

Globalisations, Mobility and Agency

Understanding Women's Lives through Women's Voices

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Feminist researchers integrate macrostructural processes with everyday micropolitics by locating women's lives at the centre of the research process. Data from this research demonstrate that changing attitudes towards women's education, "good" jobs, and productive work lives help women establish a social position from which they use their agency to successfully negotiate when and whom they will marry, continue to work after marriage, voice opinions against dowry, and navigate their position within and outside the household. Without investigating how gender norms have changed over time and what working in globalised workplaces means to women, it would be easy to miss the change in women's lives and repeat the familiar refrain of exploitation of women in the global South.

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1 Introduction

In the paper "The Messy Relationship between Feminisms and Globalizations," Manisha Desai contends, "The interrelations [between gender and globalizations] are fraught and in some instances have furthered inequalities among women. But this does not preclude other possibilities... [...] feminists have used globalizations to further women's agency and their political, economic, and cultural empowerment. To see these other stories, one needs to define globalizations in the plural and to understand feminists as both constitutive of, and important actors in, globalizations (Desai 2007: 797–98).

In order to understand how gender and globalisations interact, we need to first understand the variety of globalisations, and second, what feminist research entails for those different contexts.

Women's lives around the world have been transformed by globalisation through the flexibilisation of workers, occupational segregation, and informalisation of the economy. Feminist scholars have observed that the growing labour markets of the global economy are increasingly feminised (Freeman 2000; Salzinger 1997; Swaminathan 2004). These studies have tended to focus on the particular demographic dynamics of those niches of the global economy dominated by female labour where work is commonly concentrated at the lower rungs of manufacturing and services sector, such as call centres, and the care economy. This body of work is important and useful for understanding women's tenuous work experiences, because women are typically funnelled into low-skilled, low-paying occupations lacking job security. While this is an area where the majority of women in the global South are employed, it would be short-sighted to think that this is the only story from the South. Transnational feminists have critiqued Western scholars who treat the experience and claims of non-Western scholars as additional data points fitting within the dominant framework of globalisation, rather than seeing them as alternative loci to Western knowledge production (see for example, Bhambra et al 2014). Millions of educated women employed in "creative economies" like the technology sector in countries such as India, for example, have tended to receive less scholarly attention, with notable exceptions such as Fernandes (2000), Radhakrishnan (2011), and Upadhyya and Vasavi (2008). Educated, high-achieving women exemplify both a successful investment in human capital and labour market mobility. They are forerunners, who set standards for other women to emulate in their educational, work and family arrangements (Stone 2007). This group's entry into high status

and predominantly male professions signifies that they are at the frontline in the battle for gender equality, effect cultural transformation, and contribute to the diversification of knowledge production.

Feminist researchers use a diversity of methods from various disciplines ranging from natural to social sciences. A shared goal among these different perspectives is to prioritise women and their knowledge, and most importantly, recognise that women are not a homogeneous group (Mohanty 1988). Some common elements in feminist research are: posing new questions, selecting critical methods, locating women at the centre of the research process, using an intersectional lens, focusing on women's lived experience, and being aware of power dynamics in the research process (Hesse-Biber and Leckenby 2004). This reshaping of the epistemological position of the research agenda enables feminist researchers to view women and their subjectivities with a critical socio-historical, economic and political lens. Thus, instead of using broad strokes to paint women in the global South as marginalised, exploited, and without agency, feminist researchers attempt to identify the interstitial spaces and complex ways in which women exercise agency, even as they are operating within normative and patriarchal structures (Kandiyoti 1988). Sociology, in particular, has been critiqued by feminists (see for instance, Hesse-Biber and Carter (2000), Millman and Kanter (1987), Reinhartz (1985), Sprague 2005)) as being overly Western, positivist, and androcentric in its research undertaking, especially in dichotomising the area of work and family, where men were studied solely in their role in the public work sphere, while women were observed only within the seclusion of the private home sphere (Hesse-Biber et al 2004). Mainstream economics, too, has been criticised for assuming gender, race, and class neutrality, and overlooking the fact that people's relations to production depend on their structural position in society (Barker and Feiner 2004).

Thus, instead of theorising women's work and lives as a dichotomy of empowerment or exploitation, this article is written from the emic perspective of what women think about their own work, family, and gendered lives. I use their voices and stories to link dynamic macrostructural processes to the micropolitics of everyday lived experiences (Kingsolver 2001). Engaging with Mohanty's (1997) argument, this research uses feminist analysis to situate women's work in "the ideological construction of jobs and tasks in terms of notions of normative femininity, domesticity, (hetero)sexuality, and racial and cultural stereotypes" (1997: 6), and considers how women use agency to construct their own lives. Taking a page out of the feminist-economist analysis, this paper not only recognises the centrality and profound impact of gender, race/caste, class, nationality on work and workers but also their relationship to work that is considered valued and devalued (Barker and Feiner 2004).

