



**FRACTURING FAMILIAL PATRIARCHY:
UNDERSTANDING THE ADVOCATES AND
OBSTACLES TO DOMESTIC ROLE-REVERSAL
AS A FORTUITOUS COROLLARY OF THE
LOCKDOWN MID AND POST-COVID-19
PANDEMIC THROUGH A FEMINISTIC LENS**

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Abstract

The onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 proved to be an unfathomable stressor to individuals as well as societal groups and communities, especially taking a toll on families and familial behaviours. Family stressors are expected to have broad effects on family functioning both directly as well as indirectly through spillover effects (Hussong, et al, 2022). Following the end of World War II, deviations in gender roles led researchers to suggest that there existed a possibility for many fathers to increase their child-care hours thus leading practical experience in caring for their children, inadvertently leading to a greater bond and attachment to them. This could aid in pushing the envelope, and breaking the rigidity of existing social norms that lead toward more equality in raising children, domestic work, and gender roles (Alon et al., 2020).

Objective: The purpose of this paper is to understand, through the feministic lens, how the COVID-19 pandemic, and lockdown that followed suit, brought about the fracturing of archetypical patriarchy in terms of shared household work and even role-reversal in work trends, whilst also establishing the elements that assist and deter this drift as the new normal.

Methodology: The paper is solely based on definition and interpretation *sans* the use of empirical observation, data collection, evaluation and interpretation based on it, and conclusion.

Keywords: 1. Feminism 2. Gender roles 3. Patriarchy 4. Role-reversal 5. Sexism

Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 virus changed the way the world functions; right from miniscule acts in one's household to the manner in which the businesses

ran. The pandemic also saw a surge in unemployment, reduction in working hours, and working from home; the rate varying across continents and countries. Unemployment and reduction in work hours had a direct impact on people investing themselves in household chores (Gough and Killewald, 2011; van der Lippe et al., 2018; Pailhé et al., 2019; Bünning, 2020). Even for those, especially men, whose workspace shifted from an on-site cubical to their residences, they were able to afford to spend more time contributing and sharing the household workload, and investing themselves in child-care as well (Bujard et al., 2020; Stenpaß and Kley, 2020; Hank and Stienbach, 2021).

A survey on parents in the United Kingdom deduced that a staggering 80% of the focus group impressed on how the lockdown led to them being able to form stronger bonds with their families. (Roshgadol, 2020). This was a direct result of them being able to spend more time with their families regardless of having to cope with working from home, and homeschooling their children. Studies in Turkey too reported parents using the lockdown as a (God-given) opportunity to improve their marital life (Alhas, 2020). Considering the work of Alon et al. (2020) which proposed that the lockdown would lead to fathers involving themselves more in caring for their children as well as taking on home-schooling responsibilities. Post World War II, deviations in gender roles led researchers to suggest that there existed a possibility for many fathers to increase their child-care hours thus leading practical experience in caring for their children, inadvertently leading to a greater bond and attachment to their children. This could aid in push the envelope, and breaking the rigidity of existing social norms that lead toward more equality in raising children, domestic work, and gender rules (Alon et al., 2020). This being said, this paper further narrates definitions and establishes the groundwork on how the shift in trend of gender roles has surpassed societal archetypes and stigma to the male psyche.

Defining Feminism: Feminism is defined as a multi-disciplined approach to matters of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality as understood from social theories and political activism (Day, 2016). In other words, feminism can be defined as complex set of

political ideologies used by the women's movement to ensure the progress and ensure women's equality thus bringing about an end to sexism and the social oppression that goes hand-in-hand (Ngwainmbi, 2004) Over time, feminism evolved and shifted its focus from an analysis of inequality between genders to stressing on the social and performative constructions of gender and sexuality with the feminist theory now purposing to cross-examine inequalities and inequities along the overlapping areas of ability, class, gender, race, sex, and sexuality; and with true feminists aiming to bring about change in areas that create power inequity (Day, 2016).

Dissecting Gender and Gender Roles

Gender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of people and persons based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender (Blackstone, 2003). The roles are a result of interactions between individuals and their environments, and provide indicators as to what behaviour is appropriate and suited for what gender. In order to have a better understanding of gender roles, one must understand the term “gender” and its differentiation from the word “sex”. Whilst sex refers to the biological attribute, defined by the individual’s principal physical physiognomies; gender relates to the meanings, values and characteristics that people subscribe to different sexes. Wienclaw (2011) elaborates that whilst sex determines an individual’s biological construct, gender refers to the psychological, social, cultural, and behavioral characteristics associated with being either male or female. In fact, gender are attributes learned, and is a societal elucidation of the cultural implication of one’s sex.

