

Working and Nonworking Women's Descriptions and Experiences of their Roles in Society

Salma Amin Rattani, MScN, BScN, RN, RM
Director, General Nursing Diploma Programme
Aga Khan University School of Nursing
Stadium Road, P.O.Box 3500, Karachi 74800
Pakistan

Abstract

In a society both, men and women play a pivotal role and their roles may be defined based on their cultural values and societal norms. Understanding and conformity with these roles may be expected by both the genders. However, to limit the scope, this study aimed to explore working and nonworking women's descriptions and experiences of their roles in society. A descriptive exploratory research design was used. After approval from ethics review committee, Aga Khan University, the data was gathered from women in three communities representing the low, middle and upper socioeconomic strata, in Karachi, Pakistan. The participants were selected by critical case sampling. The sampling was terminated once the saturation was achieved. The in-depth interviews were conducted by using the interview guide. Thirty-five women participated in the study. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings showed that the participants identified three main roles of women in a society. These roles are familial, financial supporter, and socio-political roles. Women's experiences and feelings related to these roles had an impact on their quality of life.

Keywords: Working and non-working women, familial roles, socio-political roles, financial supporter role, quality of life

1. Introduction

Gender roles are the 'social definition' of women and men. Performance of these roles is guided by social norms, cultural values, class system, ages and historical perspectives of a society (FAO 2005)

Traditional gender roles which viewed male as breadwinner and female as homemaker, have changed over the time and there has been an increase in families headed by two working spouses (Perrone, Wright & Jackson, 2009) and support to this notion keeps increasing (Gallup Pakistan, 2009). In few of the societies due to men and women both being working, men have started contributing to household chores (Lewis, 2012) still in many societies, due to their culturally determined gender Ideologies (Reeves & Baden, 2000) the responsibility of child care and other family members, remains with women (Barksdale, (n.d.) and they are faced with juggling the role of mother, partner and daughter as well as employee (Austen & Birch, 2000). Carrying out these roles may impact on women's quality of life which as defined by World Health Organization (1997) is:

“Individuals perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships, personal beliefs and their relationship to salient features of their environment” (p1.).

Quality of life is a state of happiness and satisfaction that a woman gets from the role that she plays. Its presence in a woman's life is unquestionably important. Thus this research was conceptualized considering the changes in role women in Pakistan have undergone in the recent past. This study aimed to explore understanding of women about the different roles that they play in a society and their experiences related to the roles they identified.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study design and setting

Descriptive exploratory research design was used for this study. This design utilized constructivist approach as a philosophical underpinning. In majority of the qualitative study constructivism plays a cardinal role as it helps in exploring other's world view and respects individual's cultural background (Cresswell, 2003). Three communities differentiated by their socio-economic standing were selected in Karachi, Pakistan. The communities selected were: an upscale community situated in a residential section in the Southern part of Karachi, a middle class community in central Karachi and squatter settlement in a suburb in Karachi. Women living in three selected community settings were included in the study population and sampling was done till saturation of the data was achieved. A total of thirty-five interviews were done. There were seven participants from the upscale community, eleven from the middle class community and seventeen from the squatter settlement.

2.2 Sampling

Critical case sampling was employed. It is a strategy for selecting purposeful samples for critical cases. Critical cases are those that can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reasons, particularly important in the scheme of things (Patton, 2002). It permits logical generalization and maximum application of information to other cases, because if it's true of this one case, it's likely to be true of all other cases (Patton, 1990). "Gatekeepers" being the key persons residing in the areas selected were contacted to help the researcher get in touch with prospective respondents (Cresswell, 1998). Those women who were ready to provide maximum information were asked to participate in the study.

2.3 Data collection

The in-depth interviews were conducted by using interview guide (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; In-depth Interviews, n.d.). The interview guide contained open ended and broad questions (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Experts' views were obtained to minimize potential bias and to enhance rigor. To foresee potential problems and to maintain the rigor pilot testing of interview guide was done through in-depth interviews of three women who were from different socio-economic strata and consented to be interviewed.

