

# Normalizing Maternal Stoicism at the Workplace: Understanding Indian Mothers at Work

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## Introduction

*Working mothers encounter several quandaries in their careers; the most common among them being the dual burden of satisfying masculine expectations at workplace and obliging to the feminine caretaking duties to their children. Most often the un-welcome feeling at the workplace and constant discouragement from the family force them to leave paid jobs to take up full-time motherhood. Through the narratives of 28 full-time working mothers across different fields, this study examines in some depth maternal stoicism as an efficient coping mechanism that keeps them working even through spells of discomforts, which could be both physical and psychological. Also, the study explores the possible effects these stoic practices have on their efficacy levels, as they negotiate.*

The gender roles of the society provide clear distinctions on the spheres occupied by men and women. While the male role is that of the worker and breadwinner occupying the public spheres of work, politics and culture, the females occupy the private spaces of households with their roles being confined to that of the carer-nurturer. Paid work has become more of a choice-rhetoric for Indian women over the years. As the new understanding of ‘empowerment’ there is a trend that has emerged in the last decade, of slightest reductions in the still hugely existing gender gaps in the labor force of the country. 73% per cent of the new mothers are seen to leave their jobs and another 50% around the age of 30 to take care of children. Only 27% of the women who leave the jobs at the advent of motherhood are seen to return to work, of which a further less 16% achieve a top-level leadership position in the organizations (GCWL, 2018). These statistics portray the plight of working mothers as they struggle to cope and identify with the demands of the workplace and their

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homes. Our study intends to explore the formation of these 'identities' which play a vital role in the day-to-day struggles of these working mothers.

Motherhood is often considered as a significant barrier to a working woman's career. Society places its stigmas around working mothers who time and again face the backlash for making their career choices. For women, motherhood becomes choice rhetoric beyond a particular stage in their lives. Reinforcing mechanisms include creating the urge or instincts in women, through their younger days, through the process of socialization, by frequently depicting motherhood as the epitome of womanhood, labelling motherhood as a phase which completes womanhood and by social backlashing for choosing anything beyond their biological functions of reproducing. It is only in the recent past that, due to improvements in higher education and rise in the number of nuclear families and urban households that women have found themselves moving outside their homes to engage in paid work. However, what has not changed is the fact that women work double shifts, the second at home after their hours at workplaces to carry out the duties of homemakers. Working mothers have thus become an interestingly paradoxical population to study.

**Women work double shifts, the second at home after their hours at workplaces to carry out the duties of homemakers.**

Mothers often engage in the process of 'sensemaking' concerning the various

roles that they play. There is a constant role conflict that these mothers go through while they make sense of their newly formed identities, juggling the demands of the work and family. While the sensemaking process assists them in the formation of their self-perceptions, role conflicts often tend to worsen it. While their self-perceptions are often formed by a strict sense of responsibility for the family as well as work, these role conflicts often result in the loss of self-efficacy and burn them out. Gatrell (2014) also found that working mothers employ various coping mechanisms in order to keep up with the backlashing, as practiced by society for choosing their careers after motherhood.

This paper attempts to understand the maternal tensions of negotiating the borders between private and public worlds of reproduction and work. The identity salience and role behaviors of these working women in their journey to motherhood and how the organizational glass ceilings and maternal walls and the societal mother blaming affect the 'sensemaking' process of the new mothers, is to be assessed. It is also observed in the paper as to how stoicism employed by working mothers, as a prevalent mode of reducing dissonance between workplace and private spheres, succeed and whether maternal stoicism impacts the new mothers' self-efficacy levels and identity formation.

### **Literature Review**

Primarily, the very identity of a mother is created by her offspring. The

traditional mothering ideology is most often based on the expectations of a stay-at-home mother, which also deems the mothers who do not meet the dominant cultural expectations of a 'good mother', as a failure. The logic of the marketplace or the demands of the workplace is continuously at odds with that of intensive mothering (the child-centered mothering), which requires the omnipresence of accessibility of the mother at all times (Millward, 2006).

