Article: Challenges of Manufacturing Motherhood: Caregivers in the Neo-liberal Economy

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Published by: Indian Sociological Society
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Abstract

The paper explores the intricate relationship between two categories of working women, one who goes out to work leaving her child with the caregiver and the other who comes in to fill the space of the working mother. Thus, the paper is an attempt to look at ‘motherhood’ as a concept and the role of caregivers in the neo-liberal economy. The relationship between the caregiver and the mother has always been delicate. Hence, an attempt will be made to understand the relationship in terms of employer and employee, and the nature of relationship built on mutual understanding to create an environment of manufactured motherhood vis-à-vis their everyday negotiations. The issues such as the making of boundaries by the mothers, division of work between the mothers and the caregivers, their fears and anxieties are addressed in the paper.

Key words: Caregivers, Employer, Employee, Motherhood

Introduction

While motherhood is seen as an emotion, it has always been conflicting. There are boundaries which are set in terms of the rules that the mother defines for her child’s cognitive development vis-à-vis the caregiver. The dilemmas and the conflicts within a mother often set the relationship between caregiver and the mother in action. The journey of becoming a mother to giving the child away for mothering to another person involves a lot of anxiety. This paper attempts to look at motherhood and its changing discourses vis-à-vis caregivers in the neo-liberal Indian economy. The socio-cultural understanding of motherhood has enormous difference when we look at India or other parts of the globe. In the Indian context, extended families and neighborhoods filled in for the day care centers for a long time. This, however, does not hold true today, in the global economy where women are constantly going out of their four walls to make a living. Here comes in the caregivers, who have become quintessential in the Indian working middle
class families. The concept of a caregiver is new in the Indian context as the neo-liberal economy in the Indian scenario started in the late 1990s. Now when mothers go out to work, there is another category of working women who come in to fill the absence of working mothers to care for their children. The relationship between the caregiver and the mother has always been delicate. Therefore, in this paper an attempt will be made to understand this relationship in terms of employer (mother) and employee (caregiver). Further, an attempt will be made to examine the complexities and the nature of relationship built between them as they create an environment of manufactured motherhood, owing to the requirement of the mothers to venture out of their house in order to resume their other jobs in the paid workforce.

**Review of Literature**

The concept of motherhood has been explored by many scholars over the years. While the concept itself has undergone shifts, it continues to be a matter of persistent investigation. Chodorow (1978), in her classical work *The Reproduction of Mothering*, refers to the coming of the neo-liberal economy and increased participation of women in the paid work force. The changes in the traditional image of the Victorian mother and the emergence of the moral mother as signs of the shifting political economy address the crisis of motherhood. The roles of the mothers changed as they started participating in the economic order. Mothers were missing from nursing their children, their nursing roles were taken up either by the caregiver or by the bottle. This marked the beginning of a new economic order. But the constant engagement of women in care giving role also indicated the social stereotypes of motherly chores. The popular American image of a housewife and mother was also broken by the works of Betty Friedan (1963), *Feminine Mystic*. She refers to the popular imagery of women with children and husband and how it has become repressive for the women in general; however, there has been a search for a new space and alternative by these women which is outside of this popular social imagery. Oakley (1974) in *The Sociology of Housework* focused on the binaries of women in terms of her participation in the work force and the obligations of being a mother. She argues that the pressure on every woman to become a mother, have a child and to look after her child is nothing but a myth of motherhood. Such orientations on motherhood leave no space for other caregivers in the journey of motherhood but the biological mother. But such preferences come contrary to the lived experience of women in the 21st century.
The journey stared with the early 19th century when men left home based economies to participate in the wage labour market. Almost after a century woman also left their homes to go and work in the paid labour forces. Earlier the fathers who went out of homes to participate in the labour market were replaced by the homemaking mothers. It was only when the home bound mothers went out to participate in the work force that the other caregivers came into the light. Hays (1956) referring to the concept of intensive mothering talks about the intensification of the problem of childcare with an increase in working mothers. Rather than helping the working mothers, society tries to intensify the binaries of motherhood and the complexities. This resulted in a model wherein the white American middle class women were considered the primary caregivers to the child till the age of three or four. The only silver lining in her journey of motherhood could come from the father who would participate in most of the odd jobs.

