



STRANGULATED WOMEN: WOMEN IN BETWEEN FAMILY AND PUBLIC SPACE IN THE SOUTH INDIAN STATE OF KERALA

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ABSTRACT :

Women are strangulated between expectations in family and pressures of their role in the public space. Once exposed to the public space at various capacities as employees and others, they have to grapple with role expectations of two domains of their lives: family and public space. This suffocation impacts their social world in tremendous ways, often detrimental to their sociability, opportunities, excellence in their public role as well health. In the traditional division of labour existing in the society, women are considered as protector of the family and responsible house makers. But socio economic changes have altered the traditional preoccupation of women with family and women began to appear in the public domain. Consequently women have to travel between two worlds, i.e., the private domain, which is her socially constructed natural place and public domain. How women adjust to their life responsibilities is a socially relevant question which needs to be explored. This paper is an attempt to understand whether the entry of women in the public domain has made any changes in their domestic responsibilities or their private life carry any impact on the excellence on the respective industry in which they find themselves on the public space.



KEYWORDS : *Division of Labour, Public Space, Patriarchy, Family, Strangulation .*

INTRODUCTION:

Family is one of the most dominant social institutions, which has a critical role in deciding a woman's life choices. Women's preoccupation with family is largely been considered as the greatest obstacle in the way of realizing women's emancipation. In the traditional division of labour existing in the society, women are considered as the sole repository of the values being attributed to the institution of the family and responsible for its maintenance and preservation. But socio-economic changes have altered the traditional preoccupation of women with family and women began to appear in the public domain. Consequently women have to travel between two worlds, i.e., the private domain, which is her socially constructed natural place and public domain. What happens to the traditional division of labour in the private domain consequent to their public visibility is question that generated serious academic discussions. Women's location in the family becomes problematic when women take up additional responsibility outside their domestic space. Women's entry in the public sphere is considered as an indicator of their empowerment. But for women, consequent to their entry in to the public space they have to manage both the domestic and public space. Without making any significant changes in the division of labour existing, a real dilemma for

women will arise whereby they have to travel two worlds. Even though there is a wide hue and cry over increasing the participation of women in the public domain, the power relationship and division of labour existing in the domestic realm is critical in deciding the public performance and real democratization of society.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This paper is worked up on the contradictions of the lives of women in the south Indian state of Kerala, which is famous for the highly acclaimed Kerala model of development in which the place had comparatively higher indicators of social development in terms of literacy, health care, and others. The state is also being acclaimed as a better state for women's development and also ahead of other states in terms of women's literacy, sex ratio, and life expectancy (Census-2011). However, a deeper exploration in to the social architecture in the state of Kerala will give a totally contrasting picture, which stands square opposite to what is being hailed about the state (Erwér, Monica, 1999, 2003, Mukhopadhyay, 2007). Monica Erwer (1999 and 2003), from for example, has noticed a discrepancy which she described as gender paradox in the empowerment of Kerala women. This related to the near invisibility of Malayalee women in public realm, especially in the corridors of power. Scholars like Devika (2012, 2013) Devika and Bineetha (2012) Saradamani (1999, 2006) Eapen and Kodoth (2002) and Mukhopadhyay (2007) also chipped in with similar studies which were critical of the failure of the so-called 'Kerala Model of Development' in empowering women. These studies established the grim reality that women in the state had merely assumed new roles without successfully questioning the ideologically and socially constructed inequality of the system in which they found themselves. As a result women's voices are marginalized within various masculinist practices. An analysis of women's place in the various social institutions such as family is essential to get a holistic picture of the whole scenario.

Women are still in the old world where they have to grapple with realities of patriarchal expectation. Hence a woman in the state getting presence in the public place or work place doesn't necessarily means empowered. Behind the veiled picture of working women, they are strangulating between household chores expected of women in a patriarchal set up and demands of their work places.

THEORETICAL SURVEY

The location of women in the family and its impact on marginalizing women over the years has been a widely researched topic. Studies of this kind emphasized the unequal position of women in family due to the division of labour set out by the society. For instance the radical feminist assumption that personal is political directs one to look at the everyday life of women and the power relationship in the family settings (Lee, 2007). Frederic Engels in his classic work on *Origin of Family Private Property and the State* traces the way in which women's subordination consequent to the emergence of private property and the how they were taken away from the productive public sphere. He observes that if women carry out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties (Engels, 1884/2010). Nancy Fraser (1985) observes that the household like the paid work force is a site of labour which is un recognized and un remunerated, which is the basis of women's subordination. The difficulty of women who come to the public productive sphere was narrated by Arlie Hochschild's in her work, *The Second Shift* (1989) . It narrates the situation of women who came to the public domain has to carry out twin responsibilities of public and private domain and she observes that women has to work two shifts ,the first shift of paid labour and second shift of unpaid house work. Similarly in another study done in India by Abdul Gani and Roshan Ara (2010) emphasized that women are struggling to reconcile dual burden of two roles- domestic work and role at work place, because each one is a almost like a full time job. All these studies sheds light on the fact that unequal division of labour existing in the family become serious when women take up responsibilities outside the domestic space. Because of the reluctance on the part of society

to democratize the domestic space, the domestic realm became a serious site of struggle for women is a serious site of struggle for women to get liberated.

