

Towards A Healthy Work-Life Balance Among Working Mothers In India

Seeret Omar Shah¹, Syed Uzma Kubravi²

^{1,2}Department of Sociology, University of Kashmir, (India)

ABSTRACT

Indian mothers have to fight challenges every day, more so because of the fact that the concept of working mothers is relatively new and will take some time before it gets its due place in the orthodox setting of most Indian households. A woman may be a team leader or a CEO of a multinational company heading a sizeable work force at work yet when it comes to her home she's the person who is expected to be majorly responsible for taking care of her family affairs with little help from her partner. Added to it are the expectations of her in-laws and her extended family which turn her into a warrior who fights small battles almost every day. This paper highlights the plight of a working mother who faces innumerable challenges in her day to day life. It attempts to put forth several measures which should go a long way in helping her attain a balance between her work and family life.

Key Words : *Work- life balance, Working mothers , Motherhood, Management, Work place*

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood has always been a celebrated word around the world. However, there are some stark realities which still hound our society. Indian women have always been in an unfavourable position in our societal framework, which only compounds their problem when they find themselves in the dicey position of not only being mothers but also working women. Societal expectations, mental conditioning, and lack of help have led to many women giving up their jobs for taking care of the family. Simply by virtue of being a mother, a woman has a full-time job. Whether she is married, divorced, or a single mother by choice, her work is not easy. She needs to manage a household and tend to her whole family, in addition to working towards her own well-being. Within this group of super-women, we encounter the heroes who are known as working mothers. In simple language, the term refers to a woman who engages in a work life aside from her duties as a childcare provider. As a working mother, especially in a widely patriarchal society like India's, a woman is subjected to immense mental and physical stress. She is under scrutiny for not only her efficiency at home, but also in a professional set up. The work/ life balancing act is strenuous. Housework, more often than not, is considered to be a woman's job. On observing a messy house, an unprepared meal, or a child's deteriorating performance at school, the blame falls solely on the mother. She is expected to devote all her attention to the child, and consider her professional life to be the second priority. Prominent World Bank Study found that only 27% of the female population aged over 15 is working in India. This is the lowest rate of women's participation in any workforce among the Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries, with the highest in China at

64%. What could be the reason for it? There are numerous challenges that an Indian working mother faces every single day of her work life that demotivate her and ultimately result in her becoming a stay-at-home-mum not out of choice, but out of duty. In view of the influence of a patriarchal value structure of the family on their career aspirations and motivations for work, (i.e., [1]) notes that Indian women tend to impose restrictions on their career aspirations or personal achievements for family reasons. She argues that keeping a low profile in one's career enables these women to be in both the worlds, i.e., work and family.

Here are some of the common challenges that working mothers face in India:

II.COMMON PROBLEMS FACED BY WORKING MOTHERS

2.1.Living up-to the image of Idealized Motherhood

Indian women are brought up with the mental conditioning that they are born to take care of the family and their kids. This is her sole "job" and hence takes precedence over everything else. So, if she has to choose between an important meeting at work and a sick child she will invariably choose the latter. Any dereliction of duty will mark her as arrogant and selfish, with society reminding her that she is neglecting her family by going to work. In their highly acclaimed book, "Work and Family: Allies or Enemies", (i.e., [2]) argue that conflict between work and family has real consequences. It significantly affects the quality of family life and career attainment of both men and women. The consequences for women may include serious constraints on career choices, limited opportunity for career advancement and success in their work-role, and the need to choose between two apparent opposites-an active and satisfying career, or marriage, children, and a happy family life. The notion of motherhood, as it stands now, has been heavily influenced by the society we live in. Though glorified, the ideal notion of motherhood set by the society is at times impossible to achieve for any human being. The ideal of motherhood is still stuck in the past and has yet not caught up with the new breed of progressive working women. To keep her in captivity, without access to work or finance or interaction with the outside world, is less than fair. Social pressure and mental conditioning make it difficult for many working mothers to continue working after marriage. A survey conducted among 1,000 working women living in Delhi and its nearby areas, found that only 18-34% of married women continue with their professional career after having a baby. While lack of flexible working hours or crèche facilities do restrain their desire to work, most of the Indian working women suffer from a strong sense of guilt. Working women, unlike homemakers and housewives, often feel guilty at the prospect of losing quality time with their baby. Constant shuttling between work and home leaves many women exhausted, hampering their quality time with their children. Society, too, constantly reminds the working mother of her shortcomings and how she needs to learn from her housewife counterpart about true motherhood. The comparison between the two never ends. This complex cocktail of guilt and family pressure makes women quit the workforce, leading to a feeling of uncertainty, dissatisfaction, guilt, and often a battered self-esteem.