2 Context and Methods

While economic liberalisation policies have exacerbated inequalities in the informal sector in India, they have also created opportunities for young English-educated and skilled

professionals. Urban women's lives especially have been critically transformed by educational investments by their families and the state, and the expansion of employment opportunities in the private sector. This generation of women is different from their mothers who were predominantly homemakers, and yet their identities are complicated by the politics of nationhood and respectability (Radhakrishnan 2011).

The data for this paper came from an ethnographic study conducted in 2005 and 2006 at three different sites in Hyderabad, India. While the data are a decade old, the work and family experiences of these professionally employed women are still relevant, if not more relevant, given that India is facing a crisis in decreasing female labour force participation (see report from the International Labour Organization 2012). The first two sites—TechSolutions and Global IT—are pseudonyms for large global corporations with headquarters in the United States (US) and a growing presence in India. The third site—First Bank, also a pseudonym—is a private Indian bank that has a strong foothold here, with growing global aspirations. Although TechSolutions, Global IT, and First Bank provide different products and services, all of them belong to the privatised services sector and have a global presence (albeit not all to the same degree). I use this contrast between transnational corporations and a domestic company to make a larger point that even as global corporations localise, Indian businesses actively adopt global business standards in order to compete effectively in local and global markets. This also serves to locate overlapping social structures and normative cultural practices that are seen as dissimilar because they are situated across different sites and yet, are experienced and articulated by workers in similar ways (Upadhyaya 2008). Utilising a feminist perspective allows me to ask how men and women make sense of the on-going economic and cultural transformation in India, and disabuse assumptions that these changes impact them in exactly the same ways. And lastly, comparing the perspectives of workers occupying diverse class, caste, gender, and religious backgrounds and different positions (from trainees to mid-level workers to managers) in these organisations enables me to go beyond, what standpoint theorists argue as, situated and partial knowledge (Collins 1997).

The location of the study, Hyderabad, is the capital city of the south Indian state of Telangana. It is a perfect site for analysing the socio-economic transition taking place in India. It is the fourth largest city in India, with a population of 6.8 million people, and is considered a major urban centre undergoing rapid change. Economic liberalisation at the national level, and the successful solicitation by the then¹ Andhra Pradesh government of transnational corporations seeking investment prospects to set up offices in Cyberabad (a hi-tech city on the outskirts of Hyderabad), provided an unparalleled opportunity in a strategic location to investigate changing work culture and gender relations in the Indian middle class.

I gathered data using semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and focus group discussions from 58 employees—31 men and 27 women—at all three sites (24 employees at TechSolutions, 20 employees at Global IT, and 14 employees at

First Bank) via snowball sampling. Informants ranged in ages between 21 and 45 years. A majority of informants (53 individuals) have graduate degrees (engineering, MA, MBA, MS computer science, or CA—an advanced degree in accounting). Most of my informants originated from lower-middle to middle-class backgrounds, and a majority had mothers who were homemakers (N = 45). Interestingly, all the interviews were conducted in English at the insistence of the informants, even though I mentioned that I was a native speaker of Telugu (the local language) and Hindi. This use of language represents the vernacular terrain in which my informants describe themselves in empowered ways. In most cases, fieldwork establishes a hierarchical relationship between the researcher as the “expert” and the researched as the “subject,” and has power differences built in (Purkayastha et al 2003). Further, the researcher has control over both the research process and the interpretation of the findings (Sprague 2005).

However, the employees I interviewed were not only well-educated but were also aware of their role and contribution to the global workforce and their membership in a transnational class. Marcus (cited in Upadhy 2008) argues that in such cases, the researcher needs to understand that knowledge is more intensely co-produced than in the usual fieldwork process. Upadhy (2008), however, sees it as an advantage because the researcher can use this relationship to discuss findings and check theories, which could, in turn, open new avenues for research. During my research, my interlocutors did not hesitate to correct me if I had misinterpreted something they said. For instance, in discussing the constraints on the physical mobility of women, I asked how their families perceived night-time work given the discussion in the media about the sexual exploits in call centres during graveyard shifts. My female interlocutors were quick to distance themselves from women workers in call centres and resisted any suggestion on my part to lump them in the same category. They not only reminded me that they had higher education and that their work was more value added than the work in call centres, but also used notions of respectability to construct their femininity, in contrast to the questionable moral characterisation and lower-class location of the women employed in call centres. It should be noted that it was women's reputation under discussion in the media and not the men's. Thus, I learned the ways in which women deliberately construct their identity as modern global workers and “good” Indian women simultaneously, because women had much to gain by repudiating the circulating discourse.