Amy L. Blackstone, in her paper, “Gender Roles and Society” (Blackstone, 2003) elaborates: “Ann Oakley (1972) was one the first social scientists to distinguish the concept of gender from the concept of sex. According to Oakley, gender parallels the biological division of sex into male and female, but it involves the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity.” Thus, this implies that sex is biological in nature, whilst gender is sociocultural in nature, thus making it a social construct that is free to be interpreted by society through the ongoing social interactions that individuals have with each other (Wienclaw,

2011) Quoting Blackstone (2003): “In other words, gender is a concept that humans create socially, through their interactions with one another and their environments, yet it relies heavily upon biological differences between males and females. Because humans create the concept of gender socially, gender is referred to as a social construction. The social construction of gender is demonstrated by the fact that individuals, groups, and societies ascribe particular traits, statuses, or values to individuals purely because of their sex, yet these ascriptions differ across societies and cultures, and over time within the same society.”

A Classical Stance

Oakley (1972) further goes on to suggest a definition of gender roles which is: the roles that men and women are expected to inhabit based on their gender. Western societies, by tradition, have adhered to the notion that women take precedence over men when it comes to nurturing. It is based on this viewpoint that the feminine gender is expected to behave in manners which are deemed more nurturing as opposed to men who are deemed to be heads and leaders, both familial and societal; thus taking on the role of being (financial) providers, and making the important decisions of the household.

Alternate Vantage Points

These views and mindsets tend to remain prevalent and dominant in a manifold strata and spheres of society. Ever since the dawn of the 21st Century, alternate viewpoints and adherence to them are gaining an ever-increasing support. Thus there are myriad environmental factors that play a causal role in defining gender role.

Ecology: An ecological standpoint suggests that gender roles are formed by the interaction between individuals, groups and their environment; thus the ambient environment a person works in plays a primary role in defining their role.

Biology: The biological viewpoint suggests that suggests that women have a natural inclination toward the feminine gender role whilst men are more skewed toward the masculine gender role. It should be noted that this does not suggest that the masculine role supersedes the feminine role, or vice versa.

Sociology: Viewing through the sociological lens, the perspective theorises that male and female gender roles are something that are learned, and are not necessarily associated to biology.

Feminism: Falling under the sociological standpoint, the feminist perspective further goes onto suggest and elaborate that since gender roles are learned, they can also be unlearned; and new and different roles formed. Blackstone further elaborates that, “The feminist perspective points out that gender roles are not simply ideas about appropriate behavior for males and females but are also linked to the different levels of power that males and females hold in society. For example, maintaining economic control over themselves and their families is one way that men experience greater power in society than women.” And it is through the feministic lens that this paper views the causality of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on familial and domestic role-reversal. Because the pandemic led to a merging of work and family time; a blending of professional and personal lives, it is also imperative to understand traditional gender roles both at work and home spaces.

Workspace and Gender Roles

We live in a society that, whilst boasting of being forward, “open-minded” and non-traditional brims with veiled hypocrisy. In spite of progress toward gender equality, women are still falling short as opposed to men when it comes to an advancement in career; and this is emphasised on the onset of motherhood (Stone, 2007). It is often that men and women, in a workspace, are expected to undertake tasks and assume roles based on their gender (Kanter, 1977). For example: men will tend to be given opportunities that demand higher physical dexterity and leadership traits whilst sustaining an inclination for being more ambitious and goal-oriented. Women, on the other hand, will be granted opportunities that are less labour-intensive and more clerical in nature such as secretarial work because it is presumed they are more relationship-oriented. Even remunerations and benefits are provided based on gender roles. For example, parental leaves are provided to mothers and not fathers.

Whilst the above examples may seem to be governed and biased by patriarchy, gender discrimination through blind assumption of gender roles leans both ways.

