

Changing Dynamics of Family Roles: Sharing Experiences from Everyday Life

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Abstract: *Statistics regarding the participation of the women at work in Sikkim has been encouraging. Factors like education, employment opportunities, reservation in employment, education and political bodies have combined to achieve this. However, the increase in work participation of women also calls for a reorganization of the various roles within the household. Based on my experience as a working woman in an urban setting, this paper attempts to throw light on the changes in the relations within the family in an urban Bhutia household vis-à-vis an earlier situation in a Bhutia family while also exploring the stresses and changes resulting changes in the larger social structure.*

Keywords: Roles, everyday life, social structures, working women, employment, patriarchy.

Introduction

The “self” of an individual is largely drawn out of the ways the elements of the wider social structures influence our actions, thought process, relationships, values and our outlooks in our everyday life. The world of everyday life or the life-world as understood by Schutz is seen as an intersubjective world where individuals create social reality while at the same time constrained by the preexisting social structures. Social structures at the local level as well as at the global level tend to influence our choices in everyday life.

No doubt, changes take place in the world of work, but occupation or employment continue to be the major social filter through which the lives of individuals and families are structured (Crompton and Harris 1998). The women taking up paid work is a common occurrence in today’s world. A number of reasons maybe attributed to this. With modern education and changing outlook women now want to improve themselves by tapping opportunities in the employment market. They are no longer happy about

being “just housewives.” The need to meet the expenses of running a household and urge to improve the quality of life are the factors that push women into paid work. The desire for financial independence has also been an important motive in seeing women taking up paid employment. Full time employment of women is likely to clash with the hours spent in daily chores as a result of which the working women have to make adjustments in order to balance home and work. One way would therefore be a redistribution of household tasks among the family members living together, or in the time allotted to a particular task.

The conventional patriarchal arrangement demands men to be the breadwinners, while women are seen as homemaker, care giver and in the role of a nurturer. In contrast, emphasis on shared roles based on an egalitarian ideal is seen as something nontraditional, or even an act of deviance (Amato and Booth 1995). House work, childcare and care for the elderly and the sick are considered “feminine” roles and are generally attributed to womenfolk, irrespective of their role outside the house. Likewise, decision making and authority are often vested on the males in the family. This orientation about the role of women takes place in the early years of the socialization and becomes inbuilt in the personality of the girls as well as the boys, so much so that if they deviate a little, they are blamed for not doing “their job properly”.

We have data to show that compared to the situation in the 1960s, men and women in the 1980s were more open to accept that women should have their own careers and be good mothers alongside being active members in important family decisions. They were also more likely to accept that men should do their share of household duties and child care. In spite of these changes, men remain more conservative on these issues than women (Thornton 1989).

‘Attitude change is likely to impact personal feelings as well as dyadic aspects of relationships. As wives become less traditional in outlook, they tend to perceive that they are disadvantaged or exploited and thus become less happy with their marriages. In terms of behaviour, they may demand more decision-making power or press their husbands to spend more time doing housework and child-care. Since the status quo benefits men, many husbands resist these changes. Thus, when wives’ attitudes turn progressive, there is likely to be more overt conflicts between spouses and less stability in the relationship’ (Amato and Booth 1995: 58) Despite men and women being recognized as equal citizens in the eyes of the law, the society attributes differential roles, rights and obligations to the men and women.

The Bhutia Community

The Bhutia community structures gender relations in tune with a patriarchal order. Studies on the Bhutias of Sikkim (Bhasin 2002; Bhattacharya 1994) refer to them as an egalitarian society. However, overtures of patriarchy surround everyday life. For instance, the men are placed above the women in gender hierarchy, preferences are given to sons over daughters, customary laws privilege men over women, division of labour among men and women is not egalitarian and everyday practices of social relations show glaring instances of gender bias.

Historically, the Bhutias are believed to have migrated to Sikkim from Tibet at different periods in history. A large majority of the Bhutias are Buddhist, while a few of them are Muslim or Christian. Although they may not have the dowry system yet, the birth of a son is much coveted, so much so that in the past if a woman had only daughters, she was referred to as “barren” and pitied. In families with limited income, bias against daughter is reflected in sending her to an ordinary government aided school, while the parents, without fail, would try and get the son admitted to a private English medium school, which involves higher cost. After marriage the girl moves to her husband’s house. If her work area is in a different place, she might take up a different residence in a different place but will continue to visit her husband’s family every weekend on vacation. This is the standard trend although there might be some exceptions. Reliance on family members and close kin for various works from child supervision to support in times of crisis is also widely popular.

