Exploring the Division of Labour in the Family: Insights from Women in the Service Sector in Darjeeling Town

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Abstract: The colonial history of Darjeeling Hills had a considerable influence on the development and settlement of Darjeeling Town, notably in terms of women's contexts such as migration, forms of economic engagement for women, and the introduction of formal education for women, among other aspects. When we look into the region's history, we find that women have worked in a number of occupations, although primarily in informal work, and they have contributed to the region's economy and gradual societal changes in their own capacities. Despite the fact that women have long worked in public spaces in the hills of Darjeeling, the prevalent traditional norm in the region recognizes the home as a woman's primary space. Even while women in the hills may have substantially distinct socioeconomic backgrounds, they are nevertheless subjected to some dominant gender norms. Women who work outside have the obligation to divide their time between paid and unpaid domestic work, since parenting and domestic tasks have always been considered as women's work in the hills, whether in towns or in villages. Among the various challenges and debates surrounding 'working women,' one key question that arises is the link between women's participation in paid work and the gendered distribution of labour in the household. As a result, this article seeks to understand the division of labour, one component of the larger 'working women's question', in families of women employed in the service sector. As such, in-depth perspectives of ten married women who represent a segment of this social group in the Town of Darjeeling have been analysed.

Keywords: Working Women, Service Sector, Division of Labour, Married Women, Darjeeling Town
Introduction

Questions surrounding the idea of “working women” range from those pertaining to autonomy, equality, and empowerment to those involving time constraints, role conflicts and access to public spaces. However, it is not true that only women who work in paid employment are working; rather, as the headline of an article on International Women's Day published on the website “Kashmir Reader” asserts, “...There is no such thing as a ‘non-working’ woman.” This concern serves as a powerful reminder that using the term “working women” to refer only to a specific group of women whose work includes paid labour would be unfair to the rest of the women who work in unpaid domestic labour within their households. Rather, it should be an all-in-category for the various forms of labour that women undertake both inside and outside the households. Although women have always been at work, the value attributed to their work and workplace has historically been defined by socio-economic and political factors. As such, their involvement in unpaid work is usually ignored and their participation in paid work outside the households is mostly both undervalued and underpaid. As a result, the term's exclusivity to any single group of women is called into question as women are always at work. Therefore in light of this observation, women who work for pay outside the households while still performing unpaid domestic tasks are included in the term "working women" in this article, without excluding any women from the working category.

In addition to the aforementioned issues surrounding working women, the question is further expanded when the element of marriage is added to it. The marital dyad naturally undergoes changes and adaptations with marriage, especially as it is the woman who has to make the most adjustments. Consequently, for women, marriage paired with paid work adds additional layers of complexity to the process. The variable ‘married working woman’ encompasses several additional aspects that deepen and broaden the issue, including the need to balance work and family obligations, the rise in expectations and accountability, and many more. Therefore, understanding gender relations in everyday life becomes more intricate when viewed through the perspective of married working women.

One way of understanding gender relations in everyday life involves looking at the family unit. In fact, a key concern that arises with respect to "working women" is how women's participation in paid work relates to gendered power dynamics inside their own
families. Family relationships have been considered by feminist researchers as cultures where gender is symbolically produced through everyday interactions. They have focused on the diversity and complexity of family as their starting point, by emphasizing how power infuses all sites of family relationships (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). The primary socialization of gender values begins from the family and ideas of what is expected of men and women by the society are significantly developed within it. As a result, such ideals influence gender relations, which in turn reinforce gendered power dynamics in many ways. Women's positions of economic independence are therefore one aspect that might be anticipated to impact these gender relations and power dynamics in the household.

Thus it is within the interplay of all these factors that gender relations and power dynamics within the family of married working women is situated. Amongst the above discussed challenges and debates surrounding ‘working women’, this article seeks to understand the aspect of division of labour in the family. In the family of working women who are married, the division of labour based on gender remains a prominent aspect. The division of labour in the family unit naturally shifts and reallocates when married women leave the house to work, which makes it an essential component of the broader ‘working women's question.’