The visibility of women in the public domain in Kerala increased over the years. Kerala had a rich tradition of social reform movements in which women participated significantly. But there were serious apprehensions on the part of feminist scholars who raised serious reservations regarding the failure of reform movements in touching the power relationship and family, which continues to limit women's strategic life choices. (Geetha, 2006; Devika and Thampi, 2012; Chandrika, 1998).

Now women in Kerala came to the public domain through different avenues. Even though, political parties are reluctant to open up their spaces to women by giving their deserved representation, women are involving in activities of political parties albeit symbolically. Besides this, one can also see women in civil society activism, as representatives of three-tier Panchayati Raj system and as also a part of professional life. Even though the labour participation rate of women in Kerala is low compared to their educational achievement, Kerala is not a place where women confines to their private spaces. Their entry in to the public domain necessitates a serious academic question to what extent the public appearance of women made changes in to the private domain. Whether any changes in their responsibilities in the private domain consequent to their entry in the public domain in different roles as workers ,activists , by transgressing the traditional gender norms .Whether they get a new different identity from those imposed on them by the society .

The role of family in a woman's life has two different phases-one that is before marriage and after marriage. In reality the before marriage phase is a process of conditioning. The socialization and the ideological indoctrination that woman has to go through in her parental family is a preparedness for taking up the role of a domestic being. The author being a teacher working in the northern part of Kerala has plethora of examples to validate this idea and many students are compelled to get out of the stream of education because of early marriages. So society has not transformed much to realize the individuality and identity of women as a distinct individual having their own aspirations and dreams .Even the new generations of young students are always has to leave their dreams because of the emotional compulsions of the family. It is evident from the informal interactions with the students studying both in the undergraduate and post graduate stream that family expectations control them more than their own career aspirations

After marriage women has to leave their parental family and their future life is shifted to a very unfamiliar circumstances and this also has its repercussions in the career and educational prospects of an individual woman. Even the educated stratum of society believes that the primary duty of a woman after marriage is to look after the family and doing the domestic chores. If one listens to the casual talk even among the very educated section of society on marriage it can be proved very easily. The issue becomes problematic to women who are employed or those who take up any role in the public realm. It is problematic because such women has to carry out two tasks i.e., both the private and public tasks.

METHODOLOGY

The data required for this study is collected from a survey of hundred women who are in the public domain in various capacities as employed women and women who are working with Panchayati Raj institutions. The respondents were taken from the various places in the state of Kerala where a cross section of caste, religion, region as well educational status co-mingles. The women were surveyed on the basis of unstructured questionnaires. In order to get a context specific understanding of women's positioning, the women were given the freedom to speak their viewpoints rather than directing them to any pre conceived theoretical expositions. The observation during the field study is the crux of this article.

ANALYSIS

The women surveyed responded that family as an institution is necessary for a woman. Eighty percent of the surveyed women observed that family is essential for their existence and survival. Family has

been recognized as a social institution which provides women with a social acceptance. The women are supporting the institution of family in some way or the other. For some, it provides emotional security, and for others it a shelter for women in the old age and for others the social acceptance getting out of being in a family.

But the surveyed women also expressed their dissatisfaction over the power relations existing in the family. Many of them are critical insiders sharing their serious reservations on the kind of life a woman has to live in a family system. In the words of a school teacher having the age of 47 years, her serious objections to the women's situatedness in family was apparent. She observes that women and men are equal; making women a house wife and forcing her to stay at home is nothing short of exploiting women. Making women a house wife and forcing her to stay at home is nothing short of exploiting women. To her, the preoccupation with the family never permits her to enjoy her work. The existing family system is male dominated and women suffer a lot from it. Women folks are not enjoying personal liberty in its true sense. The family system should ensure 'true love'; she also narrated the plight of women who has to carry out both the domestic roles and public roles. As women, simultaneously handling job and family matters are highly difficult. Up to an extent I am able to do my job; however, sometimes the family matters create a lot of hurdles before us. Women are not getting leisure time or any sort of entertainment when they are dealing with both job and family matters. The working women's' subconscious mind is getting troubled with lot of anxieties caused by double workload of job and family.

Similarly a school teacher having the age of twenty seven also expressed her helplessness and struggle in the family life. She described how she has to compromise her dream of becoming a college teacher due to marriage. In her opinion the most difficult thing for a woman is live in husband's home after marriage, which is not a comfortable place to follow women's ambitions and aspirations. Besides the preoccupation with familial responsibilities make her difficult to enjoy her profession. She also finds it difficult to adjust her professional life and personal responsibilities, which made her life very stressful. She strongly believes that husband should share domestic works and next generation needs to change. Similar stories were also expressed by the surveyed women.

