Working A Tightrope
Category : May 1996
Published by Anonymous on May. 01, 1996

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Woking Hindu Moms - Part III

This month we continue our series on the working mother versus the homemaker. In Part I [August, '95], we learned that in Malaysia there exists little stigma to mother's working. Part II [Sept. '95] focused on the USA where most Hindu mothers are eager to "contribute to society." Around the world, day-care centers have become big business, and societies are beginning to feel the backlash of mother's leaving the home as youth flounder in rebellion and indecision. Part III reveals that India is now treading a perilous path to family instability. The strong extended families of India have been touted as an oasis amid a desert of broken homes. Are they now endangered?

By Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

In India, a woman going out for work was taboo even 20 years ago. A woman's place was culturally clear: inside the home. A wife's stepping into the open world meant a blot on her character, and more objectionably, on her husband's and his parents.' Burning occupational aspirations and hidden talents of many women lay buried.

But over a short time, major changes have taken place. First,

parents starting having daughters study to higher levels and then having them take jobs. The object was money--parents liked the extra income and also, working daughters were more marketable as brides. Many parents even began sending their daughters to work to earn their own dowries.

Today, open any paper to the matrimonial section and all the eligible bachelors are demanding "employed girls." Professionally qualified boys demand girls who are engineers or doctors. A peek in a register in a marriage bureau amazes me. Boys' ads specify the exact kind of job girls have to have and even the salary she should be drawing!

For some, becoming a working girl brings a curse. "Some fathers and brothers then do not allow the girl to marry because they do not want to lose her salary to a husband," notes author Mrs. Venkatalakshmi. "They keep her unmarried for a long time. It is deplorable."

I spoke to married women from different professions--engineers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, telephone operators and receptionists. I asked them why they worked. In every response I heard one refrain--"An additional income is necessary in these hard times. It's difficult to run a family with one pay packet."

This is not untrue. With the prices of even essential commodities skyrocketing, just paying month-end bills for most middle-class families is very stressful. Good education has also become costly, and so mothers are eager to get more

money for their children's educations. Take the Srinidhis for example. Unhappy with schools in India, they sent both children abroad for their higher educations. "We were able to do this only because my wife Mala was also earning," Mr. Srinidhi tells me.

Mrs. Rajan, a mathematics teacher at Kendriya Vidyalaya, thinks working mothers acquire a cosmopolitan outlook valuable to their children. "A working mother has seen the world outside, and she forms clear ideas of what she wants for her children. Ironically, her guilt about being away from home so much insures that she pays more attention towards the child when there. I have been a working mother and my children have done excellent in studies and are very cooperative at home."

For Jayashri, a software engineer, the first two years of her daughter's childhood was a nightmare. "I couldn't get leave. I had to stop nursing my 3-month-old baby and leave her at Mysore. Then we shunted her from place to place trying to find a suitable arrangement. Amidst all this, the child kept falling sick. Now she is ten, but I feel terribly guilty every time I see her. She went through hell because of me."

Yet, despite all the guilt-ridden tales of problems and stress that jobs cause, women cling to them. A lot of women work to utilize schooling degrees. "I had a masters in English and to sit at home wasting all the education seemed criminal," says Geetha Prakash, a college lecturer. "Now I have a government job. Come what may, I will not give it up."

Everywhere now, day-care centers are mushrooming. But mothers tell me that good ones, hygienic with trained staff, are rare. Too many are little more than baby cages--children disciplined by fear and poorly cared for. Even physical abuse is not uncommon. Mr. Srinivasamurthy narrated the tale of his year-and-a-half old daughter. "One day, we noticed blisters all over the back of her palms. Servants there told us that the lady in charge had hit our daughter with a hot frying ladle." Did he stop sending his daughter to day-care? No. He put her in another one praying it would be better. He says his wife has to work to pay off loans.

Grandmothers are no fans of working mothers. "When it would naturally come our time to retire from housework, with a working girl in the house, we end up doing the housework and being baby-sitters too!" shares Mrs. Krishna.