2.4 Data analysis

Descriptive analysis of data was carried out (Wolcott, 1994) and based on the examination of the interview data responses which were similar were grouped together to form categories. Frequencies and percentages were used to tally the number of responses related to each category (Wolcott, 1994b).

2.5 Ethical Consideration

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of Aga Khan University. Informed consent was signed or thumb printed by the study participants. This form was used to communicate objectives and intention of the study. Opportunities were provided to the participants to clarify their queries. They were permitted to choose to participate or not to participate. Participants were free to leave the study at any time and were not forced to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity was maintained by assigning the codes at the time of data analysis. Data could only be accessed by primary researcher and thesis committee.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic profile of the participants:

The participants were from diverse background and their demographic profile is presented in table 1.
Table 1: insert here

Table 1: Demographic profile of the selected respondents (n=35)

| SR # | Variable | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|---|-----------|------------|
| 1 | Age | | |
| | 20-30 ⁻ | 08 | 22.85% |
| | 30-40 ⁻ | 12 | 34.28% |
| | 40-50 ⁻ | 11 | 31.42% |
| 2 | 50 and above | 04 | 11.42% |
| | Civil status | | |
| | Unmarried | 04 | 11.42% |
| | Married | 28 | 80.00% |
| 3 | Widow | 03 | 08.57% |
| | Religion | | |
| | Muslim | 28 | 80.00% |
| | Christian | 04 | 11.42% |
| 4 | Hindu | 02 | 05.71% |
| | Zorastor | 01 | 02.85% |
| | Ethnicity (Muslims n= 28) | | |
| | Baloch | 10 | 35.71% |
| | Ismaili | 06 | 21.42% |
| | Kachi | 03 | 10.71% |
| | Memon | 03 | 10.71% |
| | Muhajir | 02 | 07.14% |
| | Sayed | 02 | 07.14% |
| Haray imamay | 01 | 03.57% | |
| 5 | Pathan, | 01 | 03.57% |
| | Family structure | | |
| 6 | Extended | 20 | 57.14% |
| | Nuclear | 15 | 42.85% |
| 7 | Education level | | |
| | No education | 14 | 40.00% |
| | Primary | 05 | 14.28% |
| | Matriculate/O level | 03 | 08.57% |
| | Intermediate | 05 | 14.28% |
| | Undergraduate | 03 | 08.57% |
| | Graduation (Master) | 04 | 11.42% |
| | Specialization | 01 | 02.85% |
| 8 | Working status | | |
| | Working | 14 | 40.00% |
| | Non-working | 14 | 40.00% |
| 9 | Working to non-working | 07 | 20.00% |
| | Years of experience (Working n= 14) | | |
| | <1 year | 01 | 07.14% |
| | 1 – 5 ⁻ years | 01 | 07.14% |
| | 5 -10 ⁻ years | 05 | 35.71% |
| | 10 - 15 ⁻ years | 03 | 21.42% |
| 10 | 15 – 20 ⁻ years | 01 | 07.14% |
| | ≥20 years | 03 | 21.42% |
| 11 | Organizational affiliation (n=14) | | |
| | Public | 03 | 21.42% |
| 12 | Private | 11 | 78.57% |
| | Socio economic status | | |
| | < 5000 – 10,000 – Low income | 17 | 48.57% |
| 13 | > 10,000 – 50,000 - Middle income | 11 | 31.42% |
| | > 50,000 – High income | 07 | 20.00% |
| 14 | Number of children (only for those who were married or widows n=32) | | |
| | No child | 02 | 06.25% |
| | 1 – 2 children | 08 | 25.00% |
| | 3 – 5 children | 18 | 56.25% |
| | 6 – 8 children | 04 | 12.50% |
| 15 | Ages of children (n=95)* | | |
| | 0 – 1 ⁻ year | 01 | 01.05% |
| | 1 – 5 ⁻ years | 13 | 13.68% |
| | 5 – 10 ⁻ years | 21 | 22.10% |
| | 10 – 20 ⁻ years | 48 | 50.52% |
| ≥20 | 12 | 12.63% | |

* Based on the total number of children of all participants put together

3.2 Women's description of their role in the society:

Based on their own experiences and observations, the participants identified three main roles; familial roles, financial support roles, and socio-political roles. Each of the identified roles has its corresponding sub-roles and its own sets of duties and responsibilities. These roles are reflected in table 2 and participants' descriptions are presented through their narratives.

