



## Working Women and Role Conflict: An Empirical Study at Oil India Ltd., Duliajan, Assam

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**ABSTRACT:** The concept of gender specific roles and role conflict has been widely explored within the sociological discourse. Although a very well-discussed and common issue, it has become, when it comes to women, the significance of this issue doesn't yet seem to have faded away. Role conflict is manifested even more drastically among urban working women. The simplest explanation is that role conflict arises among urban working women as they have to perform their gender specific roles as mothers and wives along with their jobs. However, the mere presence of multiple roles is not enough to explain the very complex phenomenon of role conflict among these women. Addressing this complexity, this paper has attempted to make a critical observation of the issue of role conflict among the working women in Oil India Ltd., Duliajan, Assam.

**KEYWORDS:** Working Women, Role, Gendered Hierarchy, Role Expectation, Role Conflict.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'role' originates in the Latin word 'Rotula', which meant a little wheel or a round log. Only by the 16th and 17th centuries was this word used to denote characters in a drama in the English language (Rani 1976). The notion of roles is significant as it is a vital tool for the analysis of social systems. Banton says, "Societies may be pictured as systems of roles." (Banton 1965). A study on role conflict cannot be embarked upon without indulging in the idea of role, in a sociological sense. And again, in a sociological understanding, status and role go hand in hand, as the various norms that a person is expected to follow to achieve and retain a particular status in a particular social context constitute a role for that specific person. Performing a role involves social relationships, as an individual performs a role about other roles (Haralambos and Heald 1980). Thus, we can say that role suggests a set of obligations and expectations attached to a particular social status.

G.D. Mitchell defines social roles as the "expected behaviour associated with a 'social position'" (Mitchell, 1968). The social roles have been classified in many ways, such as expected role (how other people expect an individual to behave), perceived role (individual perception of own role) and actual role (how the individual actually behaves). Thus, an individual performs his or her role not in isolation, but in relation to other roles and as an individual holds multiple statuses, he or she also performs multiple roles. Roles are contextual in the sense that they vary in terms of role expectation based on a variety of factors such as culture, age, sex, etc. Furthermore, with changes in social structure, the roles and role expectations also change, which makes the notion of role a very complex phenomenon to study. This ambiguity and complexity of the nature of roles, multiplicity of roles, role expectation, its contextual variation and tendency to change can be viewed as the major sources of role conflict.

Role conflict arises as a result of conflict of roles corresponding to two or more statuses (Pandit and Upadhaya 2012). Banton argues that there is a possibility that with the increasing complexity of social life, the incidences of role conflict will also increase (Banton 1965). That is because in a simple society, the roles are clearly demarcated. But as the society evolves and becomes more complex, the clear lines separating roles and role expectation blurs, and the roles overlap, creating a confusing state where a tension emerges between role perception and role expectation. In a developing country like India, undergoing change at a tremendous pace, this phenomenon is evident. Kala Rani writes, "Contemporary Indian society is in transition. Tradition is undergoing continuous change. But the modern has not been accepted fully" (Rani 1976). Under such circumstances, women and especially working women have been caught up in a transitory phase. On the one hand, they are getting into various occupations having received higher education; whereas on the other hand, they are still



expected to perform their traditional and gender specific roles at home. This has resulted in a steady tussle between traditional role expectations and new aspirations and role perceptions on the part of working women in India. Ahmad writes that, "The major role problem a woman faces is the conflict arising from multiple roles." (Ahmad 1995). Kapur suggests that women who combine marriage with career inevitably face a situation of normlessness and fail to create a balance between these two responsibilities, which results in conflict, tension and strain (Malhotra and Sachdeva 2005). According to role theory, women, regardless of the culture, are likely to experience strain when trying to meet their traditionally assigned roles at home and their modern roles as employees. This strain resulting from the tussle of work roles and family roles has been labelled as work-family conflict (WFC) (Wafula 2010). Kahn et al. define work-family conflict as a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respects (Kahn et al. 1964). Scholars have come up with various theories to explain work-family conflict. The Segmentation theory suggests that work and family as two distinct domains that demand investment of time, energy, attitude and behaviour, and application of these in one domain will lead to neglect of the other. Compensation theory suggests that individuals will seek in one domain what they can't find in the other. On the other hand, Spillover theory states that attitudes and behaviour from one domain will be carried over to the other domain. The result of this spillover could be both positive and negative (Wafula, 2010).

The role conflict approach follows the idea that time and energy are fixed and scarce, and participation in one role will reduce resources for participation in other roles, resulting in an experience of conflict (Rajadhyaksha and Velgach 2009). However, this approach cannot explain role conflict in its entirety. In a developing country like India, gendered hierarchy is a universal phenomenon and role conflict among working women needs to be explored from this standpoint. In this light, this study has attempted a critical analysis of role conflict among the working women of Oil India Ltd., Duliajan, Assam.