Housework? If both spouses work, do they share the housework? No. "Just getting a job doesn't liberate a woman," Mrs. Rajagopal told me. Her daughter is an electronics engineer, as qualified as her husband, and earns as much as he does. But cooking, cleaning, looking after children and household chores still fall on her. "My own mother-in-law would not allow my husband to rock our children to sleep while I ate my dinner," says Mrs. Punyavati, a librarian at All-India Radio. "It's a woman'sjob. Men feel it's below their dignity to assist their wives, and, oddly, it's mostly motherswho fill them with this sense of over self-importance!"

Wives actually told me that that housework was theirs--they didn't want their men doing a "lady's job." My own friend Mala,

young and well-educated, surprised me one day when she wouldn't allow my husband to sweep a room. "Men should not touch the broom. It's not good," she said. Meena, a young receptionist bluntly said, "My husband doing housework? Ridiculous! That's just not my idea of a man!"

Dr. Chittaranjan Andrade, head of the Department of Psychopharmacology, NIMHANS, in Bangalore, did a study on working women and their husbands. He concluded: "There is nothing wrong in sharing the responsibilities of the house with his wife. I took three months leave to look after our baby while my wife reported back for duty after maternity leave. I have changed the baby's nappies and have done every bit of housework."

Radha Amarnath, a dance choreographer, has her editing studio at home. When a production is underway, she often spends 18 hours a day in the studio. Who cooks? "My husband takes care of the cooking and calls me when dinner is ready. He never disturbs me or demands my attention when I'm in the studio. I owe all my achievement to him."

Home is Where the Mom Works

Even my own mother repeatedly drives home the point that children come first--all other ambitions of a woman come second. Harshala, from a traditional family of Bangalore and an economics post-graduate from Mount Carmel College, is newly married. Her parents will not let her work. She tells me, "No woman in our family has worked. From childhood, they have put it into our heads to be housewives. We may study as much as we want, but working? No."

Thirty-year-old Chitra is mother of two. She lives with her parents-in-law. She spends her days involved in cooking, catering to the needs of the children and elders and taking her own meals only after she has served everyone. Surprisingly, her five-year-old son and daughter goad her to get a job so they can feel proud of having a working mother like many of their friends. Chitra isn't persuaded. "It is against tradition in our home if girls go out for work. The thought never occurred to us."

And not all women who are well educated feel staying at home is a "too-bad waste of their schooling and skills." "I simply don't want my children left in the care of others," Veena, a science graduate, tells me.

Dr. Lalitha, my mother's friend, is an anesthesiologist who, despite her medical training, never took up work until after her children were grown up. "Knowing that they would be with strangers while I was at work would have been a very uncomfortable feeling. I would not have been able to concentrate. A mother has to be there for her children when they return from school and be available to share their experiences and tell them stories."

One major temptation that non-working mothers face is TV--many now nurse it more dutifully than they do their babies. "I find it repulsive to find mothers glued to television," says Mrs. Balasubramaniam, a dance teacher. "A working mother never has that kind of time to waste."

Some argue that the issue need not be either/or. Increasingly, enterprising mothers are setting up businesses at home--selling saris,running a beauty parlor, assembling factory components and giving dance and music classes. "I have about 30 students who come to learn music," shares Mrs. Shanta. "I have one batch in the morning and one in the evening. This way I get time for the children as well as keep myself purposefully occupied without compromising the home." The newest fad amongst mothers in Bangalore now is forming into social groups, attending classes in the afternoons to learn religious compositions such Soundarya Laharior Vishnu Sahasranama, socialize and then perform at temples.

Many choose another path--to work before and after child-raising years, but not during. The variations are many. But what is now clear is that the modern working woman has entered the Indian social scene, bringing with her new possibilities and problems. The effects on India, and Hinduism, have yet to be seen.

Part 4 will feature a new American book, Staying Home: From Full-Time Professional to Full-Time Parent, a guide for women making or contemplating the transition from office to home.

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