

Everyday Life of the Working Mothers during Covid-19 Pandemic

Winkeyla Bhutia

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Sikkim
Government College, Burtuk, Gangtok

Abstract: *Following the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lock downs leading to the closure of schools and other forms of institutional support, the workload of the working mothers has been amplified owing to the persistence of traditional gender roles and with the blurring of the private-public sphere division. This has been reflected more in the life of the women in the teaching profession who had to realign themselves to learn new technologies to facilitate remote teaching and learning while simultaneously doing childcare and other domestic chores. The present paper is based on a study of the women teachers in Sikkim and their life during the Covid-19 lockdown. The participants in the study were identified through the snowball sampling. The qualitative data has been collected through in-depth interviews with 16 mothers engaged in the teaching profession in Sikkim.*

Keywords: Education, gender role, pandemic, work/life balance, women-teachers.

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns to manage it has thrown up a host of challenges in our everyday life (Naeim 2020). From our daily social interactions to our lifecycle rituals, rules that govern everyday life within a structured context have all been altered. One such transition has been in the way we manage paid work wherein many employees of various sectors had to make adjustments in their daily schedules and adopt “work from home (WFH)” approach. The education sector too had to transform itself from the traditional method of

face to face teaching and learning to distance learning mode (Augustus 2021).

This sudden shift in the mode of imparting education from the traditional face to face interaction mode to distance learning brought new challenges such as technological anxiety, technological illiteracy and technological accessibility as well as additional responsibilities and duties (Loziak et al. 2020). Another challenge posed was the increase in domestic roles and childcare responsibilities for women alongside the requirements of their workplace (Augustus 2021; Jakubowski and Sitko-Dominik 2021; Dogra and Kaushal 2021) leading to what has been termed as the triple burden. These challenges become more pertinent in a developing country like ours which is widely identified with patriarchal values and disproportionate distribution of gender roles and responsibilities. For instance, women are bound to perform various roles and duties that include child care, their education, and household chores etc. in addition to working full time (Augustus 2021). Therefore, for many working women in India, the pandemic has upset their work/life balance and affected their physical and mental health (Rajkumar 2020). Working longer hours because of the pandemic, juggling extra caregiving responsibilities as a result of pandemic-related consequences (i.e., school closures, caring for relatives etc.) while working full-time has made the working women struggle to maintain a work/life balance (Augustus 2021; Jakubowski and Sitko-Dominik 2021; Kara et al., 2021).

Sikkim, a northeastern state of India, is a multi-cultural society made up of the Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalis and a host of other ethnic communities. The communities largely operate within a patriarchal structure where the women are given the housework and caregiving responsibilities. With the increase in female literacy in the State one can find a rise in women employment. The education sector in Sikkim which includes schools of all levels and colleges has a high share of women teachers. In this paper an attempt has been made to investigate the changes and challenges experienced by women teachers in their everyday life during the pandemic and the lockdowns that was imposed in Sikkim since March 2020.

The study is qualitative in nature with the narrative analysis being employed and is based on the semi structured interview with 16 mothers working in different schools and colleges in Sikkim. The respondents for the study were selected through snowball sampling with the participants having a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience and who had school going children. Since the data collection took place during the lockdown period, interviews were held online over Google Meet platform. Questions were designed to delve into the experiences of working from home alongside other family and personal responsibilities amidst the lockdown. The consent from the participants was taken before conducting the interviews in June 2021, when Sikkim was still under lockdown.

Discussion and analysis

Since the pandemic began several studies have been conducted focusing on its effects on everyday life. Hjalmsdottir and Bjarnadottir (2021) in their study in Iceland revealed that the pandemic exposed the existence and persistence of uneven domestic division of labour within Icelandic homes despite the dominant discourse on the country being a global leader in gender equality. Likewise, Jasrotia and Meena's (2021) study on working women in India during the pandemic also states that a significant percentage of women continued to bear the bulk of household burden alongside professional work as a result of the stereotyped gender roles within a patriarchal set up. Associating child care and household roles to women alone reinforces Butler's idea that repetitions of gendered acts determine our notion of masculine or feminine identities. Therefore, to become signified in society, we are forced to perform our expected gender identities. In doing so we shape and perpetuate gender.

Studies (Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), Augustus (2020) and Kara et al. (2021)) conducted prior to the pandemic have indicated that the presence and the number of children in a household is a significant influencer in determining workload and role conflict. This has been amplified during the pandemic due to the closure of schools and paid childcare support (Jasrotia and Meena 2021, Hjalmsdottir and Bjarnadottir 202).

In light of this empirical study, the following sections will analyze the challenges as well as the positive impact of the newly introduced work from home scenario. The data analysis reveals four major themes: increased domestic responsibilities, realigning to the new mode of teaching, role conflict and family time.