Besides, the interactions with the respondents also points towards the real dilemma of a women coming in to the public domain. The respondents described the real dilemma of carrying out their responsibilities in the private and public domain. They are responsible for looking after two different life worlds in which the social expectations of a wife and mother and the role expectations in the public domain comes in to conflict with each other. Sometimes they have to decide which their priority is. Consequently they end up not as good women or a good professional or public figure. So this points to another fact of stress in their life. It reveals a reality that the real situation of women cannot be simply judged by their visibility in the public domain but invisibility of their real suffering because of the reluctance of private role division to change.

Throughout the fieldwork, the author has come across many such instances in which the mental conflict and dilemma of articulated employed women. Such women have economic independence at least in the technical sense of the term, but hardly any 'life' within the family as it is vitiated by personal conflicts and the gendered power relations which offer legitimacy to male dominance. For these women, despite having financial security family life has little to offer them in terms of self esteem, personal support or even a peaceful life inside. For many of them only motive to continue with the alliance is the future of children. All these point towards the fact that even when there is a high degree of romanticisation about the family in Kerala, a section of women continue with it more because of emotional bondage and social realities than the emotional support , self esteem and comfort it offers.

But on the other side of the spectrum there are women who are completely submissive and not able to understand the power relations existing in the family. For them, it is quite normal for women to do domestic responsibilities and find anything discriminatory in it. They consider their job only a means of getting an income. Such women are ready to give up job if there family wanted them to do so. For them family is their first priority everything else even their individuality is secondary. In fact the opinion on this

issue remained fragmented. As already mentioned, on the one side of the spectrum are those who have internalized the ideology of subordination within the family and hence have accepted the same as taken for granted. The women come to this category never understand or question the gender bias in the family or society and they were never able to realize the power equations existing in the family. For them, family is everything, and also having the opinion that family should be the first priority of women.

Another observation from the field is that even though a section of women are capable of understanding how discriminatory the family and their social position, they are not able to resist it. They continue with the reality. Women living in a culture of silence. Individual women offer their resistance in their own way but they generally confirms to the patriarchal reality. The fact of the matter is that their lack of resistance is not because of their own inability to understand the power relationship, but because of their practical realities discourages them from doing so.

This fact of democratic deficit is also reflected in their responses about the prevalence of gender equality within the family. To a question on that, most of the answers were negative. Some women haven't even thought about such a notion in relation to the family. This means that to them inequality is a fact of life, just like they feel the earth under their feet and wind against their face. This is so in many cases in which women are gainfully employed also. This means that their economic independence has not translated into equality.

Significantly, even while the majority of women are not at ease with gender relations within the family, the fact of the matter is that, except a minority others remain reluctant to air such views publicly or join women's movement which stands for bettering their status. As stated earlier, partly this is due to the fear of being let down by the near relatives if they do so and also due to the fear of social backlash, both for themselves and for their natal families. However, the most important reason for this is their negative socialization right from their childhood days onwards as a result of which they have internalized all these as legitimate.

The author's interaction with respondents made the reality of the real dilemma facing educated and right conscious women in Kerala. On the one side the exposure to education and economic self sufficiency of women created a category of women who value their identity and individuality and having the desire to lead a dignified life. But on the other side a society which celebrates idealized domesticity, which is reluctant to accept women individuality. An empowered woman has to travel in between these two conflicting world views. This is the real problematic of empowered women in Kerala, which claims to have a progressive social space. as a result of the social acceptance of idealized domesticity ,women has to leave behind their individuality and co-opts to this concern The dilemma of an empowered women with modern thinking and a society which value the traditional role division in society is a real problematic. As long as the social acceptance of traditional practices in marriage and family remains in eth society, this will get complicated and this will lead to corresponding mental illness among women.

CONCLUSION

One conclusion from the study is the 'dangerous' grip of family as a social institution in the life of women. Unlike men, the larger society in the state has put the responsibility of maintaining the cultural domain over the women. This role of women as inventory of cultural space is being cultivated through the institution of family. At the same time, those women who are in the public space has to come up with the demands of the trade in which they are in the public space, where as they are also performing the role of the celebrated guardian of the cultural domain which is being institutionalized through the family. Here, women are performing both the roles without compromising any roles being put up on them. Hence, strangulation, a concept used in this paper argues that women are really grappling with their everyday pressures of family and public space in the state of Kerala.

It continues to exist in the existing format because of women's own internalistaion of their primary role in the family. Those who are critical of the lack of democratization in the family are also not ready to challenge it because of the idealization of family in the society. Idealization of marriage and family and the

collectivized interest of community and the family can be seen as restricting women from seeking their individual self fulfillment. So, women prefer to be inside family rather than to invite the possible consequences of coming out of it. Besides family still remains as an institution which in some way or other provides women with emotional security.

Consequent to the entry of women in to the employment and subsequent economic security, they are breaking the traditional role assumptions of the society. But, it is also found that their entry in to the public domain has not helped them to challenge the unequal power relations in the domestic space. This also points towards the grip of cultural practices in limiting the influence of economic autonomy in realizing women's emancipation. Gender inequality is embedded in a series of other systemic inequalities and economic problem is only one among them. This means that unlike all other subaltern social groups, the situation of women is very complex. This point towards the immediate need of democratization of family so as to make women relieved of the double work. This also necessitates the serious intervention of government to provide mechanism in the working places and public assistance for child care.

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