

**Change and stability at home: Professional women negotiating care work during the
COVID-19 pandemic in India**

Extended Abstract

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INTRODUCTION

The strict lockdown measures in India are likely to have multiple and long-lasting effects for how families with young children organize paid and unpaid work. As the first wave of COVID-19 reached India it imposed a strict nationwide lockdown lasting 68 days (from March 25 to May 31, 2020). The lockdown restrictions were partially lifted from June 1, 2020, but India has not managed to control the spread and is currently going through a devastating second wave of the pandemic and new lockdowns. While the consequences of the lockdown, COVID-19 infections and the lack of relief measures have been most dire for the poorest and low-income groups, many upper-class families also witnessed changes in their work and domestic life arrangements. As elsewhere, offices and educational institutions closed, and work, care and learning shifted to home for families with young children.

For upper class professionals the mandatory rules of social distancing and fear of infections have substantially reduced the availability of maids, nannies and extended family who all provide critical supporting in domestic labor and childcare (Ray and Qayum 2009; Lahiri-Dutt and Sil 2014). This situation creates an opportunity to explore how professional women manage and negotiate increased care responsibilities with their spouses when domestic help, typically performed by *other women*, is no longer available. In India, men's share in domestic labor is among the lowest in the world (McKinsey Global Institute 2015), therefore it is vital to understand whether and how the pandemic might incentivize professional men to increase their domestic contributions or whether it further worsens gendered inequalities in the family. In this paper, I focus on how professional upper-class mothers and fathers with young children managed and negotiated increased family responsibilities during the initial period of the pandemic. Specifically, I ask:

1. How do mothers and fathers manage and negotiate increased load of childcare and household responsibilities?
2. How do mothers and fathers make sense of their arrangements, and what cultural discourses they draw from to explain how they divide domestic responsibilities?
3. How does the household structure shape how domestic responsibilities are divided among family members during the pandemic?

While I interviewed both mothers and fathers, I focus on the accounts of mothers because women are the primary caregivers and family custodians (Bhandari 2020), and the burden to negotiate domestic duties to achieve more egalitarian arrangements falls on them. Thus, it is important to understand whether and how women seek to negotiate and change gendered behaviors in the home.

THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

Cultural norms and expectations tend to strongly dictate how mothers and fathers participate, negotiate and make sense of their work and care arrangements (Sullivan 2006; Blair-Loy 2009; Townsend 2010). The intensive parenting, or mothering in particular, is a global phenomenon that shapes how women make decisions about work and childcare (Donner 2018; Hays 1998). In India, dedicated mothers are seen as those who take heightened responsibility for their children's schooling and extra-curriculars; and it is also the mother's role to prepare children's meals and stay with children when they do homework, because "only a mother knows how to make her child work hard" (Donner 2008, 129). The construction of the exalted motherhood role in India is also particular to the nationalist vision of the ideal Indian woman. While women can engage in paid work, prioritizing family and children's care over work or career is a virtuous choice, something

that, according to the nationalist discourse, a respectable or ideal Indian woman dedicates herself to (Chatterjee and Riley 2001; Donner 2008; Radhakrishnan 2011). Thus, I expect that during the pandemic mothers who shift to working from home may increase their time in childcare and resist asking fathers to contribute as they try to achieve this ideal. Compared to those who work outside home, some studies in the U.S. find that telecommuting mothers do increase their time in childcare (Noonan, Estes, and Glass 2007) as investing large amounts of time in childrearing goes to the very identity of being a good mother (Hays 1998).

Women may also reject or deviate from these motherhood ideals, especially when they work in jobs that require long hours and round-the-clock availability. Devotion to work may lead women to negotiate stronger for more equal sharing of domestic responsibilities with their partner (Blair-Loy 2009). As I focus on mothers who are full-time professionals – this group may have especially strong attachment to their worker role in the context where college-educated women’s labor force participation is unusually low (30% vs the global average of 70%) (NSS 2018). Thus, the extent to which women negotiate and rationalize their domestic arrangements during the pandemic may be associated with their competing devotions to family and work (Blair-Loy 2009).

At the same time, cultural norms of masculinity and fatherhood, dictating that men should be primary breadwinners who spend long hours at work, exert pressure on men to prioritize work over family responsibilities (Hodges and Budig 2010). Men may also fear employer retribution or social stigma if they do not conform to the ideal worker norms that most Indian workplaces subscribe to (Thébaud and Pedulla 2016; Gupta 2019; Upadhyaya and Vasavi 2006). Telecommuting may not change this if men feel they need to demonstrate that they are as dedicated workers at home as they are in the office (Clawson and Gerstel 2014; Carlson and Lynch 2017). Prior studies in the U.S. find that when men have access to flexible policies, they are unlikely to use them for family purposes (Noonan, Estes, and Glass 2007), or if they use them they spend more time on work and personal needs (Sullivan and Lewis 2001; Sharpe, Hermsen, and Billings 2002).

Alternatively, as men’s provider role during the pandemic is not compromised (for those who successfully telecommute), they may be more likely to take on new family responsibilities, though they may selectively engage in activities that they see as most rewarding and least feminine (Gerson 2010; Sriram and Navalkar 2012). Although there are few qualitative studies about fathers in India, the pandemic may facilitate some men to realize their growing aspirations to be more involved in childrearing (Sriram 2019). Moreover, as I investigate households where both partners are telecommuting from home, men may be more responsive to greater sharing if they see their partners equally engaged and committed to work (Goldscheider and Waite 1991). While in my sample I have only a small share of men, in my interviews with mothers I seek to examine how they account for their husbands’ actions and reasoning for how they engage in domestic work during the pandemic.