## II. CONCEPTUALISING THE PROBLEM

As explained in the introduction, working women in urban India are performing multiple roles, which results in confusing role perceptions, role expectations and role conflict. However, mere

multiplicity of roles can't possibly explain the ground realities of role conflict among urban working women. This study presents an analysis of this role conflict from a gendered perspective. This paper has tried to explore the nature and extent of gendered hierarchy which these women face, both at family and work, and its impact on role expectations and role conflict. Another problem this paper has attempted to address is the impact of family role expectations and the nature of role conflict among these working women.

Leaving aside certain instances, women in India today are increasingly becoming a part of its workforce. Although women in India have a long way to go before they can achieve equality with men in terms of wages, positions and status attached to a job. Nonetheless, it can at least be said that women in India are now a visible entity in terms of work. However, they are still not free from the age-old socio-cultural demands and expectations which a traditional Indian society, and more importantly, an evolving and 'modernising' Indian society impose upon them. Role conflict among urban working women, which constitutes the subject matter of this paper, is nothing but a vivid representation of this resilient and repugnant problem women have to face still, and which does not confine to working women alone but surely affects them more intensely. Hence, it can be said with conviction that this issue is significant for academic enquiry.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This paper has undertaken an empirical study of role conflict among urban working women. In this regard, 40 working women of Oil India Ltd., Duliajan, Assam, have been taken as the respondents for this study. The primary data for this study has been collected with the help of a structured questionnaire and personal interviews. Besides the primary data collected through fieldwork, secondary sources such as books, journals, etc., relevant to the subject matter have also been consulted.

## III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

**Working Women and Gendered Hierarchy at Family and Work:** This paper has attempted to reflect upon the role conflict the respondents have to face from a gendered perspective. Hence, during the field study, an attempt was made to see if the respondents experience male gendered hierarchy at the level of both family and work and if this gendered hierarchy is a factor that adds to the



emergence of role conflict among them. Most of the respondents believe that they live in a patriarchal family with a male member as the head of the family. Among the 24 (60%) married respondents out of the total of 40 respondents, 20 (83% of the 24 married respondents) named their husbands as their head of the family. Among the 16 (40%) unmarried respondents out of 40 respondents, 14 (87% of the 16 unmarried respondents) named their fathers as the head of their family. However, it was noticeable that in terms of the decision-making process in the family and in making decisions regarding their own life, children's education and property-related affairs, most of the respondents provided positive responses. 28 (70%) of the total 40 respondents said that they can actively participate in the decision-making process in their family. Only 12 (30%) of the total respondents said they do not have a say in the decision-making process in their family. Again, 28 (70%) of the total 40 respondents also said that they do not feel having a subordinated position in comparison to the male members of the family in any way. A careful look into the composition and details of the respondents explains this. Most of the respondents (34, 85% of the total respondents) live in a nuclear family. All of the respondents are highly educated, and all of them are placed highly in terms of their jobs. The study shows that the educational qualification and their position as working women add to the income of the family, raise their status in the family and provide them the rights and capability to take part in the decision-making process in the family, which stands true for both married and unmarried working women.

Regarding gendered hierarchy at work, the study shows some interesting results. Most of the colleagues of the respondents at their respective workplaces are male, and 26 (65% of the total respondents) are the only females at their office. However, when asked if the respondents feel that the majority of their colleagues being male affects their behaviour and day-to-day activities at work, most of the respondents answered negatively. However, when we compare the married and unmarried respondents in this regard, a sharp contradiction in their opinions on the matter becomes prominent.

While only 8 (33%) out of 24 married respondents said that the majority of their colleagues being male creates certain discomfort in terms of their work, 10 (62%) out of 16 unmarried respondents responded positively in this regard. Again, when asked if it would have been better if there had been a majority of female colleagues at

their workplace, only 10 (41%) of the 24 married women responded positively. On the other hand, 12 (75%) out of 16 unmarried respondents answered positively in this regard. 14 (35%) of the total respondents had a female as the most superior officer in their office, and all these respondents said that having a female as the most superior officer helps them in performing their job and maintaining a balance between their job and family

The above analysis shows that a male gendered hierarchy is present at both the family and work. The fact that all the respondents live in patriarchal families and the majority of their colleagues are male points towards it. Moreover, the responses showing a preference towards having more female members at work, with the potential to increase their comfort level, especially among the unmarried working women, prove this point further. However, it is observable that the respondents are not the victims of male gendered hierarchy, as such, which is mostly the case with uneducated and unemployed women. Nonetheless, we can still see that in spite of their education and job status, male member still holds the superior status at both family and work. Moreover, in terms of work, this gendered hierarchy creates certain problems for the respondents, which creates obstacles in performing their role as an employee and which is bound to affect their role in the family as well.

