

Women professionals' attitudes towards motherhood and employment: A case study

by

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been increasing focus on the question of how working mothers balance motherhood and employment. This paper seeks to examine how far these working mothers achieved and exercised this balance in relation to the child care as well as their understanding about this process. This idea is drawn between accounts of 'preference' and 'gendered morality'. This argument is illustrated by one case study; six female doctors in the public health and one Director of health sector. This purposive sample represents four Sinhalese, one Tamil and one Muslim mother to compare and contrast their different views and experiences about the motherhood and employment. This research reveals that mothers make morally and socially based decisions about what behaviour is right and proper, and these decisions can vary availability of different opportunities and different constraints rather than free choice. I conclude that these professionals are less capacity to achieve balanced life, and such combinations lead more problematic life.

Key words: women's education, formal labour, working mother, employed mother, modern society

Introduction

The proportion of mothers in full time employment is continuously increasing in Sri Lanka. The pre-existing cultural system was also more favourable in Sri Lanka to women's education and formal labour force participation than elsewhere in Asia. For example, by 1911, 10% of females were literate, second only to Japan, and several women doctors were recorded in 1900, while there were absent in Europe (Jayawardana, 1986, Marecek, 2000 and Therborn, 2004). Even at present, literacy, life expectancy, and morality rates are well above comparable with the developing countries in the South Asian Region (Human Development Report, 2004). Compared to other countries in Asian Region the women in Sri Lanka had a head start in the field of education and achievements in women suffrage although they have existed and continue to exist in a situation of subordination to men (Jayawardana, 1986). On the other hand, in a multi religious country like Sri Lanka, Buddhism, as a major religion, does not overtly discriminate women but allow them to mix equally with men (Karunaratne, 1999). And gendered social norms have contributed to the quality of life of women as well. This situation was significantly changed with the introduction of free education in 1945, introduction of more liberalized economic policies in 1977 and attitudinal changes of people.

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In effects, in 2006, male labour forces participation rate was fluctuating around 65% against the female participation rate fluctuating around 35% (Labour force survey, 2006). This composition shows a more satisfactory trend of women's formal labour force participation than in other countries in the region, namely, in India by 2001, 25% of women were employed in the labour force, compared to 75% of men (India economy and employment statistics). In Sri Lanka, this satisfactory expansion of female participation is particularly marked for professional and managerial jobs mostly in the service sector as teachers, nurses, secretaries and doctors. These service sector occupations have been created as feminised jobs; therefore, women's employment participation is overwhelmingly concentrated in the service industry from managerial level to unskilled labour level. It is also interesting to note that within the last quarter of the twentieth century, women's representation in the higher occupational ranks, administrative or managerial, increased from just 7.5% to 23.6% and, similarly professional jobs showed an increase from 11.1% in 1975 to 28.4% in 2002 (Department of census, 2002). This particular growing trend pushed women more favourably in formal labour market because of a 'caring' image of women but, that avoid by the men. For example, women account for 68% of employees in the health and 67% in the education sector, but just 36% in the banking sector. In turn, this development seems to have fed back into the cultural system, where women, particularly mothers became both more culturally valued, and more assertive, as workers. As a consequence, public and private sector employers have recognized and focused on women's potential role as wives, mothers and workers.

Motherhood is a complex concept which culturally negotiated, economically patterned and socially constructed phenomenon (Duncan, 2002). Therefore, mothers' decisions about combining motherhood and employment, still involve responsibility for their children as primary concern. At the same time there are many developments, from washing machine to fast foods to disposable nappies, to make domestic work easier. Therefore, working mothers' domestic working hours has been a reduced. But, still women spend most of their adult working-age life in child bearing and child/elder caring (Crompton, 1998). This leads to create work-family conflicts than their counterparts although men do more caring work than early.