Tamara Hareven (1982) talks about the economic transitions in society and links it with the growing industrial economy that precedes in seizing time away from the family. Fixed working hours has led to the inflexible timings with family and subsequently making way for a conflict of guilt in the mother. In order to overcome the guilt in the working mother, the search for caregivers begin which is often been filled by another set of women. Horchschild (2000, 2003) draws on the penetration of capitalism and its impact on the care work. She refers to the categories of professional childcare workers and how they migrate across countries to provide care by leaving their children home. This creates a void of mother in the formative years of her child, but the caregiver in search of employment and better wages moves across boundaries. They care for the affluent family’s children at the cost of their own children. Horchschild describes this as the First World robbing the Third World of love and affection. Colleen (2008) talks of the global restructuring of care and the coming up of nannies from the Third World. While at a broader level, women’s participation in the formal economy has increased over the decades, her domestic duties too have increased in manifolds. Scholars suggest that public policies are also responsible for reproducing gender inequalities (Teo, 2016). The studies cited above indicate that the women from lesser developed countries have come and taken over the jobs of care giving in developed countries. Yet, the dependence on such care workers complicates the issues of social inequality as it brings in the intersectional inequality between ethno-nationality and class. With commercialisation of domestic work, there is an increase in the informal employment market (Teo,
2016). Zdravomyslova (2010) indicates that in the Russian society, the informal nature of the contract which revolves around the child leads to further social inequalities between people.

Studies also suggest that the hiring of help for domestic work also becomes counterproductive for women. Julian (2012) suggests that both men and women view domestic help differently. While men see it as a contractual service, women feel emotionally responsible for supervision and ensuring emotional needs and support to the helper. Horchschild (1983) uses the concept of emotional labour to explain the ways of selling one’s emotion vis-à-vis capitalism. This contrasts with the arguments put forth by the supporters of the Prisoners of Love framework where Stone (2000) indicates how the caregivers get emotionally attached and engage in altruism while providing childcare. This eventually puts the care workers in a conceding position, as they get attached emotionally with the child or the patient and cannot demand more remuneration for the emotional labour that they provide.

In India, the context and the experiences are somewhat different. Childcare has never been institutionalised in the Indian context as in the West. The concepts of childcare homes and paid caregivers in India, however, have been a product of the 21st century and the neo-liberal economy. Women in India were unconditionally treated as agents of procreation. The use of the metaphors like seed and earth (Dube, 1988) brings up such binaries of entrenched gender inequalities in the Indian society where women were assumed as agents of procreation. Such structural differences of patriarchy get manifested in the families too as it gets intensified with stringent rules of endogamy and caste.

Referring to the essay on Mask and Faces, Veena Das (1976) talks about the rich cultural meanings associated with the purity of mother’s milk and nursing the child. It is asserted that the process does not only help the children grow but also build the character of the child; and that the process of nursing and shaping the baby in the womb helps the child develop a bond with the mother which is permanent. While the neo-liberal economy called for women’s participation in the work force, it created a void in the traditional familial roles especially in the case of caring for the children. Several studies from India point out the layers of challenges which confront domestic workers who, apart from doing other household chores, also look after the children of the employers. India’s 2004-05 National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) highlights that there is an increase in the
paid domestic workers who are women and underscores that women account for 3.05 million of the 4.75 million of the employed workers in households (NSSO 2004-2005). It is also claimed that this data does not provide the actual data of domestic helpers which are far higher than the numbers reported (Neetha, 2009).

Chamraj K. (2007) who carried out a study of domestic workers in Karnataka shows that although they work for a fixed wage, they are made to do additional tasks and their salaries are cut if they ask for leave. It is also noted that women domestic help are prevented from touching vessels where the food of the employers are kept and are even prevented from entering the kitchens. There is an intersectionality of class, caste and gender which is evident in the profile of domestic workers who take care of children of employers as well. As domestic help became inevitable in the urban Indian scenario there is a vulnerability of class which permeated into the household spaces (Dickey 2000). In India, Neetha (2010) notes that the majority of domestic workers, including those who take care of children of employers, are illiterate. Rao (2011) observes that they are also generally female and first-generation rural migrants. It is reported that such domestic service, conducted mostly by women, is an occupation to which stigma is attached and is viewed as a service carried out by low-caste and ‘untouchable labour’. In India, Grover posits that paid domestic workers including “ayah”, “wet nurse”, “maid”, “cook” and “female sweeper” has long signified class and caste distinctions (Grover, 2018, p. 3).