In terms of my own social location, I was both an insider and outsider to the research context and process. Even though I often shared a similar gender, class, caste, national, and religious background with my informants, I was considered an outsider, as I had not lived in India for almost a decade at that point, having left for the US to pursue higher studies. There were far more differences than similarities that I began to identify as my research progressed. Some of these differences were immediately apparent in terms of gender, age, and marital status (being a single woman in my 30s and not having children), work status (being a doctoral candidate, while

many of them were on their second jobs), while other differences were more obscure, such as my aspiration to be an academic with, what my informants considered, a very low pay in a foreign country while India was booming. These differences served to make the familiar unfamiliar and enabled me to pay attention to nuances that I might have otherwise missed. More importantly, for a feminist epistemology, the difference in social location reduced most power distinctions between my role as the researcher and their roles as informants.

The next sections draw on my ethnographic work to illustrate how women work as agents in constructing their new work identities, resisting and contesting gender roles within the household, and redefining their previously marginalised identities in novel ways. Relying on a tradition used successfully by feminist ethnographers, I integrate interpretive and materialist (culture, political economy, and structural) approaches (Harrison 2007) to produce a critical analysis of women's lives at the intersection of work and family.

3 Women as Drivers of Change

Indian middle-class women are poised at a moment in history that is undergoing rapid transformation. They are poised between an old India ravaged with bureaucratic redundancies and a “new” India with its high growth rate and a place in the global economy; between an old middle class, which is steeped in upper caste membership and sanskritisation of the lower castes, and a “new” middle class, which has heterogeneous caste origins and is seen at the helm of a new India; between mothers who did not work outside the home and daughters who will grow up with career-oriented mothers. These educated middle-class women are the first generation of women to have potential to make a significant contribution to the “knowledge society” in the global economy.² While I started the research with an aim of examining work culture, my female informants often turned the discourse to the transformation of the middle class and changing gender norms. They actively set themselves apart from the previous generations and saw themselves as pioneers of a “new” India. Thus, while I cannot claim that my sample is proportionally representative (a common limitation of qualitative research), it allows me to explore interrelationships and linkages that go forward and backward, and connect and at once distance the “old” from “new” middle classes.

3.1 ‘Middle-class Girls...Want To Be Someone’

Madhavi, 36 years, is a financial analyst and had been with First Bank for six years. Making an observation about how the middle class has changed over the years, she offers:

Ten years back if you [were to] see a middle class girl, the parents and the girl also were of the view *ki* [that] educate [her] to a certain extent and then get her married and be a housewife. They never had any career plans or [the idea that] she has to become someone! Build a house, save some money, and give it to the daughter so that she has a good future in her in-laws' place. *That's it!* [With emphasis] *That* was the middle class mentality. For boys, parents were insisting on good education, good job, good promotion prospects... Lot of expectations! But now things have changed. Now in the middle class, girls

have started feeling that, yes, they also should do something on their own. *Be someone!* And parents are supporting this by educating them. My own parents took loans to make sure that my sisters and I got an education. I am a CA [Chartered Accountant] because of them. My father tells people about me [whether] they ask or not (laughs)! I see the happiness and pride in their [parents] faces.

Madhavi's outburst about the shifting priorities of the middle class reflects a changing reality observed by work-family scholars in India. Rajadhyaksha and Smita (2004) examining the status of work and family research find that while there is very little research on working women (a minority in themselves) in India, in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s research on urban women in dual earner families focused on women's role conflict in balancing work and family and determined that women prioritised family over work. They conclude that women's working status did not translate to more egalitarian positions within the family despite holding class constant. By contrast, studies (still far and few in-between) in the mid-1990s shifted to focus on career-oriented women in high-status jobs. Here, they noted the changing attitudes of men in support of their wives' productive roles. However, further probing revealed that this support did not extend far. Although men supported their spouses working outside the home, they were no more inclined to help with housework than their fathers, leaving women with a dual burden.

Studies also showed that though working women had a say in decision-making at home, husbands controlled important financial decisions. While it appears that little has changed in terms of women's status in three decades and, in fact, working women experience high work-family conflict, what the authors overlook is the historicity of change in gender norms (Pearse and Connell 2016). Though women in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s mostly pursued work for economic reasons and struggled with family responsibilities, they paved a path for subsequent generations of women to have careers and develop their own human capital potential to, as Madhavi states above, "Be someone!" It is worth noting that in contrast, when my male informants discussed the "new" middle class it was in terms of a shift from public to private sector orientations, increasing opportunities and competition for jobs, lack of work-family balance, and growing consumerism.