Employment and mothering are presented as the two worlds of employed mothers. Entering the work force for whatever the reason does not mean that women can escape their responsibilities at home. This remarkable growth of women's participation in the labour force is one of the major trends which push women to redefine themselves especially, attitudes to their family responsibilities. Therefore, the changes in women's employment patterns have redesigned their motherhood roles to meet new needs. Different women, in different social groups, seem to have achieved the redesign in different ways. For example, the average age of marriage has been risen in educated women, the house hold size has been declined and limited to one or two children, some remain childless or just have one child late in life. These different ways of redesigned motherhood patterns have not only been changed individual life patterns, but also have been changed society at last. In this vein, some claim that there are wider, and deleterious, social effects from such conflict; for example, mother's employment might lead to a loss of local community because they do not have the time to devote to maintaining family life and husband, friend and neighbor relations (Etzioni, 1995, and Edwards, 2004:2). On the other hand one might equally argue that mothers' employment can increase satisfaction and well being, not only for the women

in question, but also for their families (greater resources, role model for children) and for communities where the stock of social and human capital is increased and more widely socially distributed (Duncan, 1999 and Perrons et al, 2006). But, issues are remaining; on what grounds, and in what ways, is this responsibility exercised and achieved. Thus, it would be pertinent to investigate how professional women combine motherhood with paid work? How do they balance employment and household work? Also this study explores how do respondents understand this combination according to their experiences?

Materials and Methodology

To do this exercise, this study utilizes both approaches, intensive and extensive research design. Each research design has its own strength and weakness (Duncan and Edwards, 1999). Extensive, quantitative methods, partly superior but weak for explanations (such as, numbers and percentages) are hard to reveal meaningful data as to why some educated mothers stay at home rather than doing full-time employment. Against this, intensive- qualitative methods make an unnecessary claim in the description and exploration of the social world. For example, too much of complex data will be available for mother's decisions. To avoid above stated problems this research employs triangulation of research design; some parts of the research are qualitative - intensive research (in depth interviews, observations) and others are quantitative (surveys) in an extensive manner. Therefore, the combination of those two research designs will offer better understanding about social actions, attitudes and ideologies, in particular to understand the working mother's decisions about motherhood and employment.

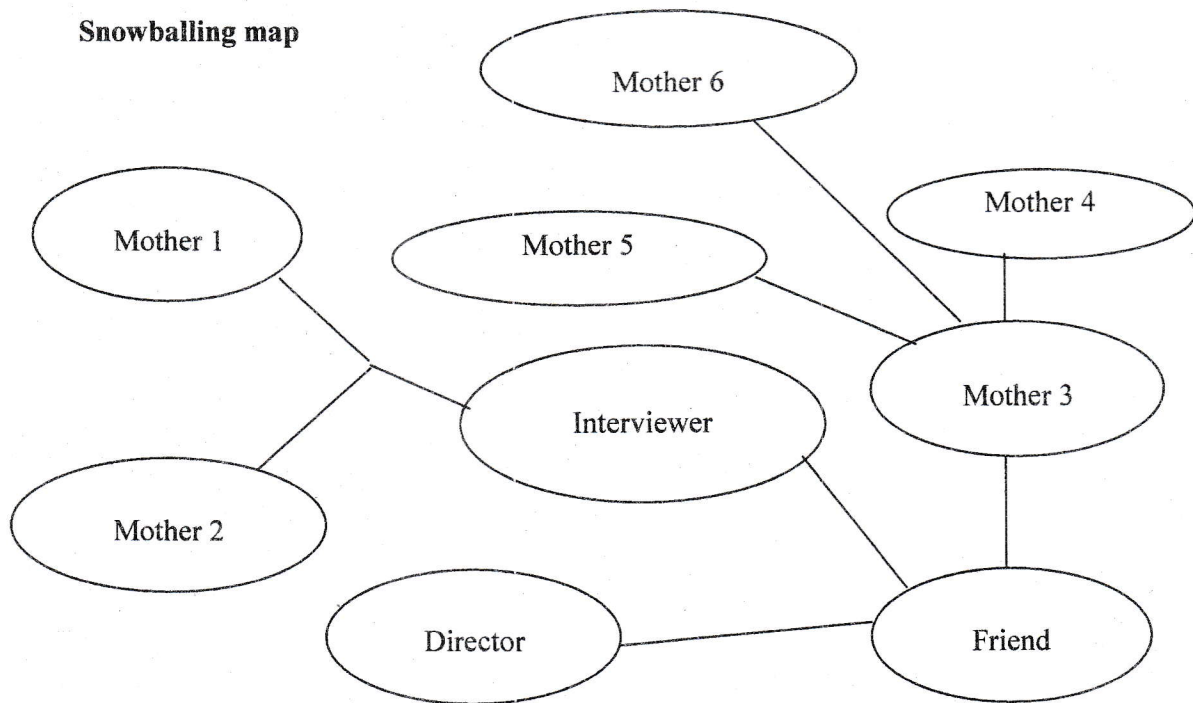
This research uses case study method which is relevant to an in-depth study of complexity, contradiction and multiple realities. In a similar way, case study allows an investigation into the meaningful characteristics of real life events such as, individual life patterns, organizational and managerial processes and neighbourhood change. This research builds one case study in the health sector, which is largely female dominated organization in Sri Lanka. In this regard, I practised the snowball technique (see below – snowballing map) to find out suitable respondents. This sample consists of six female doctors in the health sector. My concern is not to show a statistically representative sample, but to purposively sample mothers in different ethnic groups. Social practices of combining motherhood and employment are not fixed, can be varying from society to society, and in class, ethnic, and age groupings as well as in different organisation settings (Duncan, 2004). Therefore, this sample represents four Sinhalese, one Tamil and one Muslim mother to compare and contrast their different views and experiences about the motherhood and employment.