Rao (2011), in her research of domestic workers hired by households in Delhi, found that kindness and support by employers of hired helpers led to the better emotional state of the employee; but it was also found that kindness and support shown towards employees was leveraged by employers to extract unpaid labor from such workers. It has also been noted by Kundu (2008) that those domestic workers who lived with the employers developed social and emotional bonds with the employers. It has also been found by Gill (1994) that since the hired domestic helpers were often in the personal space of the employers and developed closeness to the personal activities of the employer, this, at times, led to frictions between the employer and the employee. These findings can be applied to those rendering childcare services in India as well as they also fall in the unorganised sector of domestic workers. Apart from these intersectionalities, Gurtoo (2015) stresses that women who work as domestic help are disadvantaged by inequalities caused by feminisation of such caregiving work which is considered as labor natural to women given their supposedly innate caring characteristics.
There is still no official recognition of paid domestic work in India. Agarwala (2015) notes that domestic workers in India are divided into two groups: those who are ‘live-ins’ and those who are ‘live-outs’. Live-ins are often young, unmarried migrants from rural areas who live in the house of the employer or an attached house, and their food and housing is included in their salary. Live-outs are those who work for the employer but stay in their own homes and are often married and older women. Live-outs are either part-time or full-time depending on the hours of work they put in everyday. Part-timers can work for multiple employers for a few hours and full-timers work for one employer for a range of tasks and for longer hours. There is still a lack of comprehensive legislation to regulate the payment and working conditions of domestic workers including those who render childcare services in India. This makes their working conditions and lives extremely precarious.

Methodology

The focus of the paper is on two categories of women – one set are the mothers and the other are the caregivers they hire to take care of their children while they attend their professions outside their house. Therefore, personal experiences and everyday struggles of making each other’s lives safer are considered as a vantage point of entry in this study. As the topic discussed addresses a range of issues, it requires an amount of flexibility in the methods used. Hence, along with the interviews, personal anecdotes and experiences have also been considered valuable responses for the study. The working women addressed in this paper includes the categories of a) the hired caregivers and b) the mothers who had to step out of their homes to pursue their professional lives and therefore required outside help to care for their children. A total of six caregivers and six employers are taken into consideration for this paper. Within the category of caregiver, three kongs and three local caregivers and their journey into the world of care giving has been explored. The kongs were selected because of the label that they have earned over the years of being professional in the field of care work in the state of Assam.

A Brief Profile and Background of the Hired Caregivers

This section briefly describes the profile of the hired caregivers which were interviewed. This helps locate the hired caregivers in their socio-economic and educational backgrounds which provides a framework to understand their entry into these jobs and professionalisation of this line of work. The hired caregivers
interviewed showed a sense of being in these jobs as a way of escaping more troublesome lives in their own homes and they noted that life as a caregiver also had its own perks which made it worth their while to stick on.

**Kongs**

A kong narrates:

_We were anyway having a lot of problems at home. My workplace has at least given me a space to stay away from my family. My family thinks I am a trouble for them, that is the reason why they got me married so early. But now that I am earning they want to stay connected to me and I like that. Moreover, I like this place where I work. I have my own room, TV, and space._

Another kong rues:

_At times when I get scolded for whatever reasons, I feel bad and wish to leave my work, but then when I think of home I feel I should not. This life has at least given me income and the baby helps me overcome the sorrows._

Being abandoned by husbands and being uneducated on account of being poor was another reason for the entry of women into the jobs of hired caregivers. As one kong states that her journey as a hired caregiver began when she was 25 years old; today she is 39 and mother of a 20-year old. Like most, she got married early and didn’t have any formal education. After her daughter was born, her husband abandoned them, so she was left with no financial support. Being in a matrilineal community, her close association with her mother and her natal family helped her gather the emotional support. She decided to work when her daughter was able to do a few things on her own. But without any formal education, the only option left for her was childcare. Another kong states that she entered the service of hired caregiver as she felt she was inclined by nature to get along well with children. She stated that she is unmarried and hence does not have much reservation in leaves and other such issues. The extended family which included her sister and her children were all that she had in the name of family. Though she never gave birth on her own, she has been very affectionate and engaged with kids. She often felt that maybe because she could not give birth on her own, God sent her into the profession of childcare. Most mothers preferred hired caregivers that fit her
profile – unmarried, without kids of their own, without much family and got along with children. The third respondent joined the services on a more professional footing as they were hired by people who began such businesses to cater to the needs of urban working homes which have become nuclear over the years.