Pearse and Connell (2016) note that gender norms do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in every aspect of cultural life and institutions, and need to be understood as a set of interrelationships between individuals and groups that have the power to both reproduce them and also exercise agency to change them. Later in the interview, Madhavi revealed that her mother was the driving force for her and her sisters to attain higher education at a time when higher education for girls was not a popular idea. Madhavi's mother was not very educated, having been married off right after high school, but insisted that her daughters become independent women and not a housewife like her. Pearse and Connell (2016) note that assuming the sway of gender socialisation, or smooth passing on of gender norms from generation to generation, without recognising that change runs the risk of undervaluing the

agency of social actors, one that can only be corrected by tracking change overtime. Further, they argue that normative change can occur in a number of ways, "it is common to think of change in gender as resulting from forces external to gender relations themselves: economic requirements, technology, modernization, democratisation, and so on. There is truth in this, but it is very important to recognise that gender also has internal dynamics of change" (Pearse and Connell 2016: 43). Accordingly, though economic liberalisation policies set the stage for women's increasing presence in the public sphere, it would be a mistake to claim that liberalisation alone brought about changes in gender norms. If anything, economic liberalisation served as a catalyst to thrust women into the limelight in India, work that has been a long way in the making by women in the previous generations breaking ranks in the workplace and changing attitudes within the family. Recognising the arrival of women in the workplace, current research too is shifting from examining psychological aspects of working women to organisational factors that hinder and support women in the workplace (see for instance, Bhattacharyya and Ghosh (2012) regarding women in the Indian IT sector; Hewlett et al (2013) on women facing challenges when they return to work after career interruptions).

3.2 'I Don't Want To Be a Tortoise!'

The growth of employment opportunities in the private sector provided a jump-start for the socio-economic and cultural transformations in India. Here, while capitalist patriarchal structures use gender scripts to construct the ideal worker as an unencumbered man who can work long hours and where Indian culture uses normative femininity to construct women as mothers first and workers next, middle-class professional women are slowly working to dislodge these ideas. At 27 years, Arti was one of the youngest branch managers at First Bank, a mother, and invested in her career growth. She moved from a nationalised bank to the private sector recently, and when asked if she would return to the public sector, Arti replied:

No, no, no I don't want to go back to public sector because there you will be like a tortoise. I don't want to be a tortoise (laughs)! I want to grow fast. This is a challenging job and I can never rest. I'm given challenges day-in and day-out. That's what I enjoy. I got changed to it [sic]. I got used to this atmosphere now, and I want some fast growth in my career. And here, for the upper management positions, they will not take someone from outside [the bank] generally. They'll promote [from] inside. That is one good thing about First Bank. When they think of promotions, they'll think of people inside the organization first. If they don't find anyone, then only they take someone from outside. I want to be in a position where I am noticed.

Q: Do you think men and women have equal opportunities to be promoted?

Arti: Definitely! They [First Bank] do not care whether you are a man or a woman. As long as you perform and you have talent, you will be promoted. [Reflectively] I know that I'll be losing something in my personal life but I thought that this is a good trade-off.

Q: What do you mean when you say, "losing something in personal life"?

Arti: Because [First Bank] is a little bit hectic when compared to any other bank. I put in long hours at work but people working with public sector banks hardly [work] 8 hours. So, compared to them, I miss out

on family time, spending time with my son. My role model is Chanda Kochhar, who [in 2006] is the first woman and youngest Deputy Managing Director at ICICI [one of India's largest private domestic banks]. I really appreciate how [she] handles such a big position being a woman and having personal responsibilities. So I take her as my inspiration. Being a woman I feel many times that I should leave the job, and be with my kid, especially when he is not feeling well. I really feel, "Why am I working?" But then I consider that I [with emphasis] also should become something. I should not waste my life. I want my son to be proud of me.

Several scholars have posited that the demands of the workplace are antagonistic to the strains of home and women experience greater conflict in balancing work and family life than men (Rothbard 2001; Wharton and Blair-Loy 2006). Additionally, notions of "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996), where women are expected to be nurturing with their children but competitive at work, deepen the tension in women's work life balance. In India too, although the dominant framework of normative femininity stresses that married middle-class women should be "maternal goddesses" (Donner 2008) devoting their time to the household, children and their education, some women resist these norms by their continued and intense participation in the workplace. Despite being married with children, neither Madhavi nor Arti show any signs of slowing down their pace at work, and in fact invest in their careers and actively seek upward mobility. Recognising that career success in the privatised workplace is defined by how much one contributes to the company, Arti said that she did not mind the long hours. She uses the time to go beyond the tasks assigned to her making her successful at her job. For instance, Arti found ways to cut short the time taken for some banking transactions and improved the productivity of the branch as a branch operations manager. She also took it upon herself to train new employees in efficient ways of doing things. Recognising her talent, First Bank promoted her to the position of a branch manager in just one-and-a-half years. "But there is no time to rest," she says, because she knows one can be demoted for not delivering, and she does not want to be in that situation, "Chanda [Kochhar] did not get to the top position by sitting on her hands," Arti reminds me.

