

# Women at Work and Men at Home: A Transition for Sustainable Development

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**Abstract:** The issue of women empowerment has picked up a great attention and pace in the recent years. Women stepped out of the homes and started working although they continue to juggle between paid work and unpaid work at workplace and home respectively. Even as workplaces for women have increasingly become promotive of their professional and personal development through provision of policies such as work from home, flexible shifts, maternity entitlements among others there is still time when inclusion of all women in the workforce and inclusion of all men in the “home-force” is achieved. Families have started placing value to women’s education and employment, instead of limiting them to only home-boundaries. However, it is essential to understand the ground reality. Are we in a position to say that employment is synonymous to empowerment? As women have stepped out of home in large numbers, have men stepped inside the home in an appreciable manner? This paper attempts to talk about such pressing issues, which even though not talked about seriously, confront women today.

**Keywords:** development, empowerment, gender-roles, inclusion, patriarchy.

## 1. Introduction

Women in India have seen many ups and downs in terms of their survival and status. Across the country people can be seen worshipping Goddesses, signifying the power and strength of women; though there seems to be a great divide between the respect of female in the guise of a Goddess and the female as a woman. Here, the point at which our attention is drawn is not the long-talked aspect of getting women out of their homes, but its aftermaths. What really happens when a woman, who occupies a responsible place at home, goes out to study or work? And

are there any mechanisms to balance out the work at home in order to support her (woman’s) working out.

Empowerment of women necessarily means giving power to women. A paper by UN Women’s Global Compact (2010) defines empowerment as a situation wherein ‘people - both women and men - can take control over their lives: set their own agendas, gain skills (or have their own skills and knowledge recognised), increase self-confidence, solve problems, and develop self-reliance. It is both a process and an outcome’. Another interesting statement from the same source defines gender equality as, ‘it (gender equality) means that the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same, *but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born female or male.*’

There are two things that stand out as important parameters of studying women and empowerment. First, the words marked in italics are of extreme value to us as they signify the aspect that one’s gender will not determine the way one will have his/her rights and opportunities, and thus the term used is ‘equality’. Second, if the two definitions of empowerment and gender equality are matched, it will become evident that the male counterpart of gender is somehow able to manifest his rights, opportunities, if not completely but to a great extent, especially in a patriarchal society like India, but how this is applicable to the women is worrisome. The misty issue of women empowerment therefore struggles to find an appropriate place in a male-dominated society.

## 2. Working Women: Dual Responsibility

Amidst the joy and happiness of a woman who goes out and works, there lies a huge burden of taking care of both home and job. The quality of being a care-giver is

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commonly associated with feminine counterpart in our society. And that which is inherent and spontaneous to a particular gender may not be classified and categorised as a specialised skill. Because “paid work” happens only when the worker possesses desired and not easily available skillset therefore, care-work at home is seldom accounted for as real work. This inattention towards the real work in the guise of duty, provided by females at home, continue to strengthen the boundaries of gender roles (Bhasin and Khan, 2014). Looking from the developmental perspective, one can understand that when girls in the family are brought up to become women who provide for care to each individual in the family as and when the need arises, boys have other preoccupations with evolving self. As a result, “males tend to have difficulty with relationships while females have problems with individualism” (Gilligan, 1982).

Urban woman has entered the corporate world and taken up managerial roles, yet the age-old image of a woman being a home-maker has not changed much. Even if she works, comes home tired/ has to leave early for office; she is expected to cook food, take care of kids and perform all other household duties and the male counterparts may volunteer but they hold no responsibilities. Women workers have to handle persecutions at their work place, sometimes just overlook things to ensure that their job is not jeopardized in anyway. Many Indian families are still living as joint families along with the parents and in-laws. This adds to their stress further because they have to please all the family members of her husband, listen to the complaints made against her and lend a deaf ear towards most of this. Overall, majority of women in India look towards or ‘live in the hope that things will change’ (Arab et al., 2015).

Valuing such attributes, a girl’s training so as to say in this context, will be aimed at making her a polite, humble and compassionate daughter-in-law who understands her responsibilities well. ‘The danger of such a possibility indirectly monitors the girl’s behaviour towards that which is socially approved because she is brought up to view marriage as the major goal in life’ (Sharma, 1996).

There is an urgent need to diffuse gender roles at home as ‘the ‘family’ in its nuclear form has been a major site for the subjugation of women where roles of men and women are defined rigidly’ (Mitra, 2015). Men and women of the family have to make way for each other to step in the unknown territories for sustainable development and gender equality. It is not right to keep men outside the kitchen, just as it is not right to keep women inside the kitchen when they have already forayed into the world of

paid-work. All one can wish is, that this hope is kept alive amidst the patriarchy that exists.