*Local hired caregivers*

A hired caregiver who was interviewed was a married 27-year old Bengali Hindu woman who is also a mother of two boys aged 10 and 5. She herself is a single child and hence, after the death of her father she had to relocate from her husband’s house to stay with her mother. The husband is cooperative and takes care of most of the household chores when she leaves home for work. He runs a small grocery store in the neighbourhood. Her mother too looks after her boys when she moves away from home for work. She works to supplement the family income.

Another hired caregiver who was interviewed was a 19-year old unmarried Bengali Muslim woman. She has had a troubled childhood with her father marrying two women and having many children. For her, it is her elder brother who acted as the father and helped all the siblings in every step of their lives. Now that her brother is married with his own children, she finds staying at home difficult. Hence, she decided to come out and earn an income. Such children coming from broken homes are commonly destitute and their entry into the line of hired caregivers is a way of escaping the penury in which they often find themselves.

Another hired caregiver interviewed was a 19-year old Bengali Muslim woman who was once married at the age of 14 to an old man who was three times her age. She had always been very against this marriage and hence, within a day of being married she left the husband and came back to her mother’s house. Her mother is separated with four children and always had many difficulties managing the house. So, she wanted to get her daughters married early. The plight of her family did not end there with the marriage; the mother went through a cycle of debt. She had borrowed money from a *guri* in order to help one of her distant relative, who was supposed to return the money on time. But, as fate had it, the relative absconded with the money and the mother had to repay the gut at huge interest rate. This is when the journey of care giving started.
The Challenges of Manufacturing Motherhood

Few questions often come to mind: Who are the new age mothers? What dilemmas do they face? Can a working mother be equally committed to her work like her husband? Or as Adelson and Fraiberg (1977) say that every child has the right to get mother’s unconditional attention till 3 years (if so, who pays for her in case her maternity leaves have been exhausted). How about the recent changes in families (divorces, single mothers and the women who stay away from husband for work)? With all these complexities how does a mother work?

While women have worked before, such concerns were addressed by the support which came from the extended families that consisted of paternal grandmother, extended network of siblings and a host of kin members. In the neo-liberal economy, women no longer consider giving birth to a child as an end to her professional life. But at the same time, it is becoming a hard reality of our times when not only the family, but the spouses also do not stay together. Thus, begins the anxiety of a mother! What am I doing? Am I making the right kind of ‘choice’? Often this leads to a conflict within the mother as the working mother and the mother as an employer. The emotional connect between the caregiver and the child also becomes a point of anxiety among the working mothers.

While women undergo so much anxiety, what happens to the men? Do fathers also go through the guilt of not giving enough time to the child? Perhaps they do! But the whole social construction of motherhood is such that it puts so much restrains on the whole experience of motherhood that it becomes a point of guilt, a sad emotion for women who must leave their babies behind and go out for work. When women started going out of their homes for their work, the need for the caregivers became essential and inevitable.

Construction of Boundaries between the Mother and the Hired Caregiver

At a certain point, the relationship between the mother and the caregiver is based on interpretative rules which are established in order to maintain a manufactured motherhood (MacDonald, 1998). There is a division of work between the mother and the caregiver which is established through a set of rules which are being interpreted in different ways by the mothers and the caregivers. A mother who was interviewed narrates that the caregiver is very protective of her child. At times, the mother feels insecure by her presence and has to make sure that the caregiver leaves as soon as the mother is back from work. A kong who was
interviewed responded that the family she worked with was very good but whenever the madam gets back from work she behaves differently. The kong feels unwanted for a while when the mother returns from work. While there are no confrontations, yet there is a subtle silence between the two categories of women which is based on interpretation and mutual understanding.

In the process of creating the essence of motherhood, the working mothers in their absence from home try to create a space bereft of their physical presence. In this process, the caregivers become the quintessential part of their everyday lives. The questions addressed to the mothers in this regard revolved around the process of making the boundary and marking the space and everyday negotiations. The mothers interviewed ensured that most of the chores (feeding, bathing, playing) are completed by the mothers themselves when they are around.

The struggle begins when the mothers have to leave the child with the caregiver and at the same time ensure that when they are away the caregivers perform all the tasks at par with the mother. This is where the struggle or negotiation begins. There is a class angle to this way of understanding the care work. The mothers in their absence try to create a manufactured motherhood, a space which is strictly in accordance with the ways of nursing and raising their child in their own terms. One of the respondents laments her fear from the caregivers who may influence her child towards their beliefs and practices. One respondent calls in for mindful parenting, in which there is an intervention from the parents, mostly the mother, time and again. The fathers on the contrary were found silent on such issues; besides in a few instances where they negotiated salaries, the men were silent.