As daughter

Having grown up in a household with three sisters and one brother we seldom looked for companionship outside the family. Both my parents were in state Government service and it was nothing out of the ordinary to see my mother going out to work. In fact, it was always understood that after our studies we would all seek paid jobs and be financially independent. My paternal grandmother lived with us and I have faint memories of her taking care and supervising my two younger sisters when they were babies. In reflection, I think about how much my parents might have sacrificed to ensure that all their five children had a well provided, cared, happy childhood. Since all of us were educated in private boarding schools, it must have also been financially taxing for them.

My father grew up in a village and was singlehandedly brought up by his mother. He knows how to cook and clean but I do not remember him engaging in household chores. When we were small, I remember him being away from home on work engagements for days and months. My father was the provider in a typical patriarchal sense while my mother remained the nurturer and the homemaker. Even though he was able to cook and clean my father always discouraged my older brother from performing household chores as, he believed, it was the responsibility of the girls. In this way he was very traditional in his outlook when it came to the distribution of household tasks. My brother was exempted from the household tasks as a result of which he cannot cook even today. On the other hand, he encouraged my brother to participate only in chores that were considered “masculine”, like repair works around the house, chores which required strength and chores which were done outside the house. He was also very strict with us; he never liked his daughters going out with friends in the evenings, since he believed that the girls should stay indoors after dark. Notwithstanding all the patriarchal ideals that he nursed dearly, he loved us very much and he was not very expressive in displaying his affections. Today he has become old and childlike. He has become very open about his emotions and affections. Once the patriarch who exuded authority and sternness has today come to be totally dependent on my mother because of old age and health problems. In fact, today, it is my mother who is completely in charge of family finances, a responsibility which was held by my father for as long.

My mother is the second youngest in a family of 6 children. She grew up during a time when boys and girls were brought up following differential norms and standards. Even though she was brought up in a loving household, her parents were patriarchal in their outlook and mindset. When it came to making decisions, her father’s words were counted as final. My mother never saw my father before marriage but she never questioned the arrangement.

In my vacation days, I saw my mother waking up early every day at 4:30 am. She was singularly responsible for cooking the family meals for the day, giving us a bath and changing us, serving us breakfast, packing our lunches for the day. Her mother-in-law, my grandmother, was already an old lady and she could not help much in domestic work. Therefore, it was my mother who had to manage almost everything by her herself. After finishing her household works for the morning and instructing my grandmother about her lunch my mother would dress for work and leave home by 9 am. In retrospect I wonder if she had enough time to eat her

breakfast. Unlike the present day there were no vehicles and so she had to walk 8 kilometres to reach the school where she taught. The terrain here is uneven therefore her walk to school meant walking uphill as well as downhill. After work hours were equally taxing as it meant reaching home on time and attending to the daily chores like preparing dinner, washing up, cleaning, and supervising the children with their studies. She rarely had time for herself.

My father being the head of the household his word was often taken as final by the other members. My mother too never overstepped his authority and gave him the patriarch's place. An advice she keeps giving me after my marriage was to compromise to the male authority. Rather she has tried to teach us to respect and honour our husbands. She often says the status of the family is dependent on the status of one's husband and therefore we, the wives, must be the first ones to honour it. Today having gone through marriage and motherhood my mother and her daughters have become the best of friends. She remains non-judgmental about us and even today she remains the guiding force behind all of us. Since my mother is much younger than my father in age, in old age, my father has come to be completely dependent on her.

As wife

I got married with the idea that my husband and I would be partners in egalitarian roles. My mother disagrees with this "modern foolish notion" of mine and says that the idea of egalitarianism is utopian.

I have tried to accept my mother's way but I find myself deflecting time and again. I find myself voicing my opinions in a voice louder than my husband's. I find myself speaking up if I think he is wrong and I also often find myself asking him to do his share in the care of our children. Sometimes when I think about my mother and her relationship with my father and compare it with my relationship with my husband, I feel guilty. My husband and I argue and fight and disagree over things in ways which would have been unthinkable for my parents. I think my education, the influences from the wider social structures have shaped my sense of who I am and how I ought to be. Having been brought up in a relatively liberal social ambience, my husband, unlike my father, gives me some free space to be the person I want to be. He is kind, loving and considerate but the patriarchal influence over him sometimes become evident in his outlook and behaviour. For instance, irrespective of whether I am tired or not tired I have to attend to my children and take care of their needs and wants. No doubt my husband

extends his helping hands, but if he is tired or does not want to do it then he won't do it. He has a choice; I, on the other hand, do not have that choice. Since I am the mother, I have to do it. As a wife and a daughter-in-law, I have to also try and work hard in maintaining my relation with my husband's extended family. If the daughter-in-law does not meet the social expectations or the social obligations of the extended family of the in-laws then she would be blamed. This I think is a regular feature everywhere in the country. Women tend to carry the responsibility of maintaining the social relations within their own family members and the members of their husbands' families. The social obligations and role expectations tend to increase after marriage. Now the ties are no longer limited to one's family of orientation but gets extended to a whole lot of in-laws and other kin of the husband's extended family. If I am busy I tend to ignore the obligations that I hold towards the members of my family of orientation, assuming that they will understand my situation but when it comes to my husband's side of the family I go out of my way to make sure I discharge all my responsibilities without blemish.