**Motherhood being a significant reason for the career burnouts in women**

The tendency to characterize women's work as second-class ironically strengthened the male breadwinner by depriving them of any possible status as affluent workers in their own right (Wilson, 2006). Studies over the years have spoken vividly about motherhood being a significant reason for the career burnouts in women (Juliette, Doris & Carter, 2013). However, the scenarios have been quite dynamic in the modern societies, with a significant number of women choosing a re-entry at work after childbirth, questioning their changed identities and a notion of what is considered 'ideal'. Motherhood is a term that is long associated with the concept of ideal, primarily because the society endows the nurturing and upbringing of the child as a little more of a mother's responsibility than the fathers (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). Nevertheless, studies on intensive mothering call it an emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive ideol-

ogy in which mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture and development of the sacred child and in which children's needs take precedence over the individual needs of their mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2006).

'Implicit organizational rules concerning the presentation of the body' often become troublesome for women (Wolkowitz, 2006), even without the added complication of maternity. Working women engage in 'complex forms of bodywork' (Gatrell, 2014), molding their bodies to try and fit into the 'prevailing masculine' cultures (Hopfl & Atkinson, 2000; Haynes, 2011). Rightly so, these women find themselves under conflicting pressures as they struggle to live up to the demands of masculine organizational cultures while also not entirely letting go of the 'expected traits of a feminine persona' (Shilling, 2008). Additionally, as women strive to be identified with the 'symbolic order of professionalism' (Haynes, 2011), they feel under pressure to present bodies which appear 'controlled, self-contained and slender' (Haynes, 2011). Such outward 'control of the body' symbolize a form of self-regulation which is 'central to the embodiment of the professional' (Haynes, 2011; Warren & Brewis, 2004). We intend to explore this aspect, which is characterized by the shallow extant literature from an Indian perspective, as a significant contextual gap for this study. While a few women have successfully brought in higher efficacy levels as a result of stoic practices, there was again no literature found which could substantiate this argument synergistically.

## **Methodology**

The study was done in two phases—a pilot to gather the critical variables that came up concerning the fundamental research question and the main study where all the participants included in this study were interviewed. The participants were chosen through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling helped to reach out to the prospective target participants, which was initially 32 in number, out of which four participants did not turn up for the interviews. Information-rich cases have been used for selecting the participants, where only those from which intensive information was gathered were finally chosen for further discussions and follow up interviews. Intensity sampling strategy, helped us identify those women whose motherhood and workplace identities were more intense than the others, and snowball sampling helped us reach out to a more significant number of participants.

A total of 28 first- and second-time mothers, with the eldest child being less than ten years of age, took part in the study. Specific demographic details of the participant are given in the Appendix 1. The interviews comprised open-ended questions and were semi-structured. The participants were at first, given time to freely narrate all of their experiences surrounding motherhood, starting from planning for the baby to giving birth, their familial support and perceptions concerning working post motherhood and their workplace problems and support. Then, specific questions were asked on their perceived identities, transformations, role

conflicts and coping mechanisms. Average time for each interview varied between 90 minutes to 135 minutes. Field notes helped in capturing other aspects like the expression changes and emotional narrations by the participants. Every interview was transcribed verbatim in the language spoken and then systematically translated to English for the study. It was further coded using Atlas Ti version 7.5.16. Code families were created merging similar codes which were then translated into broad themes which are discussed here. To analyze the interviews, a mixture of phenomenology and hermeneutics, termed as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA, Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), was used. IPA helped in constructing the meanings and realities surrounding motherhood experiences and interpreting them after that.

## **Findings**

Motherhood is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. When work-life and other responsibilities are brought together with it, it becomes even more challenging to portray it in a study like this. Mothers often tend to identify themselves with the immediate surroundings that they are put in at any points of time. It is that identity that is seen to be more prevalent in them, while the other identities lay unaltered deep in their perceptions. Here, we try to look at more of the subjective experiences of each mother who has participated in the study. The essence of all the interviews, categorized into three major themes, according to the code families created is discussed in this section. Juggling between work and responsibili-

ties at home is often a premise for negotiating identities concerning the attention the mothers can give to each scenario. Therefore, as discussed before, these identities are never formed independently of the significant others in the different environments that they are a part of in their everyday lives. Not to forget is the fact that the identity formation continues to be an ongoing process which takes years in a few women to shape up.

### **The Maternal Myth**

Motherhood experiences of women sometimes have such diverse faces to them that they seem more like myths. The guilt of not adhering to the conventional norms of motherhood makes women find answers in a variety of spheres that mostly involve their work. At least 12 out of the 29 participants have faced backlash of some kind or the other for not adhering to the social norms surrounding motherhood.