In order to maintain the boundary, the mothers often lay down a set of rules. The respondents (mothers) narrate that when the caregivers were professional, meaning kongs, there wasn’t much trouble in making them understand their work. They took over the work as soon as they joined the job. But the mothers felt this was missing when it came to the caregivers from the nearby areas. There are also moments when the mothers get anxious of the caregiver’s relationship with the child. A mother recounts:

*I did not have any such clear cut boundary. I helped my caretaker in every possible way, so that she can take care of my child properly. I remember that in the evening, both of them watched TV together. I brought many nursery rhymes videos and ABCD*
learning videos, and both of them watched together on TV. My child gradually started to learn all these quite easily, and the caretaker was with her, while doing all these. Before going to teach her how to write letters, I allowed her to listen and observe how to write letters through these videos. Initially I was more concerned with the activities of the caretaker. But, as my child grew older, I have started to trust my caretaker fully. She stayed with me for a long period of 7 years.

Most mothers who were interviewed had specific work which was to be covered by the hired caregiver. They ensured that the caregivers they hired did not overstep the limits of the work which they had directed them to follow with regard to caring for their children. This is established through a set of rules which are being interpreted in different ways by the mothers and the caregivers. Even within care work there is a clear division between the works to be done strictly by the mother and the ones to be done by the caregiver.

One of the respondents (mother) says:

*I used to go out before 8 a.m., when I had a morning class. Except on Sunday, I woke up before 7 a.m. Most of the time, my daughter also woke up with me. I mostly prepared the morning breakfast, rest of the things like take her to bath, preparing lunch, playing with her, everything was done by the caretaker until my arrival. I sent her to play school at the age of 2 years 8 months.*

Another mother says:

*I would prefer to do everything myself since my baby is my baby and I would want to do everything for her. However, since I try to balance taking care of her along with managing work, I do not really have the luxury of time to do everything. However, reading to her, playing, taking her out for walks/exercise is something I look forward to everyday and manage it somehow even with the worst form of time crunch.*

Overstepping of the work limits by the hired caregivers was a cause of irritation for some of the mothers interviewed. A mother narrates:
I feel hired caregivers in general try to push boundaries and overstep. With nannies this is harder because of the children involved. When they use an attachment to the child as a way to overstep, they need to be told firmly but kindly, when they are out of line. There are some activities I like to do with the children. The children sleep with parents not nannies. The children also observe everyone working at their jobs/tasks, etc. so they tend to be aware of the different roles people have in their lives.

Some of the mothers elaborated on the strict boundaries and limits which they have instructed to their hired caregivers with regard to their duties towards their children. These strict boundaries were on account of the fears and anxieties they held regarding possible bad influences on their children, ranging from sexual harassment to impaired development. Mothers in the process of setting the best environment for their children, especially in their absence, undergo a lot fears when it comes to leaving their children with the hired caregivers. They suggested that leaving their children with hired caregivers could have lead to the hampered development of their children. A mother narrates:

Religion, language and physical space are three important areas where I wish to draw the boundary. I intend to bring up my daughter as a non-believer – the way I was brought up. Therefore, imposition of religious/superstitious beliefs is not acceptable. Communication in any language except English/Hindi/Assamese/Bengali is not acceptable since our baby will speak to us only in these four languages. Other languages are of no use to her or us. The nanny is not supposed to kiss the baby, purely because of the fear of infection and sending wrong signals to the baby that it is okay for others to kiss her without her consent. Also, I fear sexual harassment, which is why maintenance of physical boundaries is important.

Anxieties and Fears: Challenges of Manufacturing Motherhood

The mothers interviewed were mostly anxious of the neglect that the caregiver may possibly commit while the mothers are away. One of the biggest fears of the mothers revolved around the caregiver’s fixation with the television and mobile phones. This may lead to lesser interaction between the child and the caregiver.
which may lead to delay in speech, picking up words and formulation of sentences. Some mothers also fear that the caregivers may hit the child, also be abusive to the child. In order to address these two issues, the mothers who were interviewed have installed CCTVs in their houses. This may not be a hundred percent relief but it is an assurance to the mothers who are time and again anxious of their work and child. Thus, trust becomes a sensitive topic of confrontation between the two sets of working women. A mother narrates:

The shortcoming that I found with my local help was that most of the time she engaged my child before the TV. I asked all the time to play with her or talk with her, but it was reported to me by my landlords that she kept my child busy before the TV set. May be this is one of the reason that my child learnt to speak at almost 1 year and 5-6 months of age. Now I feel that as she was not surrounded by many people who can talk with her, even I also talk less, she spoke less at that time. I received this complaint from her schools also up to the age 6-7 years that she does not interact much with students and speaks less. Only recently her class teacher told me that she is becoming a little bit open now.

