UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY MOTHERHOOD: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF EMPLOYED WOMEN IN KOLKATA

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ABSTRACT

India recognizes the ideal of motherhood as the highest for a woman. In our society, the role of a mother has always been portrayed either as a protector of her children or a complete caregiver. The Bhagavad Gita says that " Motherhood is another name of dedication, the selfless love and devotion towards the infant or children are grown from the seeds of innocence, no cunning, scheming, selfish motives here". It was believed that there is no mode of life that is superior to serving one's mother. This is the way motherhood had always been identified and glorified in our society. In India, motherhood is central to the social and cultural system. Motherhood and childrearing are regarded as normal duties within women's lives. Since India began economic reforms in the early 1990s, women have been streaming into the urban workforce, initially as government office workers but now increasingly as employees in the flourishing service sectors and in professional jobs. Overall the number of employed women has roughly doubled in 15 years. From the early 1950's many employed mothers began to challenge the prevailing discourse of the ideal mother. Many women are drawn to work outside the home despite criticism demonstrates the economic and psychological importance of employment for women. This change has resulted in an increase in the number of mothers who no longer fit into that traditional image of motherhood. In today's society the meaning of the 'motherhood' is quite complex, describing a broad range of women whose responsibilities vary significantly. Understanding what motherhood means is challenging because the responsibilities of mothers are constantly changing. "Women can find themselves in flux, constantly needing to manage and negotiate their own identities by continuously reflecting on the conflicting expectations of what it means to be a mother". Participation of women into labor force contributed to shaping mothers' personal understanding of their identities, as well as society's understanding of the identities of mothers. This, in turn, plays a part in defining what it means to be a mother in contemporary society."Mothers from different social backgrounds may experience motherhood differently and have different understandings of what motherhood means. At the same time there are commonalities in the experiences of mothering since they live in the same society and motherhood is socially constructed through common discourses" (Nowak, Thompson 2001:

407). There are many variables of the issues such as economic, social and emotional issues influence a mother's choice whether to stay at home with her children or work outside the home. Therefore, to contemporary employed women, motherhood is a day-to-day experience of managing jobs and childrearing. In today's society, women are defining motherhood as a "choice" that brings them a lot of joy. However, childrearing has posed the biggest challenge to the employed mothers. Most of employed mothers encountered a number of difficulties in balancing between child-care activities and job. Thus, female labor force participation, has given rise to a new plethora of controversy o v e r whether motherhood is a "golden goal of feminine" (Leighton, 1975, p.g-189) or it is a hindrance to career development for employed women in modern society.

Keywords: Motherhood, Employed women, Contemporary motherhood, Women in kolkata.

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a big, emotionally laden idea that is not easily contained in one simple sentence. Feminist scholars often define motherhood as static and unchanging phenomenon. To them, motherhood is an ideology created by patriarchy to keep women confined both within their private and domestic sphere. Andrea O Reilly described motherhood as a patriarchal institution whereas mothering refers to women's experiences as mothers which is female-defined and potentially empowering to women (O'Reilly, 2010). According to social constructionist view, both 'motherhood' and 'mothering' are socially constructed since they are viewed as social interactions and relationships which are located in societal context (Arendell, 2000 as cited in O'Reilly, 2010). However, many social thinkers feel that in order to become mothers, women need to undergo a total transformation process and in this way they create a "Motherhood self"(O'Reilly,2010). They further argued that mothers are social actors who experience ambivalence because of conflicting social norms and expectations about what it means to be a mother. This argument has been applied extensively to the understanding of contemporary motherhood particularly in the context of mothering experiences of middle class, employed and educated mothers in Kolkata. Employed (paid) mothers are women who are employed outside the home (Douglas and Michales, 2004). The term 'employed mother' typically evokes a career-oriented woman who spends 40hrs.or more per week employed outside her home. This woman is often characterized as 'super mom' who should be able to smoothly switch from career woman to attentive mother without sacrificing their jobs (Hays as cited in Mayer, 2009). A super mother is a woman who is able to juggle between a full-time career and family while meeting the societal expectations of intensive mothering. Two main reasons as outlined by employed mothers stay in the workforce are financial need and for their personal satisfaction. For many, work is essential to support the family; but this is not the actual scenario for all the 21st century employed

mothers. Some women will not leave their jobs even if their family could survive without their income.