Table 2: Roles identified by the participants are expressed in frequencies and percentages (n= 35).

| S.R # | Roles | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------|---|-----------|------------|
| 1. | Familial roles | | |
| | 1.1 Wife Duties and responsibilities related to the role as wife. | 35 | 100% |
| | 1.2 Mother Duties and responsibilities related to the role of mother. (<i>tarbeat</i>) | 35 | 100% |
| | 1.3 Household roles Looking after the house (working herself or supervising the maids) | 35 | 100% |
| | 1.4 In-law | | |
| | 1.4.1 Daughter in-law | 17 | 48.57% |
| | 1.4.2 Sister in-law | 09 | 25.71% |
| 2. | Financial supporter roles | | |
| | 2.1 Sharing financial supporter role with husband | 18 | 51.42 % |
| | 2.2 Sharing financial supporter role with husband and children | 11 | 31.42 % |
| | 2.3 Main provider | 06 | 17.14 % |
| 3. | Social political roles | | |
| | 3.1 Volunteer for community | 03 | 08.57% |
| | 3.2 Supporter of political issues | 01 | 02.85% |
| | 3.3 Advocate of political issues | 02 | 05.71% |

3.2.1 Participant's descriptions and narratives:

3.2.1.1 Familial roles:

Describing women's role in society, an unmarried participant from low socioeconomic stratum said:

"They (women) have responsibilities of their families; they have the responsibilities of their children, of their husbands, of their in-laws, of their parents. They are responsible for everything. If they are working in any institution then they have to fulfill their responsibilities over there too".
(Code# 0017)

Another unmarried participant from middle socio-economic stratum said:

"Initially woman is a daughter, and then once she gets married she becomes a wife. Definitely she lives in a family then she supports the family. Once she has her kids then she performs the role of a mother. Being a daughter, being a wife and being a mother she has different responsibilities to be fulfilled. Gradually she has to fulfill the responsibility to form a generation (*khandan ko tashkeel dayteey hay*). In addition to upbringing of her children she is responsible to fulfill all her house hold tasks. She has too much pressure".

(Code# 0026)

Describing a woman's role as a wife a married participant said:

"The real story begins after getting married (*asal kahaneey to shadeey kay bad shroo hottey hay*). Before marriage, life was "relaxed". After marriage woman gets stuck in her household responsibilities, especially in her responsibilities related to her husband, children and in-laws".

(Code# 0024)

Being specific about women's role as mothers, a participant from high socio-economic stratum said:

"The first and foremost role that women play in a society is that they are mothers. Being a mother woman plays an important role especially in Pakistan because everybody depends on their mother. Mother is central person in the whole of society as far as I understand from the area where I came from (Africa)".

(Code # 0031)

A non-working participant from the middle income group emphasized the importance of self-sacrifice for fulfilling the role of a wife and mother. She said, that:

“A woman is a part of her home. If she is absent from the home, even for a while, her house gets disturbed (*ghar titar bitar ho jata hay*). Whether it is about the upbringing of children, their mental development; responsibilities towards her husband, towards her house; keeping an eye on the children who are young adults, understanding their feelings, their demands, then adjusting yourself with them; you have to sacrifice yourself to fulfill their needs. All this is the responsibility of a woman.”

(Code # 0021)

Expressing her views a respondent said:

“When we are with our children then we should leave all our problems at a side and only being a mother we should attend our children. You should answer with love and affection to the question of your children that may sound stupid to you. This is how you help them in growth of their personality, abilities and their gut. If there are disputes with sister or with mother in-law then anger developed from these disputes should not be displaced on the kids--.”