The everyday negotiations of the mothers and the caregivers are interesting. For a lot of us they may seem inconsequential and trivial but in the everyday life of a mother such issues are of enormous importance. The mothers lament that food becomes an area of conflict between the two categories of women. What food will and should be given to the child is an area of dispute in the kitchen. Many a times, even after being told, the caregivers slip and give junk food to the child. This concern is also accompanied by the ways in which the child is fed. A respondent has also spoken on the hygiene issues which are over and again missed by the caregiver, which then irks the mothers. For instance, one of the respondents narrates that the caregiver often misses out on washing the hand before feeding the child. The mother understands that this is not done on purpose but when such acts are often repeated it becomes difficult.

The level of anxiety among the mothers was so high that it also gradually started to affect their performance level. A mother narrates:

Initially I felt a little bit disturbed, and most of the time while at work I was thinking whether she maintained proper hygiene or not,
whether she washed her hands or not and many more. But gradually I found that all these have created a kind of anxiety and tension in my life that affected my professional life too. I could not concentrate on my studies, class or anywhere. I used to call her on phone after every half or one hour or requested my landlords to go and have a look at what she is doing. All this disturbed me a lot. But gradually I realised that I need to keep a balance between my professional and personal life, and there is no other option left at my hand other than trusting her. My colleagues, especially who have children of my daughter’s age, helped me a lot to overcome those anxieties and fears. Two of my colleagues also had children of my daughter’s age, and they also relied on caretakers and husbands were not with them; we decided to make a friendship among them, which also gave me some kind of relief that each of them started to visit to each other’s place during day time also when we were not present.

The emotional connect with the child also acts as a space of anxiety for the mothers availing hired caregivers for their children. A mother recounts:

The previous nannies did not know boundaries and have tried to form bonds with the child – which of course did not happen since my baby loves me the most. The relationship between my daughter and her current nanny is based on love, and the love is definitely genuine. There have been instances when the nanny has worked beyond her work hours when she has heard the baby crying inconsolably. It is the love for children in general that motivates the current nanny. She is definitely performing her duties for monetary compensation, yet at the same time it is evident that she actually loves the child.

A mother who was interviewed said she was concerned about her first child being over-attached to the nanny when she was expecting her second child. During this period, her first child began to sleep with the nanny in her bed in the nanny’s room. This became a habit; after the second child was born, it was difficult for the mother to make her first child sleep with her as the child continued to prefer sleeping with the nanny. The mother became concerned that the continuation of the child sleeping with the nanny was leading to the child imitating the
behavioural antics and manner of language of the nanny. The mother was also worried as the child would seem to become lost in an imaginary world due to the stories which the nanny would tell her at night. The mother had to brainwash her child to make her sleep with her and not the nanny. Even when the child began to sleep with the mother, the nanny would drag her mattress to their room and insist on sleeping in their room. This degree of attachment of the first child with the nanny and vice-versa was a cause of great concern for this mother.

Many of the mothers interviewed raised the point of possible over attachment of their children with the hired caregivers which they lamented, especially when these helpers would leave for short durations or forever which would then lead their children to be inconsolable. This remains a worry for those mothers whose children are already extremely attached to their hired caregivers. At times, their child throws tantrums and cries uncontrollably if the hired caregiver is removed from the child’s line of sight. Such obsessive attachment is a cause of great concern for these mothers. A mother narrates:

*The Kong, I was fortunate to have for roughly two and a half months (with one month gap in between), she was a willing and trustworthy worker. I was comfortable leaving my children with her. She was an all-rounder and helped with the children, did their laundry, baths, etc. and when the children were at daycare or school, she would clean the house. She left saying someone in her family was ill and that she would give us news in two to three days (or be back in two to three days). This did not happen; I did not know she wanted to leave. This left us in a fix as my child got attached to her. It was very difficult for us to manage our child initially.*