The main focus of the article is exploring the division of labour in the family through the personal narratives of these women. Thus, the aim of the paper will be fulfilled through the insights of women engaged in the service sector in Darjeeling Town. In-depth perspectives of ten married women who represent a segment of this group in the town of Darjeeling will be looked into. The representation relies on the insights of women belonging to the Nepali community, between the age group of 40-55, who are employed as teachers, nursing staff and administrative staff in the town of Darjeeling. The respondents have been identified with the help of purposive and stratified sampling techniques. Personal observation forms a key part in the description of accounts throughout this article. In addition to the primary data consisting of women’s accounts, secondary data sources have been gathered from existing literature related to the topic.

A Brief Colonial Background of Darjeeling Town with a Focus on Women’s Contexts

In 1835, the area of Darjeeling which was formerly part of the dominion of Raja of Sikkim came under British control by a Deed of Grant. The British were drawn by the
station’s potential as a sanatorium as well as its advantages as a centre that would encompass all of the country’s trade and as a position of immense strategic importance (Dozey, 1917). Subsequently, it was developed into a hill station due to its definition as a health resort and the establishment of tea plantations by British colonisers. During the British annexation, the area had only a small population. However, in the subsequent decades, the number of people increased significantly due to the arrival of a substantial population from mostly nearby Himalayan regions and also from the plains of mainland India. As a result, the region formed a multi-ethnic and multilingual populace, with the majority identifying as the Nepali community and, subsequently the Nepali language emerged as the lingua franca in the region. This population growth was facilitated by the cultivation of tea, the establishment of military recruitment centre, and the availability of opportunities for mountaineering work and small-scale businesses. In order to address the demand for labour in the plantation industry, the British colonists actively encouraged the recruitment of family labour, particularly from the neighbouring state of Nepal. This approach substantially contributed to the migration of women as well. In course of time, women became the majority of the labour force in the plantation industry in Darjeeling hills, mostly working in the fields. Apart from their employment on plantations, women also had many informal roles in the colonial economy. They managed small shops and businesses in the town as well as worked as porters, construction workers, and domestic helpers.

By the late nineteenth century, Darjeeling had developed into an urban centre, characterised by the presence of modern amenities and a growing population. The amenities also included the establishment of schools. Initially, Roman Catholic Missionaries set up schools for the children of European families residing in the region. Later, the Church of Scotland Mission established schools to cater to the educational requirements of the native population in the hills. Despite facing challenges concerning gender ideology, burden of domestic work, economic obligations, and fear of conversion, women in the hills made significant progress in education (Pradhan and Pain, 2020). Although the introduction of education for women was delayed, there were some individuals who displayed great enthusiasm and took significant steps towards learning and improving their lives. The exposure to formal education resulted in chances for women to choose occupations other than informal labour. The phenomenon has continued up to the present time, with women,
although facing limited economic opportunities, gradually entering the service sector, albeit in smaller numbers than men folk.

The colonial history of Darjeeling therefore had a considerable influence on the development and settlement of Darjeeling town, notably in terms of women’s contexts such as migration, forms of economic engagement of women, and the introduction of formal education for women, among other aspects. Thus, when we look into the region’s history, we find that women have worked in a number of occupations, although primarily in informal work, and they have contributed to the region’s economy and gradual societal changes in their own capacities.

**Working Women and the Division of Labour in the Family in Darjeeling Town**

As has been pointed out, women who have had access to formal education have been able to find employment in the service sector, primarily in towns where most of the service-related sectors are located. Despite the relatively limited chances or choices compared to larger towns and cities in the country, women have been mostly and traditionally concentrated in sectors such as education, health, administration and tourism. Furthermore, it is obvious that women's aspirations to engage in employment have been modestly increasing over time in the hills, despite the scarcity of available opportunities. Even so, a woman's ability to participate in public spaces of work is not solely determined by her personal aspirations. This is particularly true in a patriarchal society like India, where the honour and dignity of both the family and the community rest upon women’s shoulders, as a result, women's mobility and access to certain public spaces are regulated, restricted and influenced by gender norms (Siwach, 2020). Thus, even though women in Darjeeling's hill society have always been present in public spaces of work in various capacities beyond their domestic spheres, it is to be remembered that their participation remains marked by the ideology of gendered roles, regulation, and constant scrutiny regarding the nature of the work they undertake.

When this prevalent traditional belief in gender roles acknowledges the home as the primary sphere for women, a significant change occurs in their role performances when they begin working for paid work. This necessitates the reorganisation of family routines and the allocation of time, workload and responsibility, among other things. Women who work outside, have the obligation to divide their time between paid and unpaid domestic work,
since parenting and domestic tasks have always been considered as women’s work in the hills, whether in towns or villages. Although opportunities for employment on equal terms and conditions to that of men are opening up for women yet it does not release them from their culturally imposed role of homemaking. Studies have shown that women workers are constrained by the dominant social and cultural norms of the society. This phenomenon has been discussed by Hochschild’s (1989) in the work “The Second Shift” where she investigates the double burden experienced by working women.