‘Linked to this system (patriarchy), is the ideology that men are superior to women, that women are a part of men’s property. In some South Asian languages, for example, the words used for husband are *swami*, *shauhar*, *pati malik*, - all of which mean “lord” or “owner” (Bhasin, 2014). As a result of the patriarchal set up, the social context of development for both men and women is altered in such a way that “it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex, it is the masculine values that prevail” (Gilligan, 1982).

### 3. Home-Maker or Working Woman?

The noun “homemaker” provides a tinge of activity, control and function to the earlier commonly used term “house-wife” for a married woman who does not work outside home. The shift in the language can be perceived at two levels. First, from house - brick and mortar building to home - composed of people living together under one roof joined by common needs and interests. The second, from being wife, “*swaamini*” or “*patni*” to an active agent of change, capable of “making” passive to active homemaker works at home, for home. This probably comes from the notion that by providing care to the family members at crucial periods of their lifetime, she is “making the home”.

Further, the current trend of working-homemakers calls for addition to the existing terminology describing women at home and at work. It is then circumstantial and important for a woman to decide her priorities, being first a working woman and then a home-maker or the reverse. Not to forget, her role as a mother, if she is one, which demands her complete attention, which is both a blessing and a responsibility. In the patriarchal context, how she is conceived as a mother is also a matter of who she mothers, a son or a daughter. The mother of a son, can assert more powers in the family, in comparison to if she were mother of a daughter (Sharma, 1996).

One can go around hearing such statements where the first quality emphasised of a girl or woman would be her cooking skills, not her intellect, education or knowledge. A famous quote says, ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’, and obviously, who is going to make this way, a woman; although we discuss very little on how to make way to a woman’s heart. It is not fundamentally wrong for women to learn to cook, but why only they, it could be anyone, any person could sometime in life fall short of resources and is bound to cook, not only a female.

Cooking food, therefore is a life skill essential for all human beings regardless of which gender they belong to.

The global scenario is progressively inclusive for women workforce, as the findings from ILO Report 2016 has affirmed, “The largest increase in women’s employment in the services sector may be seen in Eastern Asia, where over the last 20 years the share of women employed has increased from 32.7 to 77.0 per cent” (ILO, 2016). While in India, decline in the female labour force participation rate, from 35% in 1990 to 27% in 2016, has been recorded.

#### 4. Men as Home-Makers

Men at home or rather men as home-makers is the second and an equally important aspect of this paper. It is difficult for people to appreciate the fact that a particular man helps his wife or mother in household chores. Also, many mothers would be delighted to see their sons-in-law helping their daughters in household work, but the same mothers would be ashamed of their sons if they display such a gesture for their own wives. Bhasin (2014) reflects upon this behaviour and questions if only men are patriarchal. If yes, then what should we call women who continue to maintain the status quo. Can this behaviour by women be a by-product of social conditioning in a patriarchal system or a result of confusion arising out of conflict of interests, or both. As a society it is very important to take note of such anti-women women or rather anti-women-development women. This is so because when they become mothers, it is likely that they will teach their sons the principles of patriarchy, dominance and power of being a man.

In one of the interviews *Sadhguru*, a spiritual visionary, answers the question raised by a woman on how to deal with an exploitative husband, with the solution that all the mothers should raise sons to respect women, not only women at their home but women in society at large (Sadhguru, 2014). From a socio-cultural perspective, the home environment is a significant teacher for a developing individual, thereby a boy witnessing/observing his father supporting his mother, will grow up to be a man supportive of his wife and her decisions. One of the world’s most powerful businesswomen, PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi’s husband called it a day and took over as the newly appointed homemaker. Not every woman however shares the same pedestal.

Pakistani-American author Jabeen Akhtar feels, “Only among the upper-middle class and liberal-arts educated couples can such a setup function without a social stigma. Also, with men, house husbandry is a short-term fix. They

cannot forgo their careers forever to raise children.” According to her, the patriarchal grip has not dissolved completely. Though there are now some cases where one hears that father, not mother, quits her job for raising children, but we lag far behind in making such practice a norm. It is important that father be actively engaged in the caregiving processes of children to ensure the well-being of the family.

#### 5. Gender Equality: An SDG and MDG Focus

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were the eight international development goals that were established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, after the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. These were to be accomplished by the year 2015. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), believed to be extension of MDGs, have incorporated the dimensions of social, economic and most importantly, environmental development. The United Nations (UN), defines sustainable development as, ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.