This indicates that mothers are unsure and not at ease to leave every child related chore to the caregiver. Mothers who were interviewed narrated that it is their husbands who are more trusting and always push them to trust the caregiver in their absence. The caregivers also do not appreciate too much of interference. They find it offensive and demeaning when it comes to questioning their working style. All the kongs who were interviewed narrated, ‘*dada bur bhalei baidew olop khong kore*’ (the man in the house is good but madam gets angry). This indicates the anxieties of the mother and the ways in which she looks at the whole journey of motherhood.
At another level few mothers go through another anxiety of being judged by others for hiring caregivers for their children. A mother describes her experiences:

*I was less appreciated and more judged for having a nanny for the job which otherwise I was supposed to perform. People around me specially my relatives, not judged actually; they put remarks such as ‘How would you be so tension free for the whole day by keeping your child with a nanny?’ ‘You are really a carefree woman…If I would be in your place I would never leave my child alone at home’. ‘Why don’t you just take leaves, your child is more important than your work?’ ‘Give more time to your child, forget about Ph.D.’ …these kind of comments I heard mostly.*

Another instance she shares:

*In 2012, I went for my orientation course in Gauhati University; my child was 2 years 1 month old at that time, my husband assured me that he and the care taker would take the responsibility of the child, so no need to take her with me to Guwahati. I agreed, as we are living in a joint family in Dibrugarh, and I left the child with her father. After reaching Guwahati, I went to one of my relative’s home, the first thing that I heard from them was that ‘What kind of mother you are, leaving two year old child alone?’ ‘Is this orientation too necessary for you right now?’ I cried for the whole one day and requested my husband to take her to Guwahati….first he refused…but I insisted…then he managed to take her to Guwahati with the care taker also…..and my caretaker, me and my child three of us completed the orientation course…you can imagine how I managed everything to complete the course.*

**Concerns of the Caregivers: Where Emotion meets Profession**

Throughout the interviews, there was a difference in the ways the employers assessed the kongs versus the local hired caregivers. The professional caregivers knew what they wanted and what it is that they were expected to perform. They did not perform anything extra nor did they work extra besides the child related chores. On the other hand, the local helps were more affectionate and were engaged in a lot of other domestic chores in the household beyond childcare.
The kongs interviewed were very vocal about their rights and the working hours, while the local caregivers were flexible with the timings and were very satisfied with the work. There is a network in which the kongs work; it is based on village contacts and getting in touch with the local leader who helps them find a job. This lady is referred to as kongmaam; she gets a commission for every new appointee. It was also learnt that the kongs do not prefer to work with toddlers as there is a lot of running around; they prefer an infant as it involves less physical activity. They usually follow a cycle. The usual time to find a kong is in December and January; they demand paid leave for Christmas during this time and visit home for 15-20 days. They meet their respective kongmaams and negotiate their work. This is the time when they leave most of their previous employers if they wish to discontinue and search for new work place. This is very different for the local caregivers who get easily attached to the employer and the child.

There are also instances when the kongs used the child as bait. A mother rue, that in spite of giving the best to the caregiver, she used the child as a pretext to increase the salary. It was also noted during the field work that kongs were not only professional but are also a product of what Horchschild calls the emotional labour in which the emotions are sold for money. Thus, the affection and emotion towards the child are considered as a product of the market and economy. On the other hand, the care and emotion of the local caregiver is more altruistic. The respondent (mothers) were very satisfied with the level of their (local caregivers) emotional connect with the child. The local caregivers never used the child as bait and were always satisfied with the salary, and never demanded a hike, unlike the kongs who were always thinking on the lines of economic benefits.

There were also certain challenges which were predominantly echoed by the hired caregivers interviewed when asked about their work. For instance, a respondent (hired helper) noted that often times her employer used harsh statements like ‘nijor matha nologabi’ (do not use your brains) or ‘nijor jegah janibi’ (know your place); at the same time she felt that her work was appreciated by the mother who gifted her new and expensive clothes every once in a while. This duality was a constant refrain in the interviews of all six hired helpers. While they felt that they contributed immensely to the care provided to the children, yet they felt that their contribution could have been appreciated in greater ways by their employers, not just in terms of money but in terms of general overall approval and trust. This sense of undervalued has been elaborated by Stone (2000) who indicates how caregivers get emotionally attached and engage in altruism while providing
childcare. This eventually puts the care workers in a conceding position, as they get attached emotionally with the child or the patient and cannot demand more remuneration for the emotional labour that they provide.

Like the mothers, the caregivers also undergo a dilemma. For instance, one caregiver lamented that while she was working as a come-in caregiver (she would come in the morning and go in the evening) in Guwahati, she felt awkward and felt that baidew (the madam who was otherwise very nice to her) didn’t wish her to stay a minute longer once she was home from work. The caregiver felt that there was unease between the two of them which was unspoken but carried a lot of meaning. She felt she was invisible in the whole journey of mothering other’s children.