2.2.Disintegration of the joint family

Disintegration of the joint family has taken a toll on the working mother. In the past the extended family as a whole used to take care of the children's welfare. With elders missing in the scenario, parents are expected to

take care of their children and in majority cases, the onus falls on the mother who is expected to take a career break to take care of her newborn baby, thus paying a heavy price in terms of career growth. A study by (i.e.,[3]) reveals that combining paid-work and motherhood remains a major source of difficulty for women. It is the mothers, rather than the fathers, who bend their jobs to meet family needs. Nuclear family thus rests heavy on the shoulders of a working mother.

2.3.Unequal Partnerships at Home

The stress and the added workload exhaust many women out, with the only option to get out of the vicious cycle, is to leave their job. Men, on the other hand, are able to continue with their work unabated as their help is neither expected nor given. In today's modern era, even after working in the corporate world; the age-old image of a woman being a home-maker is not much changed. Most men are brought up in households where taking care of the home and family is a woman's responsibility. Even if she works, comes home tired, has to leave early for office; she is expected to cook food, take care of kids and accomplish all other household duties, the male counterpart may volunteer but holds no responsibilities. In such an environment, many expect the working mother to emulate her homemaker counterpart and resume her homely duties once she comes back home after a long tiring day at work. India's patriarchal society thinks of women only as homemakers and sexual objects and is generally subjected to exploitation and torture (i.e.,[4]).

2.4.The Super Woman

Accepting a working mother is hard enough for many people. However, in the rare chance that she gets accepted, society expects her to be some kind of a superwoman handling every little thing on her own. From attending to the home, to participating in the child's PTM, to getting involved in family weddings and other functions she is expected to do all. Missing anything makes her a negligent selfish mother.

2.5.Lack of good Day-care Centres and Crèches

Although many day-care centres and crèches have mushroomed over the years in most metropolitan cities, finding one with certified professionals is very difficult. Most of these centres also do not follow proper guidelines issued by the concerned authorities regarding their functioning. Thus, security issues force many new mothers to leave their professional career and look after their newborn babies.

2.6.Discrimination at Work

Discrimination starts at the very level of recruitment and interview, where recruiters/interviewers see women incompetent for challenging roles and ask questions like whether you would be able to continue after marriage? Unlike their male counterparts, women are assessed on the basis of their marital status and maternity plans. Pregnant women are seen as liabilities and not exactly as long-term assets when it comes to working. Maternity leaves, though available theoretically, are hardly ever practically provided by companies. It's quite common for companies to deny promotions to women who have been on maternity leave as most promotions are performance-based and not tenure-based. With a women's maternity leave being recorded as a time of average or no performance, many are left in a lurch in spite of their exemplary performance. The efficiency of a working woman is always suspected and questioned by most people, especially their male counterparts. In the upper-class cadres, it is generally seen that all qualifications remaining similar, men are usually preferred. Authorities

are doubtful whether women would be able to handle male subordinates, take independent decisions, cope with crisis and manage their duties properly (i.e.,[5]). Even though women prove they are efficient, authorities think twice before promoting them.

III.MAINTAINING A HEALTHY WORK-LIFE BALANCE

While problems abound at every step for working mothers, there are several ways by which working mothers could maintain a healthy balance between their duties at home and at work.

3.1.Managing Time

Time management is the first step towards a successful work-life balance. Waking up early gives a head-start to a day's work. Rising early affords ample time to contemplate on the day ahead and to prioritize chores which helps in managing the work at hand and saving time. This can be utilized in other domestic chores like cooking or cleaning before leaving for work so that the evening can be utilized in spending some quality time with the family.

3.2.Organising Weekends

Besides the work at home, many women have other duties outside the home to attend to, like buying groceries, paying bills, attending family functions or other important events among other things. Rather than trying to finish off these works on weekdays, it is better to schedule them for the weekend, if possible. Jotting down notes for things that need finishing during the weekends, also help to keep a track of all work and minimize clashes. Modern schedulers like laptop and mobile phone reminders can be used to remind about tasks that need to be completed.