In her book, she asserts that in families where both spouses work, upon returning home from work, the woman is tasked with an additional set of duties, referred to as the ‘second shift’. This emphasizes how the ideology of gendered roles assigns domestic duties mostly to women. She has noted that the majority of women engage in one shift at their workplace and an additional ‘second shift’ at their home, which includes child-care responsibilities. This maternal role of childcare and spousal role of domestic work has also, always been considered primary areas of responsibilities for women in Darjeeling’s society. With the rise of dual-earner families women’s status has been changing over the past few decades but although their status has been changing, their domestic workload hasn’t. This observation has been validated when the respondents shared their everyday routines during the conducted interviews. The women stated that they had to get up hours early before work in order to fulfil their domestic responsibilities, which mostly involved cooking for the entire family, alongside having to ensure they arrived to work on time. In addition, they would return home and do the remaining tasks, with some of them even preparing for the next day. The weekends too, did not seem to be a day-off of work, the piled up household work throughout the weekdays were to be completed during these days.

Seema, a 52-year-old Assistant Professor, shares her experience of pursuing her Ph.D. degree while working alongside her husband at a government college in Darjeeling town. She emphasises the physical and mental resilience she found during that period. After returning from work, she would quickly prepare dinner and then dedicate the rest of the night to her research, finding a quiet room to read after everyone had gone to bed. On the following day, she would awaken and hastily prepare meals for the day and run to work, causing her neighbours to identify her as 'the woman who runs down the hill every morning'. Despite consistently following the same routine over the years, she does not perceive it as a burden.
On the contrary, she believes it enhances women's mental strength and fosters their determination to fulfil our aspirations no matter what.

Another instance involves Rita, a 55-year-old woman employed as a teacher at a private educational institution in the town. She recounts her experience of initially residing with her in-laws after getting married. During this time, she not only had to wake up very early in the morning to prepare all the meals for the day before going to work, but also had the responsibility of serving the meals to her in-laws and maintaining the cleanliness of the house. Subsequently, after giving birth to her son, she had to take on the preparation of his school meals in addition to her husband's. She recounts her routine of returning home from work and then going back to the kitchen to prepare dinner. Her husband was completely inexperienced with the kitchen tasks, so she had to handle all the responsibilities alone. In addition, she would supervise her son as he studied, making him sit in the kitchen while she worked and he completed his homework. According to her, it was expected that every woman would fulfil this responsibility once she was married and had children. Over time, her responsibility to perform all household chores by herself decreased as they were able to hire a residential domestic helper, a young girl from the Duars region of West Bengal. Eventually, this girl was replaced by another local girl and the hiring continues to the present time. Currently, she no longer has to physically participate in kitchen work but instead supervises the tasks being carried out by her domestic help. Upon reflection, she remembers those times as a challenging endeavour to effectively handle all tasks within the allotted time. Nevertheless, she perceives this responsibility as her duty, which garnered admiration from her family members and neighbours. She discusses how that event transformed her into a capable lady of the house, who worked in and outside the house and whose decision-making was also valued.

Another case involves Prashanti, a 50-year-old government employee, residing with her spouse and children at her paternal home. She discusses the time management she had to put up with in balancing her work and familial responsibilities. Following her marriage, she made the decision to reside with her mother, who was both widowed and partially paralyzed. As a result, her husband consented to remain with them in order to provide care. Despite having to reside in her own home, she was mostly responsible for handling the majority of domestic duties, while her husband occasionally assisted her in the kitchen. However, she
acknowledged that the main duty fell on her. She expressed concern about potential criticism if she were to consistently ask her husband for help in the kitchen and other household chores. She worried that her husband might be ridiculed for assuming the role of a ghar-jwai (someone who resides at the wife's house after marriage) who is made to work like a woman in the house. Over time, she asserts that both of them share responsibility, and she habitually takes on the majority of responsibilities on her own.