Summing up, in this paper I investigate how mothers and fathers explain their strategies to negotiate and share childcare and housework during the pandemic, and how they draw from interconnected cultural discourses about gender, work and parenting to rationalize their arrangements. I focus on mothers’ own understandings of their actions to examine how they reject or align with the dominant cultural narratives, construct new narratives, and in doing so shift gender relations to more or less egalitarian structures.

DATA AND METHODS

This study draws on data from in-depth interviews with 37 heterosexual mothers and 14 fathers working in professional occupations in metropolitan cities in India. All interviews were conducted between April and July 2020. Participants were married, aged between 29-40, held at least a bachelor's degree and lived with one or two children under age seven (see table 1 for sample characteristics). Thirty-four participants live in nuclear households and 17 live in joint households (with at least one parent). All interviews were conducted in English on *Zoom* and some over a phone call lasting from one to two hours. Some interviews were conducted in two sessions of about 40 minutes each. My status as an outsider – a foreigner living in India – allowed participants to open up and “explain” certain cultural aspects of family life in India that might not happen talking to a local. Many women also found the interviews “therapeutic” as they wanted to share their struggles with someone outside their family, and as an outsider I fit this role well. However, my foreignness may have produced a reticence to critique certain cultural norms dictating housework arrangements in front of a foreign ‘other’ (Twamley and Sidharth 2019). To adjudicate the extent to which positionality may have influenced participants’ accounts, I compare my own interviews with ten interviews conducted by my research assistant – an Indian woman.

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To identify respondents who fit my criteria, I used social networks, Facebook groups and snowball sampling. The criteria for selecting respondents was that both parents were in professional occupations, telecommuting during the lockdown and had children under age seven. I chose this demographic for theoretical purposes. I wanted to understand whether and how the external shock, such as the pandemic, creates an opportunity for professional women to negotiate domestic labor with their partners, when both spouses hold similar material resources (i.e. highly educated and professionally employed), which often influence their bargaining power (Bittman et al. 2003).

Prior studies also identify that families with young children are among the most time-pressured groups as they have to attend to more intense caregiving demands compared to couples with older children or without children (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006). Moreover, these professionals are most likely to be in a life stage when their careers are most demanding and balancing work and family is particularly challenging (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). In addition, because household structure has been identified as an important determinant of women's autonomy and time use in India (Srivastava 2020; Anukriti et al. 2020), I compare how women negotiate, share and account for their domestic labor arrangements between nuclear and extended households.

EXPECTED FINDINGS

My preliminary analysis suggests that overall, the division of domestic labor between women and their spouses did not change much in my sample. Before the pandemic mothers performed about 66% and fathers 33% of total childcare while after the pandemic this proportion changed to 69% and 31% respectively. The household composition mediated women's need and ability to negotiate childcare and domestic labor. Women were less likely to negotiate the increased childcare and domestic tasks in households when a couple lived with at least one of their parents. Mothers-in-law often acted as intermediaries reducing the need for women to negotiate with their husband as they took a significant load of childcare and household chores, almost automatically. In households

where women were able to retain live-in nannies or domestic help women also received significant share of support and were less likely to negotiate family responsibilities with their spouse.

Women were more likely to negotiate and ask for help from their partners in nuclear households without any domestic support. However, their success in these negotiations depended on how responsive and willing their husbands were in taking on new responsibilities. In about half of the nuclear households, men often retreated to their newly established home-offices justifying their lack of presence by increased intensity in office work. In about another half, men increased their caregiving contributions which women attributed to either men’s previous experience living alone or their upbringings and gender ideology. In these cases, women often reasoned that because their spouse had experienced living independently during their bachelor years, they have learnt ‘how to do things themselves’ and were able to cook or clean. This was also something that these men had done from time to time before the pandemic though for the most part they did *not need to* because such tasks were performed by maids.

Finally, women who did not manage to get much help from their spouses did not present themselves as suffering but reasoned that even though they wanted to get help they were willing and able do everything themselves. For these women asking for help often invoked conflict and was more stressful than completing domestic tasks themselves. Hence, their strategy was to ask for help only in situations where they could not manage on their own as to minimize requests and potential conflict. Moreover, even if men agreed or offered to help women often refused it because explaining how to perform a particular task or managing its outcome (e.g. cleaning up after cooking) was more time consuming than completing the task themselves. In sum, my findings suggest that women tend to avoid negotiating caregiving work with partners who are unwilling or inexperienced in domestic labor because such negotiations create tensions and stress. Women tend to be most successful in sharing tasks when their partners are not just willing but also experienced in doing care work.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

	Women	Men
Mean age	34.3	35.5
Educational level		
Bachelor's degree	41%	14%
Graduate degree	59%	86%
Household structure		
Nuclear	59%	86%
Joint	41%	14%
Mean age of youngest child	3.9	2.8
Has two children	19%	14%
City		
Chennai	54%	43%
Delhi	24%	36%
Bangalore	22%	14%
Mumbai	5%	-
Pune	-	7%

Note: $N = 51$ (37 women and 14 men). All participants were employed full-time during the lockdown and telecommuted from home.

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