The Covid-19 lockdown brought the children and parents to learn and teach from home which had an impact on the women's daily routines. Increase in work and familial duties with little or no support from other family members made it challenging for respondents to balance work and life. The undiminishing nature of the same routine being reproduced everyday added to the emotional and physical stress of the respondents. Paranoia was another factor the respondents spoke about. To illustrate the paranoia during the pandemic, one of the respondents who is mother to two primary school going children narrates:

I had to be extra careful as I have young children at home and my father-in-law is diabetic; I used to disinfect the door handles, light switches and would wash all items bought from outside. We were so scared of getting infected. By bedtime I would be so exhausted doing all the cleaning and washing through the day. The next day would be the same. There was no escape from the tight routine.

Unforeseen circumstances of a member falling ill or catching COVID-19 added stress to an already overburdened routine. Experiencing this form of mental stress during the COVID-19 pandemic was not only restricted to Sikkim but has also been addressed in studies by Rajkumar (2020) and Macintyre et al. (2020).

Furthermore, various studies (Loziak et al. 2020; Jakubowski and Sitko-Dominik 2021) have shown that the sudden shift to the "online mode" of teaching during the pandemic added anxiety and workload on the teachers. In Sikkim too the online mode of teaching was something completely new for the teacher respondents with a lot of them lacking the technical knowhow. This was further hampered by the erratic internet network in the hilly regions. Therefore, the experimental method with online teaching especially during the initial months of the lockdown was taxing and failed to give a sense of satisfaction to the teachers. A teacher commented:

Response to queries, confusion about timetable, staying connected during the class were problems i faced in the initial months. Some students complained that they did not have money to buy cell phone and internet.

Preparation for classes also changed because the respondents now had to create virtual study materials for the students while also learning and adapting to the new online teaching platform. The teachers also felt that online teaching failed to create any sort of enthusiasm or interest among the students as communication was difficult and one way based. A respondent commented: 'Students hid behind reasons like "camera not working" or poor internet connectivity.'

One teacher recounted her lived experience of the online class situation saying:

It was as if I was talking to the computer with no one else around or in the audience. So, taking classes online came to be monotonous and boring.

The blurring of private and public space and the overlapping of several gender roles and role differentiation proved to be difficult to achieve and affected the respondent's performance both at work and home. Flexibility associated with online classes in the study was seen as counterproductive as some of the teachers mentioned that it led to procrastination leading to work piling and creating stress for them.

Juggling housework alongside their own schoolwork and their children's schoolwork within the confines of one's home directed to what could be seen as the 'triple burden' for the respondents (Dogra and Kaushal 2021). Their own children too had to be monitored during their class hours as the environment at home lacked well framed regulations and rules regarding class conduct. Many of the respondents encouraged the children to watch the television or mobile phones so that they could take their own classes undisturbed.

Working women often see the workplace as an escape from the monotony of household drudgery. For many of the respondents going to work meant catching up and gossiping with friends and colleagues. On this, a respondent observed:

The part I miss the most during the lockdown is chatting and gossiping with my friends and colleagues in school.

But life became very monotonous with same routine being followed every day during the lockdown. This monotony often found manifestation in expression of anger and frequent arguments among family members.

While studies conducted during the pandemic highlighted challenges there were many positive aspects that were brought to light too. Some of the respondents in the study mentioned that they were able to spend more time with their family members when they started working from home. Similar findings were also reported from studies conducted by Sađlam (2020), Adisa, Aiyenitaju and Adekoya (2021). Another positive outcome of working from home was the extra money saved by the respondents, which otherwise would have been spent on travel, eating out, or shopping. The pandemic and the shift to online class also helped teachers in adopting software skills. One of the respondents said:

I had to learn how to make Power Points and how to create google documents. Now I have gained some confidence in working with computers, which was missing earlier.

Thus, the pandemic lockdown did feature certain benefits for the working mothers despite the increased workload and role conflict.

Conclusion

The pandemic created by COVID-19 virus has affected the life of the working women as their work burden intensified. The women teachers in Sikkim, who had to manage domestic work and family, had to make some severe adjustments at the cost of their physical and mental wellbeing. The respondents in the study were encumbered with housework, childcare, care of the elderly managing studies of their own children. These roles associated with women are identified as feminine and have been performed and repeated since such gender identities are suggested, constructed, internalized, and reproduced through social mechanisms as well as through normative dominant discourse

(Yaghoubi-Notash, Mohammad and Soufiani 2019). Women in these roles are often seen as 'doing' their gender correctly leading to what Butler terms as "cultural survival". The escalation of the workload of female employees during the COVID-19 outbreak as reported in this study finds consistency with studies conducted by Augustus (2020), and Del Boca et al. (2020) as well as in studies from Poland, Turkey, and United Kingdom. Work and domestic roles often overlapped leading to tension and conflict between the two.

Despite the difficulties faced during the lockdown some of the respondents highlighted positive outcomes wherein they got to spend time together as a family which otherwise was not possible because of the competing demands of paid work hours, housework, and the children's school hours. The lockdown also gave respondents the opportunity to save money which otherwise would be spent on commuting to work, shopping and eating out with friends. Some of the teachers in the study enhanced their computer skills as they learnt how to make power points, create google documents, virtual classrooms etc. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged as a health issue, impacted peoples' everyday lives in unexpected ways.

