dilemmas faced by them as a result of their dual role.

With these objectives in view, a field based study was conducted among 120 working women in Sikkim belonging to the three notified towns in East Sikkim, viz. Gangtok, Singtam and Rangpo. Information were collected through purposive and stratified sampling and semi structured interview schedule. Women belonging either to the Lepcha, Bhutia or the Nepali community in Sikkim and working in the administrative sector, technical sector and the unorganised sector were taken as the sample population for this study. To augment phenomenological essence in the study, in depth face to face interview with open ended semi structured questions to access the qualitative aspect of this study were included wherein the lived experiences of women, their life narratives and case studies has been explored so as to see the reflections of patriarchy in their daily lives vis-a-vis one's social-cultural background and the influences it has on the balance between work and family.

The empirical work in the study has been interpreted from the sociological lens using various concepts but mainly revolving around the theoretical and conceptual paradigm of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and the reproduction of the phenomenological experience on everyday life.

III

The assumption is that it is the economic dependence of women on men which determines the power structure within the family. Hence, participation of women in income generating activities will not only bring in more income for the family but is also likely to reduce gender inequality (Mohapatra, 2015). However, often the women participate in these income generating activities for varied reasons. The empirical findings of this study conducted among 120 respondents too revealed that women take up paid work for various reasons. Financial compulsions to take up paid work occurred after the death of a spouse or when husbands became alcoholics and unable to provide monetary support or in some cases when the husbands remarried. In such situations, paid employment for these respondents brought in a form of security and a sense of purpose. Another reason why these women took up paid work was to utilise their education and to enhance their status in their family and society. This can be understood on the basis of Bourdieu's notion of the possession of capital to gain access to power and position in the society. Ethnic variation has been visible in the case of alcoholism among men leading the women to seek paid work as more number of respondents in this instance came from the *matwali* communities or those communities where the use of alcohol is culturally accepted. This also indicates that the problem is rooted in social structure. It was also revealed that a higher number of respondents in the unorganised sector and those belonging to the Group C and D

stated that financial compulsion was what pushed these women to take up paid employment. Another finding that emerged from the study was that in the unorganised sector, women entered the workforce when they have no children but then left the job when they became mothers. This however, is in contrast to the findings of Bharathy (2013) who reports that many women look for work after they have fulfilled their domestic responsibilities like raising their children up to a certain age.

Further, the study also revealed that the evolution of the nuclear family necessitates the need for two pay checks in order to meet the economic needs of the family. During the course of the interview the predominant view of the man being the breadwinner was being challenged as a considerable number of the women respondents stated that it was not possible for a man alone to support his family. This has led to a change in what Schutz refers to as the "recipe knowledge" or the "stock knowledge" that puts men in the provider role and women in the dependent role. Further, applying Giddens' discourse on structure, we find that working women as agents in the society or structure are changing the rules and resources of the society by taking up roles which were earlier within the male domain.

Seeking paid employment is not only for economic reasons. Rather it can also be looked as a factor to enhance one's status and along with it to empower oneself. The personal desire of the educated woman to pursue employment with the hope of putting her education to use and realising her higher aspirations or being career oriented was also seen as encouraging motive to join work for the respondents. Instances of being conditioned by one's habitus in the choice of one's occupation were also revealed in the study. Further, women wanted to gain status in the family

and society by being financially independent and this was another motive as to why women wanted to join work. Modern societies today accord immense importance to the status that arises out of the position that one holds in one's workplace and the income derived from it. Sikkim is also no exception to this change. Achieved status hence holds primacy over ascribed status which was also proved true in the case of the emerging socio cultural reality of Sikkim. This thought has been echoed in Talcott Parson's framework of pattern variables as well wherein he speaks of the shift of the pattern variables from ascription to achievement and this serves as a reflection of modern society. Sikkim while rooted in traditional structure is a society in transition. Pierre Bourdieu too recognises the role of cultural capital in bestowing or denying status position to individuals while also allowing for social mobility within a stratified society.

Therefore, the reasons to take up paid employment indicated no variations in terms of ethnicity, religion or caste. Rather, the reasons were more class specific. For instance, women belonging to Group C and Group D jobs opted to work for financial necessity while those in the Group B and A category worked for more for self fulfilment, higher aspirations and career choice.

As shown in the earlier chapters, any form of income for women facilitated her bargaining position and enhanced her status in her household. Paid work was viewed as an enabling factor for all the respondents in the study as it gave them a sense of purpose and they felt that it had a positive effect on their image and status. Collins' idea of power resource (social and work position) was in the respondent's control and this was what facilitated and enhanced her status in everyday life. Thus, there was no ethnic, class or caste variation noticed in this instance.