As Arti demonstrates, "good jobs" that are creative and have growth prospects for the cultivation of satisfying careers and other exchangeable forms of social capital allow for a change in the status of women. However, the path to success is not straightforward. Women continue to face discrimination and sexism at work, and their commitment to their jobs is often seen as suspect. On the home front too, women are bogged down by cultural expectations of being primary caregivers. These issues need to be addressed along with men's attitudes towards providing care and the state's support for families, if there is to be a real change. Sweet et al (forthcoming) doing a cross-national study of employees in 11 countries working in seven multinational companies find that there is very little difference in career centrality between men and women when job quality is taken into consideration, that is, if women have the same opportunities as men to enter higher quality jobs, they will invest in their careers in a comparable manner.

4 Agency and Empowerment

Agency is understood as control over resources, freedom to pursue opportunities, and make strategic life choices where women act as agents of their own well-being (Sen 1985). The path from individual empowerment to large-scale social transformation is not direct, but agency has the potential to lead to empowerment when women practise it to challenge gender norms, institutions, and injustices that subordinate them and other women (Kabeer 2008). Mason (2005) examining what empowerment means for women within the domestic sphere in five Asian countries emphasises its relational nature. By this, she means the consensual nature of interrelationships that exist in any particular context where some members of the group (mostly men) have the right over resources and access to greater power. However, when women are empowered, they not only gain individual capabilities but also create a shift in collective consensus about their right to resources and opportunities. Mason also points to the uneven multidimensionality of empowerment. Women might have power in the private sphere but not in the public sphere. Thus, empowerment is not a zero sum game—that either one has it or not. A more nuanced analysis reveals that women use power and agency in one dimension to navigate other dimensions. This section illustrates how women use their position as successful professionals in the public sphere to negotiate their status with their parents and future families after marriage.

4.1 'He Should Understand My Work Timings'

Arranged marriage is one of the last strongholds of the caste system, with the largest proportion of marriages in India being organised in this manner. In my sample, the majority of informants who are married (N=30) have had arranged marriages (N=21). But merely considering these numbers does not reveal the strategies and negotiations that women employ in changing the "rules of the game" (Kandiyoti 1988) of this longstanding institution. Lalitha, 27 years, a finance manager with Global IT, discusses her plans for marriage:

Q: Have you given any thought to marriage? Do you have anything specific in mind?

Lalitha: (Laughs) Everyone points out that I'm 27 and unmarried. But I want to proceed carefully because this is for a lifetime. Education-wise he must be a postgraduate. Must be an engineering or MBA graduate. But more importantly, [he should be] a nice person who can understand me because you know with guys and girls working in MNCs [Multinational Corporations] there are no set timings. You should have proper understanding because the work atmosphere is like that. You can come and go anytime. It is not standard timing that you go in the morning, and are home in the evening; nothing like that. [I want to be with] a person who can understand the demands at the office and wants to be with me...and, of course, a loving person [laughs].

Q: Why is this important to you?

Lalitha: [Matter-of-factly] Because I want to keep working after I get married. Earlier they never used to let a girl work in the night. Now it is fine because, everybody is working at one or the other MNC. And everyone understands that there is no particular time when the person is coming or going. It has become common.

Q: Everyone...like your parents, you mean?

Lalitha: Yes, but again there are some people in society that are still not aware of it. Take me as an example. When a couple of proposals

came my way, my parents told them my work timings...like, she is going to work late at times and asked them if their family was going to be okay with it. They were like, 'Oh my God! She is going to come home around 10 o'clock? No, that is not good.' We rejected those matches outright. I cannot be in family like that. So you see, your parents might understand, but when you go to another family after you get married they might not take it. There is another example. One of my friends has got recently engaged [sic] and had a great job. It is a love marriage. But her mother-in-law said strictly, 'If you are going to work in the night shift, you better quit your job. If you find a job in the day, you can continue. I cannot afford to send you in the night.'

Q: So what did your friend do?