The purposive sample of this research comprised as follows:

Mother	Race	Religion	Age of mother	Ages of children	Interviewed time	
					1st	2nd
1	Sinhalese	Buddhist	51	18 , 22 years	1 h	1 h 30 min
2	Sinhalese	Buddhist	48	25 , 19 , 13 years	1 h 30 min	1 h
3	Sinhalese	Buddhist	45	14 , 11 , 7 years	2 h	1 h 30 min
4	Sinhalese	Buddhist	48	17 , 15 years	2 h	2 h
5	Muslim	Islamic	36	5 , 2 years	1 h	1 h 30 min
6	Tamil	Hindu	32	6 months	1 h	1 h

Additionally, I have interviewed one Director of Medical Office (male) in the health sector. Therefore, the total sample size was 7.

Snowballing map



In order to capture the mothers' views, in-depth interview was the main technique. As a result of that I am not fully dependent on asking the predetermined same set of questions from all the interviewees or giving standardized questions in a standardised form. There were some pre-set questions but leading into the more open ended interviews; similarly, I was unlikely to rely heavily on quantifying data. The order of the questions and the wording were varied according to the interviewee. Since a data triangulation method is used, apart from the in-depth interviews there were another set of structured interviews such as, mothers' age, children's age, education for working mothers and the director as well.

Theorizing and practising motherhood and employment

Theory has addressed the question of how mothers make the decision about mothering with paid work in terms of 'preferences', 'structural constraints' and 'moral rationalities'. Similarly, some authors, view 'employment' and 'family' as intertwined with each other, some argue about separate spheres, and others focus upon 'individualisation'.

To review the relevance academic debates and to locate my issue and approaches, I seek to explore the theoretical debate with the practical evidence of how preference theory is understood in relation to mothering and paid work. Preference theory is one of a challenging and controversial works to understand women in affluent and modern societies. It gives some relevance ideals to examine how Sri Lankan working mothers combine motherhood and employment. Also, I see to what extent gendered moral rationality help to materialize Sri Lankan mother's decisions and how they understand the notion of 'good mothering' and 'paid work'.

In modern societies, there have been an increasing focus on the individual and one frequent argument as well as is that the individual has become the author of his or her own biography and the women are freed from traditional pathways (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Arguing in a similar way, Giddens (1994) also maintains that individual choices and decisions are the key factors for understanding social change in 'late modernity'. It is shift from 'we' to 'I' (Hardil et al, 2006). This means considerable changes in personal relationships and family life, and life styles become much less dependent on traditions (see Crompton, 1999) where choice is a term that is highly associated with individual freedom (Brannen et al, 2005). In effect, the work-life balance will be seen as a matter of individual choice (see Duncan, 2006 for critical review).