As mother

I have two small boys aged 5 and 9. Being conscious of the egalitarian roles of the men and women I try to instill similar values in the upbringing of my children. Yet I must confess I backtrack in my thoughts and practice and often find myself being patriarchal in my everyday life activities. For instance, I forget and say something like "boys should not cry" or something like "you are behaving like a girl". Furthermore, I am also conscious that I am constantly trying to encourage my children to do activities such as sports, music etc. which, I feel, will help them be successful in their later lives. As a result, I am constantly routinising their lives leaving them with little time to discover themselves as children. This leads to me being increasingly stressed because of the obligations that I have to meet being a mother, a daughter, a wife, and daughter-in-law and as a working woman. Parenting today is no longer limited to just raising your child physically. Social structures in the form of media, literature, science, education etc. come as powerful influences on the perception and practice of parenting. Therefore, the way my mother raised her children is something I may no longer be satisfied with and I will definitely not try it on my children. For instance, when we were kids we had to invent our own games and ideas to keep ourselves busy; the grownups did not have the time to entertain us. Today, the modern parents insist give time to their children. I find myself constantly trying to entertain my children in ways that would supposedly be

a gainful learning experience for them. Moreover, our judgment on raising children is extensively influenced by consumerism which dictates how one should or should not be. I also expect my husband to be an equal participant in the rearing and upbringing of my children.

As working woman

Being an employed woman, I spend considerable time in a day away from home and family. Often, I find myself torn between wanting to do well in my profession and at the same time wanting to conform to the established notion of “good wife”, daughter-in-law, mother and daughter. Therefore, stress of time management as a professional and the “guilt” emanating from neglect of the traditional roles is a battle that I encounter on a regular basis. Education has influenced the desire to do well in my profession while my socialization reminds me the need to perform my duties and responsibilities as a mother, wife, daughter and a daughter-in-law. My hometown is a small town and relationships are often “primary” in nature. While living in the midst of primary relations one has to meet the obligations to perform social calls during illnesses, marriages, birth and death ceremonies within the community. Sometimes, I end up attending four weddings in a single day. This also effects drain of one’s finances. The idea of reciprocity in terms of social obligations remains a deeply rooted norm in the Sikkimese society. When my children fall ill it is often I who stays back to care for them. When I have something really important at work, my husband stays back with the sick child. Since I am a teacher, I prepare for my lessons either while in the college or late at night after the children go to bed. I do most of the child care activities like feeding, washing, cleaning and putting them to bed; I spend my mornings and evenings with the children.

I live with my in-laws who are there to help my husband and me whenever there is a need. My father-in-law is the one who looks after my children when I have to go to work during their vacations. I am also able to make social calls and fulfill social obligations because of the presence of my in-laws at home. Moreover, major responsibilities at home are borne by them which is why I am able to give myself the time to do my work and study.

I started working before I got married. Managing work and family when I was unmarried was not a problem at all. Since I lived with my parents there was not much familial obligations and domestic work was something I did according to my free will. Things changed after marriage. Although my in-laws never insisted that I do domestic chores yet a sense of guilt would creep in if I do not participate in everyday house work. Upon

introspection I think it was the way that I or rather we girls are socialized and brought up to see ourselves as principal managers of home. So, if we do not manage or look after the homes after marriage a sense of guilt engulfs us. The difference between my mother and me is that she accepted things unquestioningly while I often question the traditional gender roles, although, ultimately, I conduct myself as a “proper” wife or daughter-in-law, in conformity with the structured gender roles. The patriarchal socialization process has been so entrenched in me that I often find myself being pulled into that direction, forcing me to suppress my will to re-lay gender relations on egalitarian principle. Whenever there is a shortage of grocery at home, I take the blame on me considering it a management failure. We understand that family is not the only agency of socialization. Even when the family provides a liberal ambience, the people outside one’s immediate family, for example, the neighbours, friends and colleagues, who are also the active agents of patriarchal social order, would pull you into traditional roles.

However, one can see that things are changing for the better; the barriers of age-old patriarchal tradition, whereby men mature to dominate and a woman to serve is now being challenged. While the social order and its active agents would reduce women to subservience the latter would try to break free of all shackles. My mother and many women of her generation were true victims of this. The inroads made by many women in their battle for equality can, to a large extent, be credited to the education of both men and women. Working women have given a death blow to the notion that the male always the breadwinner and this has led to the questioning and challenging of other man-made skewed traditions.

References

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