References

- Adisa, T. A., Opeoluwa Aiyenitaju, Olatunji David Adekoya, 2021. 'The work-family balance of British working women during the COVID-19 pandemic'. *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, 13 (2): 241-260. DOI 10.1108/JWAM-07-2020-0036 (accessed on 10 June, 2022 at 9:12 PM)
- Augustus, Jo, 2021. 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Working in Higher Education'. *Frontiers in Education*, 6: 648365. DOI: 10.3389/educ.2021.648365 (accessed on 11 Nov, 2021 at 12:11 PM)
- Boca, D., Noemi Oggero, Paola Profeta, Mariacristina Rossi, 2020. 'Women's work, housework and childcare, before and during COVID-19'. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 18: 1001-1017. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11150-020-09502-1#citeas> (accessed on 5 Dec, 2021 at 10:44 PM)

- Dogra, P., Kaushal, A., 2021. 'Underlying the triple burden effects on women educationists due to COVID-19'. *Education and Information Technologies*, 27 (1): 209-228. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10645-6> (accessed on 15th Nov, 2021 at 10:39 PM)
- Greenhaus, J.H. and Beutell, N.J., 1985. 'Sources of conflict between work and family roles'. *Academy of Management Review*, 10(1): 76-88. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.2307/258214> (accessed on 14 Nov, 2021 at 5:43 PM)
- Hjalmsdottir, A., & Bjarnadottir, V. S. (2021). "I have turned into a foreman here at home": Families and work-life balance in times of COVID-19 in a gender equality paradise. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28 (1): 268-283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12552> (accessed on 10th June, 2022 at 10.24 PM)
- Jakubowski, Tomasz Daniel and Magdalena Maja Sitko-Dominik, 2021. 'Teachers' mental health during the first two waves of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poland'. *PLoS ONE*, 16(9): e0257252. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257252>; (15th Nov, 2021 at 10.24 PM)
- Jasrotia Amithy and Jigyasa Meena, 2021. 'Women, work and pandemic: An impact study of COVID-19 lockdown on working women in India'. *Asian Social Work and Policy Review* No. 15: 282-291. DOI: 10.1111/aswp.12240 (accessed on 31st Jan, 2022 at 9:17 PM)
- Kara, S. B. K., D.Z Güne^o., B.^a. Tüysüzer, 2021. 'Work-Family Conflict During Working from Home Due to Pandemic: A Qualitative Research on Female Teachers'. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 13 (1): 251-273. ijci.wcci-international.org (accessed on 16th Nov, 2021 at 3.06 PM)
- Loziak, Alexander, Denisa Fedáková, and Radka Ěopková, 2020. 'Work-related Stressors of Female Teachers During Covid-19 School Closure'. *Journal of Women's Entrepreneurship and Education*, No. 3-4: 59-78. DOI: 10.28934/jwee20.34; (accessed on 15th Nov, 2021 at 9:53 PM)
- Macintyre, P. D., Tammy Gregersen and Sarah Mercer, 2020. 'Language teachers' coping strategies during the Covid 19 conversion to online teaching: Correlations with stress,

- wellbeing and negative emotions'. *System*, 94: 102352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102352>; (accessed on 17 Nov, 2021 at 10:11 PM)
- Naeim, Mahdi, 2020. 'Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak provides a unique platform to review behavioral changes in Iran'. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 51: 102090. DOI: 10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102090 (accessed on 17 Nov, 2021 at 9:23 PM)
- Rajkumar, R. P., 2020. 'COVID-19 and mental health: A review of the existing literature'. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 52: 102066. DOI: 10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102066 (accessed on 6 Jan, 2022 at 10:41 PM)
- Rana, R., Ridhi Sood, Sonali Bhardwaj, 2021. 'Women and children's well-being in Indian nuclear families during the COVID-19 pandemic'. *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society*, 2(2): 178-193. DOI: 10.37291/2717638X.202122108 (accessed on 15 January, 2022 at 11:13 PM)
- Saðlam, H.Ý., 2020. 'Covid-19 Pandemic Through the Eyes of Witnesses: An Oral History Study'. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 7 (12): 1-19. DOI:10.46827/ejes.v7i12.3383 (accessed on 16th Nov, 2021 at 3:19 PM)
- Salih, Sara, 2007. 'On Judith Butler and Performativity'. http://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~alexroni/IPD2020/IPD2020%20No.2/Salih-Butler-Performativity-Chapter_3.pdf (accessed on 31st Dec, 2021 at 11:33 AM)
- Udin, Mahi, 2021. 'Addressing work life balance challenges of working women during COVID 19 in Bangladesh'. *International Social Science Journal*, 71(239-240): 7-20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.12267> (accessed on 4 Jan, 2022 at 1:42 PM)
- Yaghoubi-Notash, Massoud, Vahid Nejad Mohammad and Mahmoud Soufiani, 2019. 'Language, gender and subjectivity from Judith Butler's perspective'. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 13(28): 2423-4419. <http://www.philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir/> (accessed on 6th Jan, 2022 at 12.09 AM)