



TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES AS A CHALLENGE TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract:

Working class urban Indian women now comprise a large proportion of the urban workforce, however, traditional domestic gender roles remain the same. When we talk of women empowerment it more often than not implies that women who were once at home, tied to domestic work, now have the opportunity to go outside of the home and become an earning member. This is good for the economy, their families, and the society at large. What often gets overlooked in this argument is the fact that while women contribute financially to the home and the economy, it's not as if their domestic roles have been eliminated. Infact, their duties have just been added to. While before, women had the time to rest in between their housework, now they have housework as well as office work and very little time to rest. The addition of office work for women has not led to a corresponding increase in the proportion of domestic work done by men. This is one of the big challenges in women empowerment as while it has empowered women in many ways, fatigue and physical exertion on account of additional duties has reduced overall wellbeing of women while providing an illusion of empowerment. Traditional gender roles have remained relatively unchanged despite women entering the workforce which has led to an increase in the responsibilities of women and doubled their workload.

Key words: Traditional Gender Roles, Women Empowerment, Working Women, Domestic and Professional Roles of Women

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TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES:

Traditional gender roles assign the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the carer - of the children, the family and household. This means that men have to be the financial providers for the family irrespective of their interests, passions, hobbies etc. The same goes for women; whether or not they derive a sense of fulfillment from their work, it is a part of their domestic responsibilities to cook, clean, manage the home and care for their children (and in some cases husbands' parents). These roles have remained relatively unchanged for generations,

especially in middle class homes. Economic and social privilege have relieved upper class and aristocratic women from these roles, however, for the majority of the general population, these roles continue to exist in some form. While there are strong biological origins for these roles, we currently live in a very different economic and socio-cultural world from a few hundred years ago when these roles first originated. The new family social and financial dynamics need new roles that distribute work more equally.



UNPAID DOMESTIC WORK IN URBAN INDIAN CONTEXT:

In urban Indian cities, a day of a working women includes domestic tasks like getting children cooking and preparing and packing lunch for herself, husband and children and in laws, getting children ready for school, commuting to work, working, returning home, attending to childrens' school work, getting children ready for next day school, cooking and cleaning. This is a typical day of a middle class working woman who is married with children and lives with parents in law. As there are too many tasks and not enough time, it is common to have some domestic help for cleaning. Depending on the financial situation of the family, they may or may not employ domestic help for cooking some part of daily meals. For most part, in addition to the paid work women perform in the professional sphere, there is a large amount of unpaid domestic work that is performed at the home.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

The concept of women empowerment was introduced at the International Women Conference held in Nairobi in 1985 as the "redistribution of social power and control of resources in favor of women". Thus, empowerment refers to women having social power to influence decisions and to have control over resources. Mokta (2014) explained empowerment as a process where people are helped in asserting control over the various aspects of their lives. Empowerment of women involves making women independent, politically aware, economically productive and having the ability to make their own decisions in matters that affect their life.

Within the urban Indian context, when we think of women empowerment our mind conjures images of women in smart office attire heading off to work. While this may not be incorrect we must question the fact that this image is eerily similar to our perception of what a successful man looks like. Upon further reflection it is observed that the yardstick for success is itself gendered. Thus while access to health services, education and employment are primary indicators of women empowerment in the country on the whole, the urban empowered women is one with a career and responsibilities outside the home. There is a tendency to forget that empowerment includes the important aspect of "choice and control". If women do not have the choice and control over their own decisions, then a crucial component of empowerment is missing.

FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT:

As a society, financial independence is a major characteristic of empowered women. Working women enjoy the freedom to have careers. This provides a sense of identity and purpose outside of the home which is very empowering. There is no denying that this is a defining characteristic of an empowered individual. The ability to engage and live a purposeful life, engaged in activities that bring a sense of personal achievement. Traditionally, women who are homemakers and completely financially dependent on their husbands and therefore have very little agency. Their activities and interests are limited to what can be afforded by the family income, and on account of their gendered socialization there is a tendency for most women to put themselves last. This usually leads to a host of mental health issues as their needs of self esteem,



respect, status, strength, freedom and recognition go mostly unmet.

DUAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF WOMEN:

According to Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt & Pallabi Sil (2014) traditional gender based domestic tasks have remained relatively static and women's additional roles in the workforce “have doubled the burden of responsibilities” on women. A working woman has to deal with work stress, commuting fatigue (in metro cities), insufficient sleep on account of domestic tasks before children go to school, cooking, cleaning, attending to children's school work, and miscellaneous tasks. Thus we see that working women have dual roles - domestic role and professional role. The same cannot be said about the majority of men. For most part they only have a professional role that is prioritized. If at all there are any family related tasks, they are limited to relationship building through leisure activities. These are a very small minority of urban Indian men who are actively involved in routine household activities like cooking and cleaning. If at all men do decide to cook or clean it tends to be more like a special event, occasion that they may be lauded for. Thus, while both husband and wife are contributing financially to the household, ie, both have a professional role that they play outside of the home, the domestic role is majorly taken up only by the women. Hence, while traditionally women had domestic roles and responsibilities and men had professional roles and responsibilities, now working women have dual: domestic as well as professional roles and responsibilities both at the home and at the workplace respectively.

IS THIS TRULY EMPOWERMENT?

When we attempt to view these dual roles in the context of the meaning of women empowerment there is some further investigation that is warranted. Women empowerment implies women having independence, agency and control over all aspects of their lives along with political awareness and economic productivity. Thus, if women are indeed economic contributors to their family or homemakers, it implies that the women have made this choice themselves. That is truly empowerment. Thus, if a woman chooses to be a homemaker we cannot dismiss them as unempowered women as it is the choice and control that she has over her life to make that decision that denotes her level of empowerment rather than the work itself. Similarly, if a woman is economically productive but lives in a family where her finances are ultimately controlled by her husband or father then, this cannot be considered as a true example of women empowerment.

REDEFINING EMPOWERMENT:

There is a need for us to reevaluate our perceptions of what an empowered woman looks like. If our definitions of empowerment do not go beyond economic independence and income then we are missing out on the key component of empowerment, that is, choice. The ability to choose for oneself what one seems right based on individual circumstances, passions, desires irrespective of what society's standards may prescribe is true empowerment. Thus the problem is not so much with former definitions of empowerment but with society imposed meanings of these definitions. It is thus extremely crucial to go back a step to investigate if one's choices are selected out of interest and passion rather than



something imposed by what society in this time and age deems appropriate and successful behaviour for individuals, both men and women.

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