However, these are only one side to the story. The changes that the society is undergoing with regard to the changes in the roles of men and women are bound to be accompanied by some degree of stress and tension. The empirical findings too revealed that the transition has not been so smooth. Information pertaining to the work culture of these women revealed that mental stress, gender discrimination, sexual harassment and depression were some of the problems reported from workplace. Some of the respondents faced discrimination even when they worked hard and well which is again, reflective of patriarchal domination wherein women are seen as the weaker sex and therefore incapable of performing well outside of her home. Discrimination was also faced by women in professions which were traditionally male dominated indicating that the society is yet to be comfortable with the idea of women working outside the comfort zones dictated by our culture. A very contradictory situation was revealed where women in positions of power discriminated against women in lower positions especially in the selection of subordinates. This can be substantiated with a study "An Overview of Attitudes toward Women in Law Enforcement" by Koenig (1978) wherein it was reported that men and women police officers preferred to have male partners as colleagues. This can be largely attributed to gender socialisation in strong patriarchal values not only for man but also for the women.

Empowerment vis-a-vis paid work was another area explored in the study. Questions on decision making, financial control and ownership of property were raised among the women to analyse empowerment among them. The responses on empowerment showed a positive indication with some degree of ethnic variation revealed. Inter class variation was also reflected regarding the query on whether the women spent time and money on themselves. Women working in the Group C and D category spent limited

time and money on themselves. The empirical findings of the study indicate that the overall trend in decision making is neither autocratic nor patriarchal. Rather, the inclination is towards an egalitarian understanding in decision making whereby mutual consultation among married couples describe the decision making process. Traditionally, the notion of consulting the lady of the house or "ghar-ko-ama" in any decision making process related to the family or the household existed in Sikkim. Thus, consultation with the wives in decision making is not a recent change that is being witnessed. However, what is different today is that the education and employment has further enhanced the decision making power and the bargaining position of the women to the extent that they sometimes are the ones who take the initiative and lead the decision making process.

Contextually locating, the scenario in Sikkim provides an interesting paradox. The macro level indicators for women and few studies (Bhasin, 1987; Bhadra, 1992; Bhattacharya, 1994;) available on women in Sikkim has indicated that the women in Sikkim enjoys active participation in economic activities, in decision making process, contribution to the family income as well as high socio cultural autonomy. In other words, her presence in the public sphere is visible but at the same time she is also responsible for the private sphere or her home. In many cases, women are subjected to dual role or what is termed as double exploitation. Therefore, one of the objectives of the study was to examine role conflict plaguing the working women and her attempts to resolve it. Hochschild (1989) in describing the challenge of trying to manage work and family uses the term second shift to describe this double burden for the working women which according to her is affecting the careers and marriages of these women. The narratives in the study amply reveals that role conflict is a big challenge that the working women of Sikkim often confronts in her day to day activities. This gets more

visible when the children are small and need constant supervision or when the elders in the family fall sick. It also gets aggravated when the working women are caught in a dilemma between the standards laid down by the society as well as with their own internalized beliefs about what is expected of the proficient worker and a good mother - values which are sometimes incompatible.

Another research question addressed in the study was to explore if any traditional gender-roles was being reproduced in the everyday work routine of the men and women. A gradual change was noticed in the unorganised sector wherein it was shown that the respondents shared a more egalitarian relationship with their husbands when it came to the distribution of household tasks showing class variation. This egalitarian distribution of household tasks was more obvious in the case of nuclear families. This change in the unorganised sector is likely due to the economic condition of the respondents wherein affordability of paid help and time saving household gadgets may not be possible. Similarly, the case studies also showed that the working women in Sikkim also rely on family members for the sharing of household chores and child care. There was little or no ethnic variation reflected in the above instance.

At the outset of the study, there were indicators especially earlier studies which showed that the women in Sikkim are not subjected to gender bias but the case studies collected from the field work has proved otherwise. Gender bias appears to be institutionalised in various forms and is displayed in everyday life. It is done unintentionally or in a manner in which the individual is completely unaware because this bias has become a part of the individual's habitus and therefore, no second thought is given to it. For instance, many respondents in the present study accept that

housework and childcare are the responsibility of the womenfolk. To paraphrase Berger and Luckmann, this social reality of sexual division of labour is created when men and women internalise the objectified reality which is confining house work and child care to women alone. The internalisation of this notion translates into the individual's subjective reality which then becomes a social reality or an accepted social order. Hence, it gives rise to the differing gender roles in the society. The situation is not much different in the present study.

The bastion of patriarchy is often carried forward by the females themselves because of their gender conditioning and socialisation. For instance, in the present study, it was revealed that delegation of housework to the women was stressed upon by the women themselves. This inculcation of gender roles begins from childhood socialisation itself. Among the different ethnic communities taken into consideration in the present study, the Nepali community had the least representation of husbands helping their wives with household work. This low representation of husbands in sharing house chores could be attributed to the relatively more patriarchal values that exists among the Nepali community who are basically Hindus.