3.3.Working towards Professional Accountability

Working mothers often tend to stress about home duties at the work place. It is important that at work all home concerns be kept away. In order to ensure respect and support at the workplace, it is better to complete the assigned work within the set deadline, so that no one gets a chance of doubting the working capability of the working mother. Precision and a sense of responsibility towards the work assigned ensures that no complaints are made. Free time or mealtime can be used to check on the family or home, but it is always better to keep such concerns at bay from the workplace as long as they are not urgent.

3.4.Pre-planning

It is quite common to see working mothers running hectic errands in the morning frantically looking for things that are needed by children or ironing their school uniforms before finally leaving for work. In order to be free from all that running around, it is better to pre-arrange everything the night before. It is advisable to pre-plan the next day's meal or even get the ingredients prepared beforehand to make the process easy the next morning. Deciding what needs to be worn the next day and ironing it before going to bed ensures a tension free morning and making last-minute decisions. Arranging everything the night before effectively manages time. The extra time can be used in some worthwhile pursuit.

3.5.Avoiding Procrastination

Putting off work may seem pleasurable at that moment; however, one has to pay a heavy price for it later. Completion of tasks at the last minute is often stressful. It is always better to manage work during the time allotted to it rather than to keep putting it off no matter how difficult or tiresome it may be.

3.6.Practicing the Art of saying “No”

The superwoman syndrome is something many women develop while handling both work and home. This makes them feel that they can move mountains. However, they need to understand that it is not possible to do everything. If a situation arises where a co-worker asks for help in completing an assignment, there is no need to feel guilty about refusing them, if neck deep in their own work. Taking up more work unnecessarily puts a strain on time management and messes with organizational skills. Learn the art of saying no politely yet firmly, it will save a lot of inconvenience that may crop up later. Explain lucidly why it won't be possible for them to help. At work, women should clearly state out how many responsibilities they will be able to carry. This clarification does not label them inefficient, rather it becomes a statement that they are serious about their work and know their limitations.

3.7.Asking for help from family members

Managing everything seems like a fantastic idea, however, more often than not, it lands the working mothers into a host of problems. They need to realize that certain jobs need to be delegated to other people in order for things to function smoothly. It is desirable to ask their family members to step in and help them with some of their chores. Professional help to take care of children at day-care centres or preschools and kindergartens can be availed. Hiring maids or housekeepers to help is an option that working women need to be open to.

3.8.Asking for Help from Spouse

While most men have a conservative approach towards helping women in their household duties however, in recent years, there have been some forward-looking changes too. A good percentage of men help their wives in doing things that were once considered a women's job only. In modern society where both men and women work towards meeting household expenses men should share domestic responsibilities and work especially those that require physical strength. Husbands should become a part of the child rearing process by managing children while wives are at work. This process will foster stronger ties between fathers and their off springs and instil better values in them. They will grow up to be more responsible adults.

3.9.Working from home

Working from home is always an appealing option for many mothers, especially when their babies are very young and are being breastfed. The key here is to take work seriously, take care of deadlines and ensure that household chores do not come in the way of professional commitments. Promptly responding to emails and

keeping track of all important emails will help working women to maintain a balance between home and profession.

3.10. Taking out some “Me” Time

Taking care of children and running a household often take a heavy toll on women both physically as well as mentally. The unfortunate part is, that often neither the family nor the society and not even the mother herself gives much consideration to her own health and happiness. It's important for women to take care of themselves before they can take care of others. “Me” time thus becomes very important for their well-being. Spending some moments all by themselves, away from all household and work-related issues affords an opportunity to heal and rejuvenate. A quick getaway with friends or family, or meeting up with friends for a movie or shopping, are just a few examples, which can be indulged in to un-stress.

IV. CONCLUSION

The new generation has become aware that working women are as capable of taking care of their babies and family as they are of committing to their responsibilities at their professional space. However, a lot depends on how women take up these new challenges. Prioritization of work and effective time management will ensure that both household and professional work go smoothly. It is equally important for women to celebrate these new phases of their life be that as mothers or as working women. The above mentioned strategies, to create a conducive balance between work and home, will help in taking some stress off the shoulders of working mothers by helping them in managing their time and energy in a better way. Nevertheless, it is advisable to tackle challenges at both home and workplace as and when the need arises by devising out of the box solutions when traditional ones cannot help. However, it is easier to encompass little modifications over time once the initial steps have been taken.

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