Deepa, a 45-year-old government nursing staff, discusses the shifting schedules at work at her job that periodically prevent her from being at home during nighttime or morning shifts. She lives with her husband and a daughter. It has been a couple of years since her spouse has voluntarily retired from service in the Indian army and is able to assist her with all domestic tasks. In addition, he supervises their daughter's academic progress on a daily basis, prepares meals, and does the grocery shopping in her absence. She believes she is fortunate to have a spouse who assists her in all aspects, enabling her to maintain an appropriate balance between her work and personal life. However, she acknowledges that she makes an effort to do the majority of the household chores while at home in order to avoid placing an extra burden on her spouse since it is mainly her work as a woman with him just providing a helping hand.

Certainly, these working women were required to begin their household duties after spending hours at work; their employment did not exempt them from their domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless, the key aspect underscored by the aforementioned accounts of women is that while it may seem that working women are responsible for the "second shift," the women themselves do not view it as such. They do not consider it a burden or additional work, but rather an inherent responsibility that every mother, wife and daughter-in-law should fulfil. The respondents' belief aligns with arguments of other notable studies (reviewed and referenced in Carriero, 2021) which posit that when women engage in more housework than men, it is not merely a mundane task but rather a way to express their gender identity. The studies highlight that by performing domestic chores, women demonstrate their commitment to fulfilling their expected gender identity. Therefore, if women and men see and behave towards domestic work in this manner, it indicates that, to some degree, they have internalized this cultural ideology of domestic work as women’s primary work and view it as an essential element of proper female identity.
It is to be mentioned here, that not all women respondents indicated tolerance of their double workload. Some women expressed that they sometimes expected their partners to voluntarily take up domestic tasks without being prompted, but this was not the usual situation. Only in the event of their wives being ill would they be seen engaging in chores at home. Depending on their financial situation, to lessen the workload on themselves, some of the respondents chose to engage women domestic helpers mostly during the daytime. This follows Menon's (2012) argument that the woman of the house is often expected to either perform household tasks herself or ensure that they are carried out by a low-paid woman from a lower socioeconomic background.

Another example is Beena’s case, a 40-year-old primary school teacher at a government school who also runs her own business. She discussed the disparity in the level of comfort and leisure experienced by women and men at home, even when performing the same job. She expresses sadness and raises questions about the gendered division of labour in our culture upon witnessing Marwari men shopkeepers being served lunch and tea by their wives everyday at their stores. In her words, “Women also run businesses, like herself, but we do not get the same kind of treatment from our families even though we work as hard as the men”. Regardless of the rush of her day at work, she describes the necessity of returning home and single-handedly managing all tasks, marking the beginning of her ‘second shift’. Thus, in order to keep up with her work and domestic responsibilities, she hired the help of a woman to aid her with household tasks on weekends for a few hours. This narrative of Beena and others previously discussed are illustrations of how a working woman has to divide her time between domestic responsibilities and her paid work. Therefore, one of the strains is a time-crunch brought about by the need to manage multiple roles (Fox and Nickols, 1983). A married woman who tries to combine her career and family is certainly caught up in this time crunch; however the intensity may vary from individual to individual positioned differently in society. The gendered division of work is also impacted by a range of factors, such as societal expectations, cultural norms, economic situations, and individual choices (Tornello, 2020) along with a woman’s subjective identity of caste, class, age, educational background and so on.
Conclusion

While there may be some noticeable modifications with regard to the division of labour within some families and variations across households, it can be generally concluded within the scope of this paper that traditional gender roles and expectations still persist. Despite trends in increasing participation of women in paid work in the hills, working women, especially married women, continue to perform the lion's share of unpaid domestic work and childcare. The dynamics of gender relationships between a married couple and their interactions with other family members are undoubtedly influenced by the larger cultural framework operating at the societal level. These frameworks establish guidelines for a marital dyad to structure their everyday lives in accordance with culturally determined standards. The division of labour in Darjeeling, like in other patriarchal societies, is influenced by such culturally determined standards. As noted by Menon (2012), such cultural norms reflect the belief that domestic work is primarily the responsibility of women, even if they are employed outside the home and are earning an income.

References


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**Bionote:** Ritu Mangar holds a Master’s degree in Sociology from University of North Bengal, Darjeeling. At present, she is pursuing her Ph.D. degree in Sociology from Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling. Her research focuses on women, work, and family. In general, her research interests include Women and Gender Studies, Labour Studies, Urban and Himalayan Studies. She has previously published book reviews and research articles centering around women’s issues.