

An Attempt towards Debunking the Myth that Women's Labour is Inconsequential

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Abstract:

In a patriarchal society like ours, men are considered the breadwinners of the family and women, the homemakers. Therefore, any work that a woman does, is not valued much because it does not contribute directly to the income of the family. However, in this process their untiring efforts and the amount of time they spend in taking care of the household chores, such as preparing meals, getting kids ready for school, managing rations, cleaning, washing etc. remain unnoticed. It is believed to be her responsibility. The process of socialization is instrumental in making one learn the expected gender roles and accept the norms. It prepares a girl from the very beginning to find the true meaning of her life in making others happy. The present paper makes an attempt to bust the myth that women's labour is inconsequential or minimal, critically examines the reasons and focuses on the possibilities of bringing a change in the mindset of people.

Key Words : *Invisible Labour, Stereotyping, Gender disparity*

I. Introduction

The stereotypical gender roles expect a man to earn and provide financial security to the family. In fact, a man is also 'imprisoned by the gender stereotypes', as observed by Emma Watson, the British actor and Goodwill Ambassador for U.N. Women. If a man fails to play the role of a provider his masculinity is in question. In a patriarchal set up, a man is considered all in all for it is his income that is considered primary. A boy in the process of 'becoming a man' learns a crucial lesson that it is his sole duty to provide economic security to his family and thus deserves all respect, attention and care.

On the contrary, a girl, to fit into her gender assigned roles, repeatedly gets the message that her primary role is to give unconditional love, care and attention to the family members and their needs. Hence, very few girls get necessary encouragement to play an active role in earning. They are taught to feel weak and dependant on men for social and financial security. Even today for an educated girl pursuing a career remains just an option, provided she is able to balance both home and career. Of course the consent of the man in the family--be it her

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father, husband or other important males, is of much importance. Economic security and social respect do not seem relevant for women in a male dominated society because the moment a woman thinks of being independent and makes choices of her own, she challenges the norms – the age old tradition that a woman is just a shadow of a man, not an individual.

In the book “Towards a World of Equals” a worker is defined as someone who works continuously for eight to ten hours outside the home for money. We often tend to consider something as work that is remunerative i.e. work which generates income. With such narrowly framed definition there is no wonder that the physically and emotionally demanding labour of a woman, who is eternally marginalized in the patriarchal set up, hardly draws any attention. She is considered a non-worker or unproductive. Thus there is no wonder that the 2011 Census of India categorized most of the working-age women as non-workers. It is in this crucial context that this paper makes an attempt to critically look at the concept of invisible labour of women in our society.

The Oxford Learner’s Dictionary gives the meaning of the word ‘invisible’ as ‘that cannot be seen’, ‘concealed from sight’ and ‘ignored or not taken into consideration’. It is the psychological make-up of the male dominated society that does not take into consideration the enormous effort a woman takes to transform a house into a home where we look beyond the structural aspect of a place meant for shelter and move to a place that breathes, that is livable because of the warmth, love and selfless bonding.

Judy Brady wrote her satirical prose “I Want a wife” which appeared in 1971 in the Ms. Magazine’s inaugural issue. The text attempts to list the expectations of a husband from his wife and unfortunately there is no end to it. She writes, “I want a wife who will have the house clean, keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be, and who will see to it that my personal things are kept in their proper place so that I can find what I need the minute I need it .” It is as if she depicts the essentials of a good wife. There is subtle indication of indifference from the husband’s side, because the list gets even longer when the husband expects such a wife in his life who will take care of the details of his social life, who will take care of the babysitting arrangements, who will have the house clean and prepare a special meal, who will make sure that the children are fed and ready for bed before his guests arrive so that the children do not bother them. These extracts are vital to understand the context of invisible labour to which a woman is tied to. Judy Brady concludes her essay in a witty manner but with a deeper emotional pain, “My God, who wouldn’t want a wife?”

One can be reminded of the Telugu poem ‘Vantillu’ by a Telugu poet, Vimala. It is translated by Dr V.V.B. Rama Rao. The poem draws attention to the fact that the kitchen must have evolved in terms of looks, gadgets and the dishes that are prepared by the woman in a house, but they are solitary kitchens. No one is seen to help the invisible labourer in the kitchen. The poet writes, “Damn this kitchen/ Inhuman, it sucks our blood, robs us of hopes and dreams / A demon, a vulture, eating into us bit by bit all our lives.” The poet adds, “Let’s uproot these separate stoves. /Our children are about to enter these lonely kitchens: /Come, for their sake, /Let’s demolish these kitchens now...” The age-old gender specific roles have set a boundary for women and the boundary demands her to be confined to her own space i.e. home where she is expected to love, care and serve the family members without expecting anything in return. A woman who fails to do so is considered ‘un-womanly’. Through socialization, in the

very formative stage, a woman gets the message very clearly that she has to be the epitome of goodness and virtue and must comply with the set rules, well defined for her. Beauvoir rightly says, “One is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman.”(The second Sex, 1949)