Gender equality as a goal to achieve sustainable development has remained unchanged from the conceptualisation of MDGs in September 2000 to drafting of SDGs in September 2015. The third MDG reads as ‘Promote gender equality and empower women’ and the fifth and the tenth SDG are ‘Gender equality’ and ‘Reduced inequalities’ respectively. Promoting the rights of women and ensuring gender equality has been highlighted in both these breakthrough movements, that strongly advocates the fact that to ensure development of the nations and sustainability of environment, we need women to have equal rights as men. This is crucial as women’s socially ascribed responsibility for the management of natural resources such as water and fuel means they are more adversely affected as resources continue to become scarce.

In the context of making women in-charge of the resources and self-reliant, it becomes necessary that they are able to have a say in how resources are maintained and used. But, due to limited realisation of their rights and greater responsibility, women become more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change. Moreover, women’s lack of access to land, agricultural technologies and financial capital hinders opportunities to diversify their livelihoods or increase resilience in the face of climate change. Tackling the underlying social norms which limit women’s access to social and economic resources - such as land and financial capital - will be key

to implementing gender-responsive climate change measures (OECD, n.d.).

The situation is even grimmer for working women struggling to make both ends meet at the home-front. It will be insignificant to talk about gender equality without considering households below poverty line for various reasons such as rural-urban-migration, illiteracy, to name a few. Such households, where women have to become breadwinners as well as caregivers to their young children have to combat different set of challenges while working mostly in the unorganised sector (Swaminathan, 1985). Contextualising lives of working women in a weaker socio-economic background, Sobti (2009) opines, 'women have to perform the role of wage earner and home maker; since they have little time, they do not want to bargain for better conditions. Being untrained and illiterate, they are not able to keep pace with modernisation and skill requirements'.

In the same vein, rural women of poor households (whether male- or female- headed) bear primary responsibility for family subsistence, when it is also true that they are not equipped to fulfill this responsibility owing to unequal sharing of household resources. Further, the situation worsens due to rural women's unequal access to earning opportunities and to agricultural land, and the decline in common property resources and forests dedicated to development activities (Agarwal, 1989).

It has also been noted that rural women have lesser job mobility due to their primary and often sole responsibility for childcare, among other reasons: "the ideology of female seclusion, and the vulnerability to caste/class-related sexual abuse...confinement to casual work in agriculture, only men being hired as permanent labourers—a feature that appears to be related, among other things, to the need for permanent workers to substitute for family men in ploughing, in market transactions (buying inputs, selling products), and in night operation? (irrigation, guarding crops), that is, in work from which women tend to get socially excluded... lower payments often even for the same tasks, made possible by the ideological assumptions (usually shared by both employers and workers) that women's earnings are supplementary to the family or that women are less productive than men, and by the lack of unionization among female workers" (Agarwal, 1989).

Social recognition of women's work as productive and important is crucial for sustainable development. In general, agricultural fieldwork is physically more visible than home-based work, as also the paid-work than, for

instance the 'no cost' collection of fuelwood, fodder, or water. Apparently, for rural households such paid work takes up a higher social valuation (Agarwal, 1989).

### **6. Inclusive Development: The Way Forward**

Vivekananda had rightly voiced, "that country and that nation which does not respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future". Historically, women have been suppressed, underestimated and valued less in the society and also within their families, especially those facing the odds of socioeconomic inequality and exclusion by virtue of belonging to a particular social class or caste. Though this is changing but not at the pace that it should. It goes without saying that sustainable development is impossible without improving the status of women. Such a change will be catalyzed by various factors including wider social recognition of their work both inside and outside the home, as productive and valuable.

In every family, women are made to sacrifice their aspirations and ambitions for their household and give up their desires for the sake of her husband's wishes. Even in educated and progressive households, women may seem to run the household and be on the forefront of running errands, but in reality, they have no decision-making power. They might want something but if their husbands' views differ, ultimately the latter's word is the final word (Das, 2012).

A positive environment in the family in terms of acceptability of differences and unconditional regard and care for females makes them confident and makes them positively oriented towards their lives. On the other hand, families that impose strict restrictions and high expectations on their daughters makes them develop a negative perception about themselves (Virmani, 2011). As the first institution of development, family play a critical role in empowering women. Equity, thus, is required more than equality; men should not feel offended that it is the women's rights which is given more attention, but should understand that it is so because women do not actually enjoy what they deserve.

Respect, though a small word, has very serious connotations. Respect is what is the need of the hour; respect for a home-maker, respect for a working woman. This essential back and forth home and work transition for both men and women, requires mutual understanding and intent to be companions in the sustainable development journey. There is an urgent need to change this deep-seated belief regarding the economic-psychological arrangement of families in a society where 'behind every

successful man there is a woman', and must have more men saying that beside every successful person, there's another supportive person, regardless of the gender dichotomy. It requires each person to adopt a gender-neutral approach to perceive the two realms - the home - making business and engagement in paid work, outside home. As a society, we must come to an understanding that development will only happen if there is cooperation between man and woman, and not competition.

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