(Code # 0021)

Describing familial roles that women play, a working woman from low socio-economical stratum said:

“She (woman) should take care of her house, take care of her husband (*shoher ki khidmat karna*), and take care of her kids and do cooking. Woman is required to fulfill her responsibilities without being told. Though I am doing a job even then I am fulfilling my responsibilities well. I get up early in the morning and according to my routine I am fulfilling my responsibilities”.

(Code # 0009)

Another participant from high socio-economic stratum said:

“Working women is house wife after her working hours (job). Thus working woman has double responsibilities she has double burden to hold”.

(Code # 0032)

Highlighting the implication of women not being able to fulfill the familial role, a participant from high socio-economic stratum and having experience of living in America for a long time said:

“Divorce rate in America is 65% because women work outside. They don’t care about their kids and their way of living is very different. Asian women are very different. Women are working yet they have to work at home if they don’t then there are possibilities that their families will break”.

(Code # 0035)

Comparing recognition of women’s familial roles in rural and urban setting, a participant from middle stratum said:

“Though the women in rural areas are also contributing in the upbringing of their children, they also take care of all of their household responsibilities but they may not be privileged to gain support and encouragement that women in developed areas/cities can get. Thus culture, environment, and education are the major contributor of the women’s’ roles and responsibilities”.

(Code # 0020)

Challenging the gender roles prescribed by the society one of the participant from middle socio-economic stratum believed that familial roles could also be fulfilled by men. The participant said:

“It is culture and the home environment which teaches different roles to men and women. Since beginning the men are involved in the work that is to do with outside the home. They are not taught any responsibility that has to do with in the home. I think when women can do everything that is to do inside and outside the home then why can’t the men do so?”

(Code # 0022)

3.2.1.2 Financial supporter roles:

Describing their role as financial supporter, those women who were compelled to work used the word “*majboori*”. Most of these women were from low socio-economic stratum. However, the women from middle and high strata were also working and financially supporting their families. Among working to non-working participants, a woman from low socio-economic stratum said:

“My husband had a regular source of income because he was a rickshaw driver, but he married to another woman. He left me and my kids and went to his second wife. I have 8 children and when he (husband) left us my kids were young. I had to work to financially support my family. Now my one son is working but that is not enough. Therefore, I am still working but due to my ill health I cannot work regularly. So I work off and on”.

(Code # 0008)

Another woman from same stratum being the main financial provider said:

“In a society, compared to men, women are playing multiple roles because compared to men women have more responsibilities. Men are only responsible to earn money that’s it. But if I talk about myself then I would say that I am playing the role of a man and a woman. I had the responsibility of child bearing and rearing as well as to earn. If you see then in this way (she meant when the woman is working), woman has double responsibilities.”

(Code # 0014)

Describing women’s role as financial supporter, one of the participants from high socio-economic stratum said:

“She (woman) wants to shoulder the responsibilities of her husband. Presently life it is very difficult to manage if only one member is working and rest are just relying upon his income then they cannot provide good education to their kids, and they cannot provide good life to their kids. If woman is working then as there is more money they can fulfill the requirements of their children”.

(Code # 0029)

It was disturbing to hear that even after fulfilling their familial and financial supporter roles there are women who are being verbally, physically or emotionally abused by their family members; husband and in-laws. One of the women from working to non-working status, belonging to low socio-economic stratum said:

“---He (husband) was used to snatch money from me even if I resisted he was to win. He was used to beat me, kick me out of the house he was telling me to leave the house and go away but even being beaten bitterly I never left my house. I stayed back for sake of my children”.

(Code # 0002)

One of the participants from middle socio-economic stratum, having a husband who was not working and the woman was the main financial provider for the family, yet was being emotionally tortured by her husband and in-laws. The participants said:

“If nothing (husband neither fulfilling the financial supporter role nor supporting in familial role) then at least he can control his dominance upon his wife. In our society it is very common that men are very dominant upon their wives. They would grumble and accuse their wives on little things. Even if such attitudes are controlled, I think that would even be a big support”.