One can be reminded of Jamaica Kincaid’s essay, “Girl” where we find an overbearing mother who imposes endless rules and regulations upon her daughter to make her future ready. The text is an apt example to show how the stereotypical gender roles are passed on generation after generation, where a girl hardly has any scope to open her mouth or raise a question. She is meant to embrace these rules because they in turn would ensure a safe married life or would guarantee a secure home for her. The mother, in “Girl” wants her daughter to be recognized as a good and respectable girl in society but the way she imposes a long list of instructions such as the way she should do laundry work, hem a dress , cook a delicious food item , iron her father’s shirt and pants, soak salt fish, grow vegetables, sweep the house ; or other kind of instructions to bring behavioural changes such as how to behave, eat and walk in public, make the readers realize how a mother becomes at times irrational and strict in disciplining a girl child to meet the societal expectations.

Thus when a woman steps into the role of a wife, a mother or a daughter-in-law, she is expected to fit automatically into these roles as she is believed to have undergone this kind of rigorous training. What she does for her family is nothing but her duty and she should do it without any complaints. What she does tirelessly for the family, often without minimum acknowledgement, is seen as a sign, not only of her unconditional love but also of her innate sense of responsibility towards her family. So where does the question of labour come from? Thus there is hardly any thought about sharing her load. This kind of mindset stops one from acknowledging her strenuous effort round the clock.

This age old image of woman, as a confined soul, is time and again presented in many of the popular commercials. These advertisements on the one hand, , highlight the powerful, aggressive, active and larger than life image of a man while on the other, they depict a woman as being involved in household chores, not very alert about the outside affairs; she is dependent, shy, vulnerable, seductive and powerless. Advertisers highlight the stereotypical image so that the viewers can connect to them and the level of acceptance is more. Erving Goffman observes that advertisements “emphasize some things and de-emphasize others.”

The Surf Excel Easy Wash advertisement shows a woman who is hardly worried to see the dirt on the clothes of her son who soiled his clothes in his attempt to polish his grandfather’s shoes. However, the mother-in-law says, “*Par tumhaare haatho ka kaam to badha dia*” (But now your hands have to see to tougher stains. The phrase ‘*tumhare haatho ka kaam*’ shows how washing is considered solely a woman’s job, though it is not). In response to this the daughter-in-law says, “*Nehi maa, easy hai*” (No mom, it’s very easy!) Her relaxed smile reassures the easiness and the zero effort in washing clothes.

A popular brand called Prestige sells its product with the catchy tag “*Jo biwi se kare pyaar wo prestige se kaise kare inkaar*” (whoever loves his wife can’t say ‘no’ to Prestige). The husband is caring which is essentially very important to run a happy family. However, the care is reflected in buying her an efficient pressure

cooker which would minimize the load but the man or any other family member is not shown to lend a hand. Once again the viewers can not miss the woman's extra enthusiasm and happiness in cooking a variety of dishes and serving the family. All these advertisements give the impression that cooking and doing household chores are not at all tiring and that there is nothing to grumble or complain about, totally overlooking the drudgery and pain that women experience in doing the endless household works. And in doing so, it reinforces the idea of 'invisible labour' in a subtle way.

The saddest part is that her labour is looked down upon in the world, and is not part of national accounting or GDP. But ironically, it is what sustains the economy. In material terms, women's unpaid or invisible care work is huge. In his report in *The Hindu*, "Why fathers need to be more motherly", G. Sampath takes cue from the UN and presents his findings. In his study he found that 85 per cent of Indian men agreed with the statement, "Changing diapers, giving kids a bath and feeding are the mother's responsibility." On the other hand, many women feel that "the home is traditionally the one space where they exert some power and ... are reluctant to relinquish this." This report shows a stereotypical mindset which chains women to such care-giving work where her physical as well as emotional labour remains unpaid.

In a global scenario we find less women in paid labour sector. Here we have to also include the invisibility of those women who along with the domestic chores and family responsibilities, extend their support by being engaged in various other enterprises like agriculture, animal husbandry, weaving, pottery, catering, family-run businesses etc. Though without her assistance it would have been tough to run all these family enterprises, she remains unpaid. Even a small vendor who earns by selling a food item like *dosa* or *idli*, is able to do so comfortably, because of the invisible toil of the wife who might have got up early in the morning for works such as grinding, packing and so on. The irony is that in spite of her labour in this unpaid family enterprise, she hardly has any control over the expenditure of the income because in patriarchal family structure it is the man who is the head of the family and calls the shots.