For example, within the field of academia: Ristad and Rigstad (2007) identify higher academia as a masculine occupation that is, by nature, patriarchal, and which is sheathed by a glass ceiling of implicit norms that hinder women's effective participation and advancement within the field. On the other hand, especially during the early and middle years of schooling, more preference is given to female candidates over men because of the perceived notion of them (females) being caregivers and less sexually threatening. Male teachers who are inclined towards working at the pre-school level face a multitude of workplace complications due to the existing gender bias (Sak et al., 2012). For example, male pre-school teachers are often seen as potential sexual abusers (Barnard et al., 2000; Cohen, 1992; Cushman, 2005; Drudy, 2008; Farguhar, 1997; Santiago, 1999; Shaham, 1991; Thornton, 1999; Wiest et.al. 2003), labeled homosexuals or not real men (Farguhar, 1997; Wiest, Olive and Obenchain, 2003) since this type of teaching is women's work (Cohen, 1992; Cushman, 2005; Drudy, 2008).

Familial Gender Play

Domestically, labour has always been divided traditionally based on gender. Though some cultures have supplanted the traditional stance with a more egalitarian one, others still subscribe to the old ways of having males and females have a set of responsibilities which are based on the perceived abilities and demands on each of the sexes (Wienclaw, 2011). In spite of gender roles being social constructs, in some ways, they are biologically and physiologically based. It falls upon women who must go through gestation and childbirth; though it is argued that the biological role ends at birthing. Wienclaw (2011) argues that, "It is no longer necessary for women to even stay home to nurse an infant. Not only can infants be bottle-fed using formula, women can express breast milk so that the baby continues to get all the immunological benefits of breast feeding without the mother needing to be physically present.

Gender does have a biological foundation in the physiological differences between females and males. However, the way that gender is interpreted differs from culture to culture and, in some ways, from individual to individual." Research has always shown that there lies no difference between the sexes in terms of intellectual aptitude (Feingold, 1994; Lynn, 1994; Halpern and Wai, 2020). As

women strive and secure gender equality at the workplace, they seek gender equality at home as well, thus affecting the division of labor for domestic responsibilities. Because men are expected to be the primary breadwinners for their families, women often find themselves to be in poverty if their marriages dissolve. In this example, a feminist perspective would assert that men tend to hold more power in their marriages than women since men are less likely to lose power or social status if their marriages dissolve” (Blackstone, 2003; Oakley, 1972)

Gender Stereotyping

Blackstone (2003) goes on to elaborate that gender stereotyping refers to the oversimplification of the understanding of males and females, and the differences that exist between them. As a matter of fact, it includes myriad exaggerations, and inaccurate and unfounded assumptions about the nature and behaviours of males and females. It stresses on the differences between males and females whilst wrongfully concluding each gender’s natural inclination to particular behaviours. It is common for individuals to base their perception of what roles a particular gender should take on based on gender stereotypes such as assuming that males are rational, not emotionally sensitive; whereas females are irrational and overly emotional. Feminism has through the years helped to critique gender stereotyping whilst offering unconventional and non-traditional alternatives of what gender roles should be so as to create an equality between women and men. Individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles are more inclined to value of egalitarian relationships between men and women. They also understand that individuals have the right to determine what roles they wish to occupy.

Towards Egalitarianism

Flynn (2011) states that sociologists study gender roles so as to explore the manner in which gender is constructed and performed; the manner in which family relations are maintained.; and how the family unit affects society. In 1955, sociologists, Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales, in their book, “Family, Socialization and Interaction Process,” explained that the role of the nuclear family and the gender roles within were to serve the economy. According to them, the nuclear family is a system that functions, requires and depends on

equilibrium and successful role performance. Provision of income, house-cleaning, food preparation, caring for and disciplining children, and maintaining relationships with friends and family, etc. are common family roles in the nuclear family (Huntington et al, 2001). This traditional social role division, emphasised the difference in women's and men's roles in the family system, with men playing instrumental roles by earning money in their chosen profession and the role of women being characterised by emotional, physical, and maintenance work, and limited to being wives and mothers.

But with the advent of feminist movements in the 1960s, theories opposed the classical beliefs and argued that the role of the family and gender roles was to share responsibilities (Carroll and Campbell, 2008). Post World War II, a significant number of women became part of the work force whilst seeking higher education. By the mid of the century, American society was characterised by prosperity and a growing need for equal civil rights (Breines, 1986). Other significant changes in society that helped influence and change gender roles were the growing trends of marrying and parenting at a much older age; the sharing of parental responsibilities; the increasing number of married women partaking in the workforce; and the greater commitment of women to their careers. Due to the sudden evolution in patterns, mainstream sociology was slow to adapt to and recognise the modern and converging gender roles for men and women; and found it equally difficult to retire the traditional and classical beliefs (Szelényi and Olvera, 1996). The merging of masculine and feminine gender roles ensued in the family and work settings. The reasons for this included new civil rights laws, new female role models, economic needs, and co-ed education in which boys and girls commenced to study from the same curriculum. Eventually, social and economic transitions transformed family gender roles (Flynn, 2011).