(Code # 0022)

Among the working women there were participants who through their working aspired to excel in their life; enhance their social profile and grow professionally. As one of the respondent from middle socio-economic stratum said:

“I feel as I have done a course in teaching then it is better that I should be working. This is a way to be in touch with the recent things. Besides this my working is beneficial for my kids too. I am able to get an understanding that which school is good for my kids to get the education. There is lot of competition in education even”.

(Code # 0028)

3.2.1.3 Socio-political roles

The socio-political roles were the least identified roles as only 3 (8.57%) mentioned being “volunteer for community service”; 1 (2.85%) mentioned being “supporter of political issues”; and 2 (5.71%) mentioned being “advocate of political issues”. A supporter of political issues, as described by the participants, is one who participates in political exercises like elections, while an advocate of political issues is one who actively pushes for political and social reforms by lobbying.

The respondents mentioned that their social responsibilities were: visiting relatives if somebody was sick or for condolence when somebody died or attending ceremonies when invited by families and friends.

Community work, which is voluntary work, is thought to be done if the individual has the resources. A number of participants mentioned about time as one of the biggest requirement for community work. Activities described in voluntary work included match making. It is a process whereby suitable life partners are searched for young girls and boys. Arranged marriage is the norm in the Pakistani culture, hence, match making is seen as a community effort to marry off boys and girls. Other activities that were highlighted included, serving elderly in the community, arranging sports and other activities to keep the youth together and be engaged in healthy habits.

4. Discussion

In regard to demographic profile of the study participants, among the thirty-five participants, seventeen were from low, eleven were from middle and seven were from high socio economical strata. The sample size was related to the population of each community with the squatter settlement having the most number of people. Majority of the participants were married, between the age of group of thirty to less than fifty years and were Muslim. The country profile of Pakistan shows that 97% are Muslim and 3% are Christians, Hindus, and followers of other religions. Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashtun (Pathan), Baloch, Muhajir (immigrants from India at the time of partition and their descendants) are the reported ethnicity groups (The World Factbook Pakistan, July 2006 estimated). Thus the participants' profile was according to the country profile.

There were more participants belonging to extended families than nuclear families. Pakistan has traditionally embraced the extended family structure. It includes a married couple, their sons, their sons' wives and children, and unmarried offspring (Library of Congress Country Studies, 1994).

Forty percent of the participants had no education whereas a combined (22.84%) were undergraduates, graduates and specialized. This reflects the actual literacy rate for women in Pakistan, where only 24 percent of adult women can read and write (Library of Congress Country Studies, 1994).

In terms of working status there were an equal number of participants. There were 40% working and 40% non-working women. The "working to non-working", which was the third category, was not predefined but was identified at the time of data gathering. This category refers to those participants who were working but had quit or there was no consistency in terms of their work patterns. Their working status kept changing based on their needs. According to The Labour Force Survey for the year, 2001-2002:

"In Pakistan participation rate in economic activities has increased from 29% in 1999-2000 to 29.6% in 2001-2002. The increase has been noted for males and females separately and relatively more in urban areas ---" (p. viii).

Based on the Labour Force Survey (2001-2002), it appears that women are now increasingly beginning to be part of the labor force in Pakistan. This likewise been reflected with regards to the proportion of working and non-working women in this sample.

Majority of those who were married had between 3 – 5 children. They also had young families since the ages of the children are between 1 – 10⁻ years. Among all the children, majority of them were between the age group of 10 – 20⁻ years. Many children, especially from low socioeconomic strata were part of labor force. Similar findings are reported by Morecraft (2002), where seven is the median age entering the work force in Pakistan.

In regard to women's descriptions of their familial roles, the role of the mother is seen as coming hand in hand with that of a wife so it is difficult to separate the two roles. The responsibilities are overlapping and, apparently, one does not take precedence over the other. All the participants, regardless of their working status, seemed to be overwhelmed with their responsibilities towards their children and their homes.

Life for the working woman in the middle and high income group is quite similar except that those from the high income group can hire helpers to facilitate their work at home. They also felt that they had dual responsibilities, one at home and one at work.