Owing to the increasing nature of mothers' involvement in the labor force, several studies especially in America, have been conducted in the area of motherhood and mothering: among the issues that have been looked at are; maternal employment and childcare, mothers' work-life experiences and pattern of childcare and so on. In the era of 'Century of child' (Apple, 2006), the old pattern of child-care practices were replaced by modern medical and scientific guidance. Mothers who used to consult medical practitioners regularly in order to gain expert knowledge about children's physical and mental well-being, was regarded as 'good mothers'. Therefore, the notion of 'good mother' was a result of scientific discourse and institution and re-defined constantly through media and the flux of political and economic ideologies. Fouaultdian approach of 'normalization' and 'disciplinary power' is relevant in this context. In our society patriarchy made us believe that motherhood is an all-pervasive- normative occurrence and all women are supposed to be natural mothers. Modern employed (paid) mothers are constantly subjected to the pressure of 'being watched' by others in formal and informal settings. In a formal setting professionals in social institutions such as education, medicine and child psychology serve as social controlling agents of 'New Momism' (Douglas and Michales,2005). They have legitimacy and expertise to provide information on how parents should raise their children. The modern mothers expected to come back on time, quit job in order to her children's education, cutting off their leisure time, prepare home-cooked food items for her children instead of using easy-to-cook foods like Maggie, pasta and so on. According to Douglas and Michales, mothers are no longer responsible for just the basic needs of children today, but they are also expected to be the protector of child's innocence, perpetuator of all social activities like pediatrician, teacher and therapist (ibid). Today employed mothers are oppressed by both the pressure to have children and to be perfect mothers. The pressure to be 'perfect' can come from various sources including education system through teachers and administrators or through the health care systems via pediatricians and psychologists. Hence, women's mothering is defined and controlled by the larger patriarchal society in which they live. As Rich argued, mothers do not make the rules, they simply follow it. Motherhood, in Rich's word is an experience of 'powerless authority' (as cited in O'Reilly, 2004). Mothers are policed by what Sara Ruddick calls the 'gaze of others'. Under the 'gaze of others', mothers surrender authority to others and lose confidence in their own values.

Motherhood in India has for a long time been characterized by the belief that a mother's domain is primarily the domestic one. In recent times, especially after globalization in India, financial independence and economic aspirations forced a majority of women to participate in the workforce. Career ambitions are also a big driving force for a mother choosing to work,

especially one who is well qualified. Since the 1990s women are expected to choose independently and consciously whether they want to become mothers or not, and if they are mothers how they shape their own motherhood. Motherhood was perceived as a natural phenomenon and working outside the home was increasingly accepted for mothers. Knijn and Verheijen (as cited in Beets, Schippers, R.te Velde, 2011) distinguished between two types of mothers: traditional and individualistic mothers, of which the later fit the 'new motherhood' idea. These types of mothers belong to a particular socio-economic background: "the higher the educational level and occupational status of the couple, the more likely the women represent an individualistic type of motherhood" (ibid). Another significant contribution to this regard was made by Gilman who argues that women fulfills the dual roles of mother and sufferer, and pass these roles down to their children, creating a continuing image of women as unpaid workers and nurturers. This, in turn, has undermined women's creative and personal growth. Thus he believed that women could desire home and family life, but should not have to retain complete responsibilities of these areas. Gillman stated that these changes would eventually result in "better motherhood and better fatherhood, better babyhood and childhood, better food, better homes, better society" (Gilman, 1970, p-317).