Lalitha: (Laughs) After marriage she persuaded her husband to move to Hyderabad [from Bangalore] away from her in-laws, to work at our branch. She requested a dayshift and continues to work.

Unlike in a romantic relationship where one gets to know the other person over time, in an arranged marriage there is pressure to make a decision quickly. Women such as Lalitha, who are employed in the new privatised services sector and participating in the global economy, represent the new Indian women who not only negotiate with their parents about when and whom they will marry, but are also comfortable in asking tough questions of prospective bridegrooms and in-laws. To them, their jobs meet more than an economic need. They invest in their careers, and expect an equal partnership in marriage. Thus, while their parents and relatives might vet the prospective grooms, women are not only voicing their opinions but also have a final say in who they get to marry. In anticipating their married lives, women want to make sure that their family life is not in conflict with their work life.

Several scholars have noted that work and family act as oppositions where women are concerned because the positions they occupy within and outside the home are governed by gender ideologies that in turn shape women's decisions to stay or leave the labour force (Crompton 2000; Stone 2007). Accordingly, young marriageable women reason they can mitigate work-family conflict to some extent by carefully selecting future partners and in-laws. Other scholars (for instance, Radhakrishnan 2011) similarly find that professional women in India play a major role in planning their futures. This new trend of arranged marriages where women are consulted by their families indicates the fluidity of women's changing position at the intersection of work and family. At the same time, the embodied nature of social control on women is evident in the case of Lalitha's friend who had to give up a lucrative job that involved a night shift. Even so, we should not disregard that she and her husband moved to Hyderabad, ostensibly to be away from the surveillance of the in-laws, and she continues to work and might even end up taking on night shifts. Thus, even as they go along with arranged marriage, women are not just submitting to cultural expectations but bending and asserting social relations to achieve what they want from a marriage.

4.2 'Why Should I Pay Him a Dowry?'

Before economic liberalisation policies were introduced in 1991, the practice of dowry advantaged families with boys who were employed in the public services sector, because these jobs were coveted, had status, and assured a secure future for the

family. Families of such eligible young men had a wide choice of brides and could demand any amount of dowry.³ Some unscrupulous in-laws, however, demanded more after marriage, and when the parents of the bride were unable to provide, the in-laws would be violent towards the bride, sometimes resulting in a dowry death. Far from receding, dowry in neo-liberal India is exacerbated such that status is represented by conspicuous consumption—lavish and lengthy weddings funded almost entirely by the bride's family, and exchange of luxury commodities such as flats, cars, and vacations abroad (Uberoi 2009). However, not everyone is comfortable with this trend. Most of my informants—both male and female—claimed to be against dowry, and some women took steps to stop the practice in their own marriages. Savita, 25 years, an employee at TechSolutions is engaged to a man of her choice. She is quite outspoken about dowry:

In my case, luckily, my father-in-law did not ask any dowry. That was good. *Really good* [with emphasis]! If he had asked for something, I would have rejected my fiancé and the marriage. That's how strict I am about dowry! Why should the bride's family give money? If both the bride and groom are earning ... I'm the same like him, am I not? I am earning equally to him. So why should I pay him a dowry?

Savita's passionate resistance against dowry comes from a growing awareness of self-worth and gender equality bolstered by her economic independence. Her determination to hold her principles above her "heart" is evidence to a growing backlash from educated women who are active in the labour force and against the practice of dowry. Socially conscious movies and some individuals who go against the system are making an impact on young people's minds. One case that made the headlines in 2003 is about Nisha Sharma, a young, college-going woman in Delhi who had the bridegroom and his father arrested at the venue of the wedding when they asked for a dowry. Nisha became famous both nationally and internationally with women's groups praising her actions and prospective grooms coming forward to marry her without a dowry. Several of my informants brought up Nisha as evidence of changing times and to show that they too were against dowry.

The catalyst for this change is the entrance of middle-class women into IT jobs and their high-earning potential. Working women and their families are aware that once married, women's financial contributions stay in the husband's household; so they question the need to provide a dowry in addition. Despite these trends, one cannot generalise the protest against the practice of dowry to the entire generation because women are still negotiating within the confines of a patriarchal system.

Savita is a well-educated, professionally employed, independent woman who has selected a spouse on her own. Such women are a minority in India, and deep-rooted structural inequalities need to be addressed before the practice of dowry completely disappears. We should also be reminded that individual human capital achievements in education and paid employment do not automatically determine women's empowerment (Kabeer 1998); rather, the impact of individual capabilities is interceded by cultural norms and gender ideologies (Mason 2005). However, Kandiyoti persuasively argues

“...patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between genders” (1988: 275). Middle-class women in India are situated at such a historic moment of transformation that has potential to improve women’s worth and impact the practice of dowry.