Particular to the role of in-laws, most of the women found this role as important. There were also duties and responsibilities accompanying this role and it required self-sacrifice from the woman. In-laws is one of the six areas of marital adjustment as identified by the psychologist. Other areas include religion, social life, mutual friends, money and sex (Lazarus & Delingis, 1983 as cited by Hashmi, Khurshid Hassan, 2006)

Based on the interview data, all four roles: wife, mother, household and in-law were identified to be important in the make-up of a woman. All the four roles were intertwined and so much related to each other, especially the household roles, that it may be difficult to discuss one role without touching the other roles. A considerable amount of sacrifice on the part of the woman is needed to fulfill these roles; however, fulfillment of the roles, no matter how much hard work it takes, makes the women happy. This happiness is attained through the societal approval of the roles that a woman takes. For the Pakistani women in Karachi, fulfillment of these roles, including the society's approval of their behaviors, constitutes a good quality of life.

The participants believed that as women, financial support roles were important to provide a better family life. However, from the narratives of the participants, it appeared that there were benefits when the husband and wife worked together. This augmented the family income and it also enabled the women to practice their profession or to improve their skills. The limitation of this set-up was that women assumed dual roles. They had to fulfill their obligations in the home and at the same time attend to their work. This made the working women very tired and distressed, especially if they could not get paid helpers, or if there was nobody living in their house that could help them. Similar findings were reported by Sanlier, & Arpacı, (2007).

Battering of women sometimes seems stem out from financial issues. Problems related to finances also seem spill out to the children in the family. This showed that those with less power were controlled by those who had the power. It was also reported by the participants in the low socio-economical strata that a woman's husband takes out his anger on his wife who then takes it out on her kids. One of the major reasons for husband to be angry was his not being able to fulfill the financial supporter role.

The vast majority of the respondents in the low income group have children who are also working to augment the family income. These findings were consistent with finding reported earlier that 17.6 percent of Pakistani children are working and supporting their families. Indeed, children's working as domestic help is a common phenomenon in Pakistan (Latif, A. 2000).

For those who are sharing financial supporter role with children, especially the young kids, the working women felt that life was not good for them. They still felt that it should be the husband who should provide for the family. These participants did not seem happy performing this task. This was reflected in the words "poison" as used to describe their lives. Most women still felt that if only their husband had enough income, they and their children would not need to work.

Traditional viewpoints on the women's roles were also expressed by some participants. The participants, considered their role as a sole provider only when the husband could not provide adequate financial support to the family or was completely jobless. This role however was seen by many as undesirable.

However, still for many women the financial support roles are not yet acceptable. To perform the financial supporter role, there were participants who worked at home such as tailors. However, most of their working women worked outside the home. Among these women's, there were few who viewed working as a break from their home and from their routine work. Lyon (1996) in an earlier study, found that women get employment if there is no wage earner, the household is relatively educated and the woman is between school and marriage, there are other women in the household to perform household duties, husband and wife are employed jointly as servants or running a shop, the woman can earn while remaining at home, the family income is so low that every available earner earns if at all possible, and there are women who simply like working and whose male relatives are agreeable, indifferent, or unable to prevent it.

The socio-political roles described by the women were very much related to the earlier roles that they had identified. There are traces of mothering and caring roles in the social and community related roles. According to Corporation for National and Community Service (June 12, 2006) and Corporation for National and Community Service (June 13, 2006) community volunteers are more likely to be women than men and among these women employed women are less and majority are from outside the workforce.

The other sub-roles that the respondents identified were “supporter of political issues” and “advocate of political issues”. Importance of these roles has been identified by the advocates and activists of women issue who believe that “You don't have to be on the inside to make a difference. Working outside the political structure, these women have drawn attention to their causes and are advocates for change” (Women’s Issue, 2012). Thus though these roles are identified by less number of the participants yet these roles are very important for development of a society and are of critical value.

5. Conclusion

To conclude in a society men and women play vital roles and performance of these roles are based on their social and cultural norms and values. Distribution of these roles is for the development of a society. However, it is important that the society should secure their human rights and should save those who are vulnerable.

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