Epistemology and Ontology

A social constructionist approach has been used in my study. In my choice of constructionism I followed Flick (2009), "it informs a lot of qualitative research programs with the approach that the realities we study are social products of the actors, or interactions or institutions" (Ramos and Masquita, 2013). Contemporary employed and educated mothers experience their 'selves' neither as complete social constructions nor as essential and 'uncultured' sites of unchanging difference. Rather, the very notion of motherhood of interaction and social construction and is intricately social and cultural in its basis (see Stanley and Wise, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

The empirical research was carried out among 16 heterosexual, Hindu, married, full time/part time employed mothers working in both private and government sectors in the urban city of Kolkata. This paper is based mainly on qualitative in-depth interview chosen on the basis of purposive and snow-ball sampling. The mothers in my study were primarily from middle and upper-middle class families whose children are aged (1-10) years. Children at the selected age group are found highly dependent on their mothers. The average age of the respondents was 32 years. The youngest participant was 29 and the oldest was 40. Ten participants were employed in the private sectors and six were in government sector. All of the participants had a master degree, 2 had received a doctorate degree, and 3 had M.phil and 5 participants had received degrees in technical and management areas. The participants had a monthly household income of less than

rupees 75000 to more than 1,30000. The interviews were informal, more appropriately described as conversations, a topic specific narrative with an assumption that data collection is an interactional method. I used a semi-structured interview guide as the primary method for data collection. The duration of the interview was 30-60 mns. Although the interview had pre-determined questions, I allowed the participants the freedom to talk about what they felt was significant to them. I felt like an insider when I had the opportunity to share personal experiences with respondents and tried to use my experience to make connection. The primary data of my study thus analyzed and interpreted with the help of secondary data derived from other sources both published and electronic. After the interview was done I transcribed them verbatim. I followed thematic approach and coded them.

FINDINGS

A) <u>Career: A personal fulfillment and financial freedom</u>

In contemporary times, a woman has the privilege to actually choose between work and motherhood. However, social conditioning entails that the woman put home before career even though no expense has been spared in her education and upbringing towards being independent. The equation in a household where both partners are employed changes with the arrival of a child. Maternal instinct ensures that in the initial crucial weeks; the baby is mostly, if not entirely, in the mother's care. During this period mother-child bonding becomes very strong and sees many women happily opting out of pursuing a career. Later on, financial implications of living on a single income and economic aspirations induce a majority of women to get back to work. Career ambitions are also a big driving force for a mother choosing to work, especially one who is well qualified.

Adrita (40 years): a Kolkata based software developer and the mother of two said,

I can't even picture my life without job. I have always dreamt of becoming a software developer and I am happy the way my career has shaped up. I don't regret continuing my job even after having babies. I am happy.

Satarupa (33 years, assistant professor and having a son under the age of six): *I became pregnant during my PhD and I got the job when my baby was two years old. My job brings me outside my four walls into the world, and helps me in all aspects of my life.*

Madhulagna (34 years, part-time lecturer and the mother of two kids): I motivated myself to continue work after having my first child. I prefer to be identified as a lecturer than a mother. I can't see myself being a house-wife.

Sima (34 years, computer trainer and the mother of a kid under the age of three): although my salary is low, but I won't quit my job. I work not only for the money but for the sense of independence it provides me.

Aditi (37 years, medical representative and the mother of two): my career is my identity. Motherhood is a perfect bliss but I derive joy from my work too.

In my study, employed mothers with high and low salary, expressed that paychecks mean power. Paychecks enable them not only in contributing to their family but to decide how their earnings are spent. The employed mothers said that they have never intended to stop paid employment and emphasized the priority of professional development in their lives. However, their husbands support their decision.

Aditi (37 years, medical representative and the mother of two): My husband thinks that if I am a full-time homemaker, I would go mad. Moreover, he feels that my employment makes our home happy since I enjoy what I do.