#### **Family-Role Expectations and Role Conflict:**

After establishing the fact that the working women respondents in this study face gendered hierarchy both at family and work, it is time to explore the family role expectations and whether these role expectations lead to role conflict among these women. This study shows that all the respondents have to get involved in household work such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, care of children and in-laws (where applicable), etc. Among the 24 married respondents, 22 (91%) said that their husbands help them in household work, especially with shopping. Among the 16 unmarried respondents, most stated that they are not expected to perform household work to the extent that it puts pressure upon them in terms of maintaining their responsibilities at work and home. Yet, 18 (75%) out of 24 married respondents and 6 (37%) out of 16 unmarried respondents consider household work as a burden in terms of maintaining a balance between their roles at home and work. Again, 18 (75%) out of the 24 married respondents stated that they get much less free time in comparison to their working husbands and pointed towards extensive expectations in terms of household work as the reason for it. These



statements are made by the respondents even though 14 (35%) out of the 40 respondents have hired domestic help to assist them with their household activities. Only half of the married respondents, 12 (50%) out of 24, live with their in-laws. Out of these 12 respondents, 8 (67% of 12) stated that their in-laws help them with household activities, especially childcare. Only 4 (33%) of these 12 respondents living with their in-laws felt that caring for their in-laws creates an extra burden on them, and the expectations of their in-laws make them follow certain rules and customs, which makes it more difficult for them to maintain their responsibilities at home and work. And yet, when asked if it becomes easy for them to maintain their responsibilities at home and work if they are not living with their in-laws, all the married respondents (24, 100%) stated that it does help. When asked if living away from the husband's family near the workplace helps them, 20 (83%) out of 24 respondents answered positively. Even 12 (75%) out of 16 unmarried respondents, who did not consider household work as a major burden, also stated that living away from their family for work, they can balance their roles at home and work in a better way.

Oil India Ltd. provides its employees with many opportunities to take part in various activities such as sports and cultural programmes. While all the 16 unmarried respondents stated that their role at home doesn't create obstacles for them in grasping these opportunities, only 10 (41%) of the 24 married respondents could answer similarly. Respondents were asked to comment in general on whether they find maintaining their roles at family and work stressful or not.

While 10 (62%) out of 16 unmarried respondents responded negatively, only 8 (33%) of the married respondents stated they don't find it stressful. On the other hand, while only 6 (38%) of the unmarried respondents answered positively, 16 (67%) of the married respondents stated that they find it stressful to maintain both roles at family and work. These respondents provided a lack of time, inability of time management and overburdening household work as reasons for their difficulties in creating a balance between their roles at home and their role as an employee.

The preceding analysis makes it abundantly clear that working women in Oil India Ltd., Duliajan, face the problem of role conflict. Their responsibilities at home make it difficult for them to perform their roles at home and work, and also to create a balance between the two. Family role

expectations, which seem to be more evident in the case of married working women, make it stressful for these women to perform both roles. This reality is also suggestive of the fact that gendered hierarchy present at both the family and work levels is a primary catalyst in creating a conflicting role situation for these working women.

#### IV. OBSERVATIONS

This paper has attempted to analyse of role conflict among 40 working women of Oil India Ltd., Duliajan, Assam. The objective of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of role conflict among these working women from a gendered lens. While pursuing this objective, this study has looked into the existence and nature of male gendered hierarchy at the family and work levels. This study has also tried to explore the family role expectations, inevitably stemming from a gendered socio-cultural structure in which the respondents are a part of, and see how, if they do, it helps in creating a condition in which the respondents have to face conflicting role situations.

The results of this study show that although the respondents enjoy a certain level of social mobility and status both at family and work due to their education and job, they still live in a world which is defined by a male gendered hierarchy. The gendered hierarchy is present at both the work and family levels. This makes it hard for the respondents to perform their role as an employee, along with making their role in the family much more demanding. Thus, gendered hierarchy plays a crucial role in making the process of maintaining both roles at home and work stressful for the respondents.

Probing further, this study has shown that family role expectation is a prime reason for the emergence of role conflict. In this regard, this study presents an intriguing contrast between the married and unmarried respondents. This study has found that the role of a married working woman in the family is much more demanding in comparison to an unmarried woman's role in the family. This heightened role expectation is the result of traditional family values and ideas of conventional gendered division of labour, which persist in our social structure. This fact is evident from the stressful role expectations in terms of household work and the respondent's assertion that not living with the in-laws and living away from their husband's family makes it easier for them to maintain their roles at home and work. This suggests



that living with the in-laws, who represent an even more traditional gendered hierarchy, creates even more demands and expectations in terms of the role of a married working woman in the family, which makes it stressful for them to create a balance and perform their roles at home and work.

Thus, this paper presents a critical analysis of the role conflict among working women, which makes it clear that not just the multiplicity of roles, rather gendered hierarchy and family role expectations influenced by it, act as major catalysts in creating role conflict among these working women.

#### V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social roles and role conflict are very complex phenomena as they are nebulous in every sense of the term and remain entangled with various other social phenomena. A gendered perspective provides a viable vantage point to look at this complex phenomenon, which this paper has attempted to do. It can be said that working women in India today are stuck in a transitory phase between tradition and modernity, which makes their roles at family and work incompatible at times. Doing away with this problem will require more in-depth academic enquiry, which will keep in mind the complexity and the contextual realities of the issue at hand.

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