The study highlighted that with both the parents going to work, providing for child care during working hours is a problem most working parents face today. The problem has become more pronounced with the increase in the nuclear families and the breakdown of joint families. The situation gets further aggravated when the children fall ill. Higher number of women stayed back from work to take care of sick children indicating that child care is still seen as woman's work and her primary responsibility while also affirming the belief that a woman's role as an earner is

secondary compared to her role as a mother and a wife. Hence, the working role of a woman continue to be sidelined in favour of her role as a mother and a wife.

The patriarchal notion of the ancestral property being passed on along the male line was also revealed in the study. Even though the Hindu Marriage Act 1955 has been extended to Sikkim yet, the Bhutias and the Lepchas continue to be governed by their customary laws with regard to succession, marriage and inheritance. Family property is retained in the name of the male head of the family and women lack legal rights on it. However, with the Sikkim Succession Act, 2008, unmarried daughters have been given the right of inheritance in the father's property along with the sons. But the same Act also reinforces the customary practices of inheritance of excluding daughters who are married to somebody from outside the state. The empirical data shows varying means whereby the respondents have come to acquire ownership rights over movable and immovable property. Few case studies revealed that the land in the name of the women was obtained in the form of gifts from the parents. However, higher number of respondents had acquired property, vehicles, jewellery and other assets in their name through purchase with their own earnings. Therefore, this further indicates that the roles and relations of the women in the Sikkimese society are changing since land and house in the earlier generation property were legally registered in the name of the male members in the family.

Among the jobs that were looked into as a part of the field work for this study, the job of a policewoman which was traditionally regarded in a masculine domain, was considered the most challenging when it came balancing home and work. Apart from the unconventional working hours, the police women in this study also had to face suspicions from their husbands as their job entailed them to spend long hours with

other policemen. This was especially relevant in the context of Group C and D police women because they had little say or choice over the nature of their duties or their working hours.

However, despite the difficulties confronted by the respondents in managing work alongside their homes, few of them spoke of quitting their jobs. The perks of having a job that brought income which was virtually necessary to maintain a comfortable life style was seen as far too advantageous and outweighed the difficulties in balancing home and work.

One core objective in the study was to examine the problems of the working women as a consequence of their dual role. Some of the problems that they confronted were work induced misunderstanding, difficulty in discharging familial responsibilities, managing social obligations, lack of leisure time for the respondents which may trigger psychological or mental guilt among the working women.

The exploration regarding the strategies and coping mechanism adopted by the working women to manage home and work, the narratives revealed various solutions such as taking help from one's spouse, from the extended family, sending school going children for private tuitions or to boarding schools, utilising time saving gadgets such as washing machines or rice cookers, hiring help, availing leave from work and prioritising and efficient use of time. This is in contrast to the oral narratives of the women from the earlier generation who often relied on their older children to take care of the younger siblings. Supervision over the children in the earlier times remained lax as the neighbourhood or the community remained small and compact. Moreover, paid work was less demanding on the women. Women often lived with their in laws and child supervision and house work was often shared with the other

women within the extended household. However, in the present times, structural change, impact of individualistic orientation and the breakdown of collectively in a society that is in transition has led to changes within the family and the society often proving dysfunctional for the working women.

On the basis of the above discussions it can be safely concluded that traditional gender roles appears to have changed more slowly as a result of the slow change in cultural values and normative standards and also due to the reproduction of patriarchy which is practised and observed amply in various forms in everyday life. Development in technology, means of communication, education, employment are being realised in the society here but the pace of change in notion and ideas of gender roles and traditional values does not match the change in material culture and values therefore, indicating cultural lag. Hence, the working women are often trapped in this dilemma of traditional values and career demands.

The lived experiences of the respondents revealed the persistence of the double burden that the working women in Sikkim endure in their everyday lives, which they regard as a normal course of social reality. There is no doubt that women in Sikkim match up to the empowerment indices but what lurks underneath the shadow of empowerment are instances of double exploitation wherein her visibility in the public sphere has to be managed with her traditional role in the private sphere as well, which the working women have accepted it as a part of their social reality.

Thus, based on the empirical findings it is suggested that there is an urgent emphasis to look for alternatives to provide social support services to the working women in Sikkim while keeping in mind that the real change required is a change in the value systems of a patriarchal society. The state could also extend help by providing

monitored and safe child care facilities such as nurseries and day-care centres so that employed women can focus on their work with the knowledge that their children are being well taken care of. Flexible family leave policies, friendly human resource management policies and flexible work timings should also be introduced to encourage more women participation at the higher levels of decision making.

Further, women should be socialised to take up more challenging assignments with confidence and reorientation of gender roles without much guilt. Socialisation of the young children should be gender neutral in nature so as to curtail the principles of patriarchy within the family and the wider society at large. This would help in creating a cooperative environment at home which would prevent the women from taking on responsibilities both in the private domain as well as in the public domain and thus, aid in the aversion of stress and role-conflict on the women. Finally, society's perceptions towards working women need to change taking into consideration the conflicting demands that are placed on them. While this may take time, women on their part, must start making efforts in transforming the stereotypical ways in which they are perceived, and this can be done by making some changes within their individual families.