The findings of my study suggests that, despite continuing gender segregation in household labour, norms and behaviors are being negotiated; Bengali men are increasingly taking part in household activities. Dermott talked about 'New fatherhood', the prospect of a new fatherhood revises men's parental importance as fathers who make a greater contribution to childcare. Men becoming more like women with respect to parenthood could provide the other half of the transformation in gender roles to balance women's increasing similarity to men in terms of participation in paid-work.

B) <u>Motherhood and contemporary childhood practices</u>

Childhood is a period of dependency. In India, women are viewed as the main providers of child-care. In Bengal, employed mothers who have choices whether to work or not to work have considered so many things before they take the alternative child-care decisions. Many working parents look to their parents for help with the kids. However, in cases, where mothers live in nuclear families and have no one at home to leave their children with, they opt for a crèche or a babysitter

Bithi (30 years, part time lecturer and having a kid under the age of three): My son often cries when I leave for college and feel comforted when I return. Although I feel bad about leaving the toddler at such a young age but I am helpless. He has to accept his mom the way I am. I phone home sixth times a day to find out what is happening and try to give instructions our maid over the phone.

To Bithi, child-care has no specific pattern. One needn't to stay at home 24*7 in order to take care of her children.

Paromita (32 years, an electrical engineer and having a son under the age of seven): I chose to use my in-laws as our day-care provider because I knew my children were being cared for by someone who deeply loved them.

Gitashree (30 years, H.R manager and the mother of two): since I live in a nuclear family, hence, I have no other options except hire a professional helping hand for my kids.

Sima (34 years, computer trainer and the mother of a kid under the age of three): I have put my baby to daycare which is close to my computer centre. I prefer daycare centre because it offers a formal, structured environment.

From Gitashree and sima's narratives, it has become clear that alternative options of childcare like daycare centers, babysitters shine new light on the aspect of contemporary motherhood.

With the development and growth of IT sector, there are lots of works from home opportunities are available.

However, from the above narratives it is revealed that child-care is mostly a choice for modern working (paid) mothers. Child-care pattern depends on the family's income and size. The all mothers, I interviewed, had sufficient financial resources to opt for the alternative mothering practices.

The most prominent feature in all women's everyday mothering was a never-ending struggle to arrange their own lives as working mothers to the greatest advantage of the children.

Soma, is a 33 year – old sports journalist and a mother of two small children, when she describes her life as a working (paid) mother.

I have totally rearranged my life. I do not carry out any projects from the time I pick up the children at day care centre until they go to bed at night.

The understanding of motherhood and mothering as a practice is founded in a constant struggle for opportunities to give the child space and closeness. The intention is to adapt the work schedule constitutes a relatively stable structure. Thus the goal becomes one of preventing the rest of life from interfering on motherhood. For many women, this struggle often leads, at least, provisionally, to abandonment of their own activities other than their paid work.

The employed mothers, in this study are generally professional workers whose husbands have also equally demanding careers. Some of them also hold 'male-careers' in which they face the expectation that childbearing won't interfere with their devotion on the job. They do, however, represent Hochschild's ideal of "the woman with the flying hair"; laptop in the one hand, and child's hand in the other, striding confidently out into the day. One of the myths that have emerged concerning this 'superwoman' typology is what she manages to balance a demanding career with equally demanding expectations about mothering (Harper and Lawson, 2003).

C) <u>Construction of motherhood: good mothers vs. other mothers</u>

The idealization of motherhood is a culturally constructed idea that devalue some mothers where valorizing others. Mothers behave in accordance to what has been prescribed as acceptable behavior. Being this good mother is an impossible task and the reinforcement of this mythical ideal puts all mothers into a lose-lose situation whereby the ways a mother comes to know how she should behave is repeated and limited, manipulated and exalted in the media, setting a standard so high the only outcome can be a series of failures. Judith Butler explains that, "Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes" (Rock). Rock added, binary logic confines mothers to 'good or bad' is socially constructed and propagated in western culture to serve patriarchy, dividing mothers. And the 'good mother' and 'other mother' are interdependent on each other to find value within the breath of mothering experiences. 'Good mothers' strive to be better 'good' mothers, while other mothers also strive to be better 'good mothers'.