Hits the COVID-19 Pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the planet, it changed families, roles, and their functioning; something which they had adhered to for decades. Work from home became a commonality. This meant that both men and women not only shared a common home space but also a common work place. According

to Hank and Steinbach (2021) three changes were noted in the functioning of both

traditional and egalitarian families:

Firstly, the crisis caused couples to be skewed towards extremes: that is to say, some shifted to a strongly traditional arrangement whilst others shifted to a total division of labour and childcare which indicated role-reversal. Secondly, their study indicated that “there is an almost equal split between those in which the female partner’s share in domestic and family duties increased and those in which it decreased, respectively. Particularly in previously more egalitarian arrangements, a substantial proportion of women is now more likely to be mostly or (almost) completely responsible for everything. If male partners increased their relative contribution to housework and childcare tasks, they rarely moved beyond the threshold of an equal split of 50/ 50.” And finally, working from home provided greater opportunities and/or obligations to increase one’s relative contribution to housework for female partners and childcare for male partners (Stenpaß and Kley, 2020) Moreover, their findings suggest that men exhibited an immediate reaction to changes in working hours during the Corona crisis, resulting in – positive or negative – adaptations of their relative contribution to domestic and family responsibilities (Hank and Steinbach, 2021)

Discussion

In many cultures, the housework performed by women is greatly devalued as opposed to the tasks performed by men. Thus making it more and more difficult for men to adjust to share in the responsibilities of domestic tasks. More so, the deep-seated attitudes held by men and women who are brought up in a society that values the traditional set of beliefs greatly affects the practices of sharing of responsibilities. This typically means that there are deeper issues regarding gender roles and what tasks or activities are or are not masculine, and vice-versa. There is also a prevalent notion female hang-ups (Wienclaw, 2011) wherein so deep are the gender roles ingrained in women that when their husbands actually take over some of the traditional domestic responsibilities in the family, some women tend to gate-keep, resist or manage their husband’s contribution in household tasks, even if they are working on a full-time basis

themselves. “This situation may arise from the woman’s own concepts of traditional gender roles and the reluctance to give up this role or feeling that her gender identity is threatened by her husband’s non-traditional participation in the home. It has also been hypothesised that women may gate-keep because the types of jobs that many of them can find outside the home typically do not have as much prestige as those of their husbands. As a result, sharing domestic responsibilities can negatively impact the self-esteem of some women because they see their husband as more competent outside the home and do not want to see him as equally competent inside the home as well. For this reason, gatekeeping can occur even when women work full-time and objectively need help with domestic responsibilities. Similarly, some women attempt to take over managerial responsibility for their husband’s domestic tasks” (Wienclaw, 2011). Other situations women face to fully give up their domestic responsibilities are the differences in standards of domestic responsibilities such as manner in which a task needs to be performed, level of cleanliness, etc. Ruth A. Wienclaw further argues that: “Less educated women are not the only ones who may experience difficulty when trying to balance their domestic responsibilities with their jobs. Professional women, as well, may experience problems with their self-esteem, stress, or guilt when they find that they cannot take on all the domestic responsibilities involved in child care and housework as well as all the duties and activities associated with their careers. The guilt experienced by these women, however, may be more than a personal issue related to gender identity and self-esteem. Some observers have suggested that guilt arising in such situations is actually inherent in society (Guendouzi, 2006).”

Conclusion

The progress of the feministic movement has certainly brought women to understand gender bias and discrimination. But the deep-seated and inherent traditional views will be something hard to break apart from. It is true that the pandemic has merged work and home spaces thus also making men and women equally partake and share in household responsibilities but this will not prove to be a growing trend unless the societal mindsets of gender roles inherent and prevalent in society are changed from the foundation stone of society itself. With

the newer generations more inclined to modern mindsets, breaking the beliefs of older generations who are chained to the classical and traditional theories of gender roles is something that only time and influence will decide.

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