5 Shifting Identities within the Home

Feminist economists such as Bina Agarwal (1997) and Notburga Ott (1995) posit that gender relations within a household are based on a cooperation and conflict model, and involve negotiation between family members. The distribution of resources and responsibilities are outcomes of this negotiation. Therefore, by having a good job (in terms of money, status, and prestige), women can bring much to the bargaining table and escape the drudgery of unpaid household labour that is both devalued and has opportunity costs. These are small steps in using social capital to improve one’s position within the household.

5.1 ‘I am Not a Good Girl’

Prema, a single woman of 26 years, has an MBA and had been with Global IT for over five years.

Q: How do you spend your time over the weekends?

Prema: I don’t know how to cook and I don’t go into the kitchen or help out with anything at home. I even work late! No...(laughs) *I am not a good girl* [emphasis added]. Over the weekends, I sleep in and make plans to go to the movies or dinner with my friends.

Q: Has it always been like this or since you started working?

Prema: I am the youngest in the household, so to some extent I didn’t have much responsibility at home, but since I started working, there is even more of a difference. Now I am not *allowed* to do much. My parents take so much care [sic] of me. They see it as: “She is going in the morning and working hard till late night, so let her rest.” The caring is more.

Prema’s autonomy and capacity to dictate her own schedule are the envy of many working Indian women. At the same time, she feels compelled to frame this aspirational arrangement, even if jokingly, as a moral failing, an abdication of her inherent responsibilities as a woman. This shows us how deeply entrenched the household division of labour is. Recent reports have indicated that Indian men do a fraction of the housework compared to Indian women; for instance, the Global Gender Gap Report 2014 by the World Economic Forum shows that India is ranked at the bottom in terms of household division of labour. These statistics at the country-level, however, do not discuss why men take on such little work or the structural inequalities that reinforce this unequal division of labour. More importantly, from a feminist perspective, these data also do not reveal the differences between women in various groups. For example, urban middle- and upper-class (and caste) families can afford to hire domestic help to do menial tasks from which lower-class and lower-caste women have no escape (as workers and within their own households).

Analysing data from my study show that unmarried middle-class women like Prema, pursuing higher education and/or working in lucrative jobs, can negotiate decreased (if not escape) household chores in order to focus on their work outside the

home; and parents often go along with such arrangements. Married women, however, cannot do it to the same extent. Here, there is a further difference. Married women in patrilocal arrangements have greater housework, child and elder care responsibilities than married women living in neolocal arrangements. But even in this context, employment status matters. Married women in patrilocal arrangements working in high status jobs and bringing home a significant salary can negotiate a decreased workload at home and even tap in-laws for childcare arrangements. Thus, merely surmising that Indian women do the majority of housework misses the nuances involved. Compared to women, unmarried men in the study did not bring up housework in their interviews. Married men, on the other hand, expressed some guilt and remorse at not doing enough to help their wives (whether they were employed or homemakers) within the household, but specifically with regard to children and not in terms of general housework.

Returning to Prema’s reflection above, being “bad” is connected to discursive ideas of normative femininity that many women appear to accept, but resistance to these norms problematises the idea that norms are passed down smoothly (Pearse and Connell 2016). Knowing how to cook, keeping a nice home, and taking care of the elderly are considered quintessential qualities of “good” girls. In a context where middle-class women are defined by their relationship to their family, in terms of being daughters, wives, and mothers, and where women’s physical and temporal mobility is strictly governed by family members and society, being “good” is an important quality to strive for. But far from being penalised for flouting this norm and conventional cultural standards, Prema is being treated, in essence, as a young man who is absolved of any household responsibilities and has no restrictions on mobility outside the home. Prema attributes this treatment to her educational attainment and employment in the new global economy.

However, one must be careful not to exaggerate this newfound freedom of young women. While it is becoming acceptable for women to work into the night at IT companies, hanging out with friends at a pub or dating are still unacceptable behaviours for “good” girls. Even as Prema revels in her freedom of movement, she carefully constructs her identity within “good girl” standards and stresses, “My parents know where I am at *all* times.” She distances herself from women who work in call centres and those associated with “loose” characteristics. In a larger sense, though the presence of educated, upwardly mobile women traversing public spaces after dark and resisting responsibility within the home unsettles traditional notions of women’s place both inside and outside the home, its actual impact on women and their families is complex. Against the background of increasing violence against women, such “freedom” can be taken away anytime and women are cautious about not “misusing” or overusing it.