Accordingly, Hakim (2004) sees modern women making almost free "choices" between family work and market work in the 21st century. Preference theory states that 'preferences' become a much more important determinant of women's choices than the variety of socio- economic factors between market work and family work (Hakim, 2004). However, all the respondents in this sample explained that when they combined mothering with paid work, it was influenced by biographical, social factors and/or different constraints rather than the 'free choice'. According to a one mother (Doctor-2),

"I am a widow, you know, without a husband it is very very difficult to run a house and doing this job. Oh! You know, some times I feel to resign but how can me. How do I finance my children's education, tuition fees and their future etc? Sometimes I feel to do private practice. But it is not possible, if I start private practise I should stay until late night, some times. But, there is no enough security for me or my kids, you know what I mean - many cultural problems, so, I gave-up that idea. You see, there is no chance for our choices. Many barriers! "

Therefore, in contrast to Hakim's individualised view, it can be argued that both the attitudes and behaviour of women towards the family and employment would seem to be shaped by a variety of structural factors such as, economic, cultural, religious as well as state policies.

Childcare problems are a major barrier to women's (full time) employment and their career promotions. Therefore, women are not still free to choose employment and career, because majority of women give priority to their domestic lives than their career or promotions. As explained by a mother (Doctor-1) in the sample,

"I do not know how I looked after my kids; it was happened not smoothly but... (Full of tears in her eyes) I did not get much time to stay with them, but whenever I free, I always with them. You know, mother has to play a big role than the father. She has to bear and rear her children well. I have to do best and right things for them. So, where is the time for my studies or at least to think of me?"

Another mother (Doctor-3), mother of three children was questioned about how and when she gets time for her studies while doing a job and mothering.

"Is this time to study me? Do I? I do not think! What ever I gained that is more than enough for me. Our time is already passed. This is our children's time. We should not spoil their future. They follow us that mean their parents. Is it? If I start my studies now every thing will be spoil, even my family? Don't you think?"

In contrast to these views, a young mother (Doctor-5) in the sample explained how she views about her child care practices and her career expectations.

"Any work with the kids is hard. Really they cannot understand, and they pleased us to say and do this and that. But we do not get time for those. Some times they cry for different things. But we are helpless. Sad to say but that is the truth. I have to give more priority to the job. Money is important matter; there are many things to do. Children's education! Even my higher studies! Because of my mother I am able to do my job some what leisurely than others. And I know daughter will be fine and she is so close to my mother."

Further, as she pointed out,

"You know my family is an extended family, I am very closed by and many relatives are around my home. This is my home town. For many doctors that is the big problem. So, I do not have many problems on it"

Based on these views, it can be argued that the women's employment behaviour is a reflection of their historically available opportunities and constraints. Therefore, there may be considerable differences between managing employment and family and also, women's intentions and actions can change according to an availability of child care facilities, age, location of the work place and family negotiations, and that work patterns of women are a product of their particular circumstances. Also it can highlight that the extended family structures allowed mothers to easily combine paid work with domestic work rather than the nuclear family pattern. Many mothers said that after having babies they had problems of the night duties, especially keeping children away from them. Therefore, all mothers in this sample strongly agreed that they were struggle with managing motherhood and employment in different levels, in effect; their life patterns have been changed. Also they have agreed that the attitudes of traditional motherhood pathways and male breadwinner model have been weakening. Because of many reasons our society has been highly accepted the dual earner couple model and increasingly became more popular in the new generation.

According to a one mother (Doctor-4), narrated her experiences as follows,

"We both of us doctors, we both are earning and there is no idea of who is the primary earner or secondary earner. We both valued each other. We both do domestic work when one is in a busy schedule. I also believe that we are now

away from the traditional motherhood, you see, we just like a machine and we do not have a time and relaxed mind to read bed time stories or songs, as my mother did when we were small”.

Basically, it is agreed that mothers' responsibilities towards the domestic tasks, especially child care and cooking work have been changed and redesigned according to their available opportunities. These practices are collective and social understanding about what is the right and proper relationship between motherhood and employment rather than the individual maximisation. Therefore, mother's have varying degrees of understandings and behavioural patterns on employment and motherhood.