Adrita (40 years, software developer and the mother of two): I feel a good mom's definition does not mean being with the child all the time and resolving all their problems. For me being a good mom means I should be able to raise my kids to be confident, independent and be good human beings.

Paromita (32 years, an electrical engineer and having a son under the age of seven): Good mother does not necessarily mean spending time alone, it means being emotionally involved with the child's activities and being able to establish a close bond with them.

Madhulagna (34 years, part-time lecturer and the mother of a kid under the age of seven):I think it does not depend on the fact that a mom is working outside or not, spending more or less amount of time with the child. What matters is how well I can groom my child. Even if a mother works outside, it is important to groom the child with proper values. Also it does not only depend on a mother if her child turns out to be a good or bad human being. It also depends on the society. A mother should love, care and be strict at the same time so that the child gets an all-round grooming.

Pritha (40 years, librarian and having a kid under the age of ten): dynamic nature within the mother as per the child's demand. A mother should have the quality to channelize her child's resources in a structured way.

Satarupa (33 years, assistant professor and having a son under the age of six): the definition of good mother is unknown to me. Moreover, I think concept of motherhood has undergone a huge change in last few decades. A good mom is not only one who cooks good meal for her children or stay 24*7 with them. To me, a mother should be both financial and emotional support for her children.

In my study, I found that contemporary employed women refused to adhere to the fixed, strict ideal of intensive mothering. The respondents were asked whether they consider themselves as good mothers:

Adrita (40years, software developer and the mother of two): I surely don't fit in the definition of good mother, who cooks well, keeps everything in perfect condition or run to the doctor every time my kids fall sick. I forget to give them medicines at times. But yes I try to be friendly with my kids, I'm someone with whom they can discuss all problems especially with my elder daughter who is 12 years old and has so many queries. At times they complain and compare me with other parents, but have accepted me the way I am.

As the 21st century unfolds, more and more women are challenging the archaic notions of motherhood upon which patriarchal power imbalances rest. The narratives of women participant exhibit that mothers are working to re-define traditional notions of motherhood. Employed women are proving that one doesn't need to stay-at-home in order to be a good mother. "As society changes in response to shifting social, economical and political so too does motherhood." According to Rich, mothers are not stagnant beings, they adapt and adjust situation at hand. The 21st century is proving to be a very complex environment through which mothers explore their identities.

CONCLUSION

From the early 90's many employed mothers in Kolkata began to challenge the dominant discourse of ideal mother as exclusively bound to home. As a still tough economy continues to inform family cost-cutting and work lives become increasingly flexible, more and more working parents are on the hunt for new childcare arrangements. Mothers are opting for informal childcare arrangements to get their needs met. Mutual understanding between spouses ensures that along with bringing in the income, both parents share the responsibilities of childcare and the immense fulfillment that comes with it.

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Contemporary working mothers feel that children of working mothers tend to be more responsible, do more work around the house and become more independent, as a whole. Daughters of working mothers respect their mothers; have less traditional values regarding marriage and sex-roles and view women as more competent than do daughters of full-time housewives. My research findings support Rich's famous notion of 'Breaking the myth of motherhood'. According to her, " the words are being spoken now, are being written down, the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are being cracking through." Therefore it can be said that the mask of motherhood has begun to break apart and contemporary mothers are motherhood on the basis of their own mothering practices. Economic empowerment somehow helped them overcoming the dichotomous construction of 'good mothers' and 'bad mothers'. However, contemporary mothers believe that 'Intensive mothering' is just a myth and thus, impossible to attain. Hence, they are inclined to redefine their success of motherhood in more human terms than any dominant ideologies of motherhood and adopted 'Extensive mothering' (Christopher,2012) practices which encouraged them to meet their mental, physical and social needs, which sustained their self-esteem as individuals and led them to feel balanced.

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