5.2 ‘My In-laws Respect Me More’

Madhavi, mentioned previously, a financial analyst with First Bank, discusses the differential treatment given to her by her in-laws:

I'll tell you, I've seen the difference in my in-law's house itself. I am educated *and* working. My other two sisters-in-law [husband's brothers' wives] are not much educated and they're housewives. So the treatment my in-laws give me is different from what they give my sisters-in-law. They give me more respect. If I say something, they listen. If they [sisters-in-law] say something, my in-laws don't listen; they discount their viewpoint. But they will like to take my viewpoint because they feel she's interacted with people, she's seen much larger society, much larger world, she's educated, so let us listen to her. So, *that* recognition will come when you're educated, and working.

Madhavi garners respect from her family, and finds it fulfilling. As a financial analyst for a private bank, she not only uses skills she learned at work to invest her own money but also advises her in-laws about their investments. Her in-laws in turn treat her better than their other daughters-in-law and also help with childcare for Madhavi and her husband. Both Prema and Madhavi work in male-dominated professions and bring home a big pay cheque. In Prema's situation, she earns more than her father did when he retired. And in Madhavi's case, her salary is much bigger than her husband's, making her the primary breadwinner. But more than that, they bring home an exposure to the outside world that was not part of the world view of middle-class women from previous generations. These women are amongst the first to be well-educated and working in prestigious occupations in their families.

Many of the women I interviewed focused their energies into building careers, and over time, got their families to recognise them as working professionals. This is not to say, however, that Indian middle-class women are suddenly being treated like men and there is gender equality. Married women

still struggle with the burden of housework and childcare. While Madhavi's husband is proud of her position in the bank and leaves the financial decision-making to her, she still has to feed the family when she gets home from work. "He does not even start the rice cooker," she complains. "I have to do everything because he will not enter the kitchen. He sees it as my domain." India is poised at a moment where its patriarchal traditions are at odds with the global image that it wants to cultivate as a modern nation state. Women from diverse class and caste backgrounds are making strides in education and slowly gaining a foothold in the workplace. If India is to truly make use of its human capital, it will have to undergo deliberate and significant transformation in the area of gender equality. The scope of what these middle-class women can do has opened up new futures for succeeding generations of women in India.

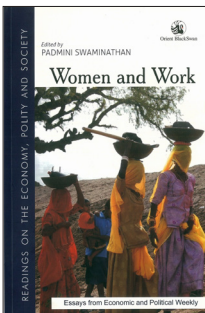
6 Conclusions

While it may take a long time for institutional, social and cultural barriers to be removed, changing attitudes towards gender equality, education, and employment are making significant changes in the lives of middle-class women. Informants in my study self-identified as serious economic actors and did not look at work merely as a job or pastime. They actively invested in their careers and made plans for the future. In a context where women's work is both undercounted and undervalued, middle-class women are slowly entering male-dominated occupations without causing many ripples but making sure they are not invisible within the workplace or the household. In the current charged milieu with a focus on violence

Women and Work

Edited by

PADMINI SWAMINATHAN



The notion of 'work and employment' for women is complex. In India, fewer women participate in employment compared to men. While economic factors determine men's participation in employment, women's participation depends on diverse reasons and is often rooted in a complex interplay of economic, cultural, social and personal factors.

The introduction talks of the oppression faced by wage-earning women due to patriarchal norms and capitalist relations of production, while demonstrating how policies and programmes based on national income accounts and labour force surveys seriously disadvantage women.

This volume analyses the concept of 'work', the economic contribution of women, and the consequences of gendering of work, while focusing on women engaged in varied work in different parts of India, living and working in dismal conditions, and earning paltry incomes.

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against women in India, it is easy to miss the more nuanced changes taking place within the private and public spheres. Feminist perspectives, thus, are integral to highlighting the novel findings about labour, household, and social dynamics. Future work in this area would benefit from research using feminist methodologies that raise new questions about whether

the conditions for women have changed at the intersection of work and family. Analysing the interaction between transformational macrostructural processes and everyday dynamics exposes interstitial spaces where gender relations are being modified. Such modifications might not be groundbreaking but they should not be dismissed either.

NOTES

- 1 The state of Andhra Pradesh was reorganised into the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in 2014. Hyderabad, the capital of Telangana, is also the temporary capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh till the new capital is built in Amaravati.
- 2 The World Bank's recent focus on the "knowledge society" theme argues that access to science and technology is key to closing the gap between the South and the North (World Bank 2002). This reasoning comes from the realisation that the global economy is transforming in a way that makes higher education a basic condition for economic competitiveness and thus, for economic development (Naidoo 2003).
- 3 Of course, those employed in the private service sector also commanded a high dowry, but those employed in the public sector far outnumbered those in the private sector prior to 1991.

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