In this vein, Duncan (1999) has identify, socially negotiated and culturally patterned 'gendered moral rationality' (about mothering roles and children's needs) as the major determinant of mothers' employment behaviour. Duncan (2003 and 2004) argues that mothers' orientation to paid work is primarily determined by their varying gendered moral rationalities concerning motherhood and paid work. They have identified; first, mothers' were gendered because they fundamentally dealt with notions of mothering - mothers do more caring and household work than fathers; mothers were moral in providing answers about the right things to do because unquestioning they do better and proper for children, and they were rationalities in providing a framework for taking decisions about participation in the labour market because they need to make children's future (2003:311). In some social groups the concept of 'good mother' always lies on mother who is always stay at home with their children and look after children's psychological and physiological well being rather than think of mother's own needs. And some social groups view mother should gain a higher education and do a better job for well being of a family or for their children's future. And some see both views are correct.

According to one mother (Doctor-6),

“You know sometimes it struggle me; running a family is not an easy thing especially with the caring work. Anyway I do not want to resign from the post. Job is giving satisfaction for me. And this is a kind of respectable job; it is good for my children's future. Also, it is provide finance to us. One day children will follow me when they become a big. If mother holds high education, children also trying to follow her. So, this will be a good role model for them. I can advise them as an educated mother. This is a good privilege to me and as well as to my children”.

It can be claimed that mothers do not view care simply as a barrier for employment, but they feel morally obligated to care, and often wish to do so. Needless to say, once women become a mother, she neglects a career ladder (temporary or permanently) and all efforts make for the child's development. In this sample, all the mothers viewed their employment decisions in relation to their responsibilities to their children. Therefore, these psychological rationalities are heavily gendered, as one mother (Doctor-3) explained,

“When my little one smiles how I keep her alone. As a mother, how I concentrate on my studies? I couldn't, never happen it. We should do best for them that are our target”.

Similarly, this research reveals that when their children are young, responsibilities towards child care play as a key role. When children get sick, forgetting their career developments mothers get leave and stay at home with children following a notion of 'good motherhood' as they are established through their life. Therefore, mothers give

priority to child care according to their owned social and moral understandings rather than free choice or economic rationality.

Conclusion

My research data suggests that these professional women, especially those with small children, the problem of balancing employment and caring work is crucial. Further, this research reveals that mothers were not achieved either the satisfaction or the good functioning at work place or at home without a role conflicts. Although they faced many negative experiences in terms of motherhood still they required a job for an economic survival, therefore, women are making an increasing contribution to household economies. The attitudes towards motherhood and employment seem to show both diversity and uniformity. In the uniformity sense, mothers were still concerned with meeting their children's needs as the first priority. In a diversity sense, there are considerable differences between managing employment and family. Mothers and their husbands understand mothers as primary caregivers for their children. And still mothers experience unequal gendered division of domestic labour although there is an increasing support from their husbands. Wherever mothers work, work full time or part time or whatever, they have unconditional and immeasurable practical and emotional obligations and responsibilities for the child care. It said that mothers are more confident and skilled at bringing up their children by their own. Therefore, this study fits into the idea of socially negotiated and culturally patterned 'gendered moral rationality' as the major determinant of mothers' employment behaviour. On the other hand, research evidence does not agree with Hakim's individualised preference theory. As she explains that different categories of women have inherent preferences for different choices about market work and motherhood.

Certainly, government policies in Sri Lanka, for example, gender equality policy has been generally encouraging of women's' employment and education. At present, there is a strong coverage of maternity protection for working mothers. They continuing attachment to employment with supported through this paid and non-paid maternity leaves. However, there is no adequate supportive organizational climate, namely, favourable family-friendly policies and publicly funded child care facilities for working women to reduce the major burden of child care. These pressures will make the combination of employment and family life more problematic, and obvious implications for work-family conflicts. Hence, there is a growing social norm that working mothers are unable to strike a satisfactory balance between their employment and family roles. It severely effects not only to mothers' career but also to society at last. On the other hand, lack of information, currently, makes it difficult to advance understanding and policy improvements. To eliminate these contradictions between continuing social norms and change in the gendered division of labour, policy improvements are needed. These issues regarding the employment and family combination are of prime importance not only for researchers to further study but also for the government and policy reformers.

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