Another important aspect brought to light while speaking with the hired women helpers is that they need to go and work in more affluent women’s house due to financial needs; this also means that they have to abandon their own children in doing so. A kong and a local help who were interviewed shared that because they do not want a similar future as theirs for their children, they had to come out and take care of others’ children. Horchschild (2000, 2003) draws on the penetration of capitalism and its impact on the care work. Horchschild (2000) describes this as the first world robbing the third world of love and affection. The need for care workers has multiplied as the transition from agrarian to industrial economies grew. This has been borne out by this study as well as most of the mothers interviewed are first generation ‘career’ women.

Findings and Conclusions

The two categories of women studied share a story of mutual dependence. When one category of women (caregiver) takes care of the children for a payment; the other (employer) can move out of their homes to pursue their professional lives which results in their financial independence. Leaving the children in the hands of a hired caregiver gives rise to a host of challenges for both parties. From the interviews and small scare interactions conducted with both parties, the contrast in their approach towards caregiving become apparent. While, the mothers have their own rules when it comes to the child, the caregivers also seem to understand the enormity of the situation. There are often clashes, which occur on the ways in which the two parties wish to extend care to the child. While sometimes both, achieve an understanding at times; a resolution remains out of reach leading to
friction between them. The employers (mothers) whose responses have been used have a relatable account. They represent similar socio-economic status and life choices. They consider it important to have a professional life for which they are left with no choice but to hand over their children to hired helpers. In the absence of the extended network of family members the caregivers came to salvage their families. The caregivers also acted as a buffer, gave enough confidence to the working mothers so that they could venture out of their homes.

Despite the shortcomings which were pointed out by the mothers, the hired helpers have also been vastly been appreciated by the mothers for the extensive work carried out by them. They have mostly agreed that without the hired helpers they would be severely handicapped in pursuing their careers. They also did not bother much about the religious affiliations of the caregivers and had no reservations on the salaries to be paid. The range of salary, however, varied from five thousand rupees to twenty thousand rupees a month. This again is an indication of the similar socio-economic life choices of the women under study. It also reflects the class of the women who can hire help for their children and also indicates the business of providing such hired help which has mushroomed owing to the rising phenomenon of a class of career working women such as the mothers who were interviewed. Tamara Hareven (1982) talks the fixed timings in the industrial economy and its impact on the quality family time which was earlier flexible has now become rigid. She argues that it is this feeling which eventually gave birth to the conflict of guilt in the mother.

The mothers in their absence from home try to recreate an environment of intensive mothering with the help of a set of dos’ and don’ts which is to be followed by the caregivers all the time in their absence. While the whole concept of hiring a caregiver suggests that the mothers sought the best in the profession for their children and therefore, settled for the caregivers who would only engage in care work and not on any other domestic chores. But the rules and boundaries again at another level question whether non maternal childcare is possible and is it flexible? The mothers often feel that the mother work is never shared and cannot be recreated by an outsider. While the caregivers often felt neglected and unappreciated for the care they provided towards the child. As they believe that they did not receive the desired respect for the work done. There is always a class angle to the whole idea of socialization and childcare which also gets reflected in the process of childcare.
Thus, the dilemma of motherhood and childcare continues even after either having the best in the profession or training the caregiver in the best possible way. This, however, is a class-based idea. This gets highlighted when we look at the reactions of the mother towards both the categories of the caregivers. While, the mothers felt more comfortable with the kongs then with the local helps when it came to the childcare alone. While both the categories of women try to create and recreate intensive motherhood, the binary of employer and employee continues to overshadow the processes. To a certain extent the kongs work has been appreciated by the mothers yet there was a line which made them rethink the boundaries of employer and employee. There are various points in which they negotiate at an emotional level. The mothers often bereft of a choice accept the caregiver while, on part of the caregiver they negotiate for money and the emotional connect with the child. It is, however, subjected to interpretation whether we see them in terms of class (employer and employee) or the mother taking out her catharsis on the caregiver.

Notes:

i The Khasi women who have attained puberty are given the salutation of kong. In case of this paper the category is used to refer to the women who came as caregivers.

ii Usually a women’s group which is formed as a self-help group, here women contribute money every month and develop a corpus. When in need the women from the same group can borrow money from it either by not paying interest or by giving minimum interests.
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