The Economic Survey, 2020 presents an alarming data which shows that 60% of women in India within the age bracket of 15-59 years are engaged fully in household work. The survey also found that there is a decline by 7.8 %, from 33.1% in 2011-12 to 25.3 % in 2017-18 in India's female labour force. Feminism as defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary is 'the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes'. However, in reality we find a different picture. Due to lack of access to education other than socio-cultural and economic barriers stop her from realizing or exercising her rights.

In a society where people lament over a girl's birth, how can one imagine of investing on her proper upbringing, education and future? According to the Population Research Institute (PRI), due to prenatal sex selection between 1990 and 2018 around 15.8 million girls went missing in India. The findings are very disturbing that approximately 550,000 girls went missing in 2018 alone in India. It is a paradoxical situation that on one side we have noble government initiatives such as *Beti Bachao, beti padhao* (Save the daughter, educate the daughter) and on the other hand, her journey from being born to making a future of her choice is full of challenges at every step. Unless she is equipped with employable skills, it is difficult for her to enter the workforce.

In rural India we find women more in agricultural sector which is often unpaid family work. Those who earn small wages from being engaged in tailoring, embroidery, *beedi*, *papad*, *agarbatti* or bangle-making are home-based workers who earn meager wages. Compared to unpaid family workers their condition is better as they have some control over what they earn. The irony is that even these women do not consider themselves workers and believe that they are only supplementing the family income. It is all because they work from home. Even the census does not count them as workers.

In the modern society there are many women who work outside the home and do different kinds of jobs, be it a domestic worker, vendor, beautician, sales girl or a TV anchor, doctor, banker or engineer. We have a list of women who balanced their home and work well and succeeded. Yet the myth that a woman's wage is only supplementary has not changed much. It was in the 1930s when the first Wage Board proposed that a man should be paid a family wage as the head of the family because a woman has always been perceived weaker and dependent on man. Even after 80 years there is not much change in the mentality, though women have left their mark in almost every sector and proved that she is no less than a man. When a woman works she is supposed to get wage only for her labour because like a man she does not need to maintain a family.

The age-old mentality affects women when it comes to wages. Though after independence the principle of "equal pay for equal work" was implemented, in reality there was not much change. Even today equal wages have not materialized. Today even when a woman is the sole bread-winner and runs the family, she hardly enjoys the importance or recognition of being a provider. A ray of hope is generated with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act which implements the equal pay for equal work principle. It is an initiative to strengthen the other section socially and economically.

It is an undeniable fact that compared to their male counterparts, women face innumerable obstacles to enter the labour market in terms of access to adequate employment opportunities, safety at the work place, conducive working environment, discrimination and most importantly finding a balance between family and work. As she prioritizes her family, it becomes extremely difficult to take up jobs that demand longer working hours or frequent travelling. After marriage and often after child birth, a woman is forced to compromise with her career to take up her nurturing job. Often women are found to compromise with the changing of job location or promotions, even though it might enhance her career opportunities. Thus we find very few women in the top or in the C-suite level.

The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution of India provided reservations for women in the elected bodies of municipal corporations and gram panchayats. They are in legislative assemblies and parliament. We have successful women as CEOs of MNCs like Rekha Menon, Chairman Accenture India, Vanita Narayanan, MD, IBM India, Chitra Ramakrishna, MD, National Stock Exchange, Priya Nair, Executive Director, Hindustan Uniliver, just to name a few.

Women have made a mark successfully in many male dominated fields. Cricketers like Mithali Raj, Harmanpreet kaur, Gauhar Sultana, Mary Kom in boxing, Anuradha Naik, a trained conservation architect and

architectural historian, Shila Dawre, the first Indian woman auto-Driver, Vankadarath Saritha, the 1st woman driver (2015) in the Delhi Transport Cooperation, actresses like Ramya Krishna or Priyanka Chopra, are a few examples who had shown courage to break the barriers and chose the path of their choices.

These examples show that there are initiatives made to come out of the world of invisibility to a world of visibility, acceptability and success. However, unless there is more involved fatherhood or more equitable participation in care-giving from men's side, this journey of her success is bound to face hurdles time and again. In official statistics women's contribution to the economy often remains undocumented, invisible. It is time that there is a more liberal and sensitive approach towards acknowledging women's labour at home and in the work place because the economic development of a nation cannot be truly realized if its women are not economically empowered.

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