Yukta, a 30-year old Test Engineer felt an inability to share her thoughts with people, fearing a backlash: "I was yearning to go back to work. It was a feeling that I could not share with people also. I liked the initial few days...but then it becomes monotonous. I was someone who enjoyed socializing at workplace. I knew I couldn't be home any longer."

Two out of the 12 women who have faced backlash, spoke about how different their pre-conceptions about motherhood have been from their actual experiences. According to Elizebeth, a 30-year old school teacher: "It was different. Ini-

tially when I was pregnant and used to get sick, I would wait for my maternity leave thinking that I could relax at home. No waking up early, cooking, rushing to school...you know the daily routine. But once the baby came, I realized it was nothing like it (expectations). Three months into it, I wanted to run back (to school)."

A few others like Sandra spoke mostly about the initial days of motherhood when she was stuck by post-partum depression that arose from her job loss. The envy of her husband's lifestyle after the birth of their son also in many ways portrays his lesser involvement in the caretaking process and the resultant fewer lifestyle changes. "Quitting my job and being at home was very difficult. I used to be alone, most of the time. My husband was constantly travelling with his band. I seriously envied his life. He too had the baby, but his life was the same as before. It was depressing. I felt that some part of me still longed for the life I had previously, although I must say I was happy having a baby. My mind would oscillate between the thoughts of being an unpaid laborer/nanny/cow (laughs) and the lost dreams of a globe trotter."

Here we find a significant weak identity formation in Sandra, for whom her workplace identity was very dear. In most of these cases, the reduction of their identities makes things rather complicated for these women. The major actors playing out in identity formation in this theme are the 'self' and the 'perceived version of the 'self' for these mothers

### The Un-wanted

Re-entry experiences shared with us suggest that women who have had successful bouts at work have had their proficiency questioned once maternity sets in. Commonly termed as 'Maternal wall' or 'Glass-ceiling', all of the participants in the study have faced discrimination of some kind after their re-entry. In this theme, we try to focus on some of these instances of discrimination that has changed their outlook towards work that has made them feel 'unwanted' at the workplaces. Lakshmi, a 30-year old software professional had a prolonged waiting time before she managed to get a project. "After I joined back post my maternity leave, I had to be in the bench for a few days. I was working on one of the best projects before I left, but people would be like 'oh, your baby is so young, you will always try to rush home, we need more committed people, we have deadlines.' I was like how did my being a mother become a deciding factor for my commitment?"

**All of the participants in the study have faced discrimination of some kind after their re-entry.**

A lot of the participants have reported that their commitment to work has come under much scrutiny post-re-entry. Deepika, a 30-year old Software Engineer, felt the same: "I could see that nothing really was same. Now, everyone would comment on I not having time, my boss, even my friends. Of course, I could no longer be the person who could go on

team outings in the weekends to exotic places around the city. I had to spend that time with my son. It was a change that I felt was very unwelcome generally at my workspace." It is these experiences that mostly create a desperate need in these women to live-up to the organizational demands, and use various coping mechanisms. From the interviews, the most common one was maternal stoicism, which is discussed in the next theme.

### The Stoic

Stoicism is a phenomenon that has been noted in every two out of three participants as a workplace coping mechanism to fit into their new roles as mothers. Mothers are keen to avoid marginalization, by working through tiredness and ill health, in order to associate themselves with the traits of immutability, sociality and intellect. Reshmi's nature of work was difficult for her post-motherhood body. "I had a C-section, and the most important side effect of it is the backache that follows. My work forces me to move around most of the time. I have to climb floors and meet patients. I don't sit, unlike a doctor in a clinic; I'm constantly on the move. But I can't leave my job. It is important for me."

**Mothers are keen to avoid marginalization, by working through tiredness and ill health.**

Women experiencing the physical distress which comes with motherhood, have often resorted to stoicism by submerging their guilt and anxiety. Most of

the extant literature on motherhood deals with the ideals of 'good mothering', which is characterized by the availability of the mothers for the children. Divya, recently accepted a long-due promotion from being a clerical staff to an officer in the GPO. However, her promotion came with a mandatory transfer, which put the entire family in a dilemma. "I have completed 18 years of service now and all of a sudden got promoted to the post of an officer with a transfer. The pay was good and everyone around me told to take it up because we need the raise badly. Then I thought may be after three-four years I can take the voluntary retirement. My daughter who is 7 years old said, 'why do you need to quit then? We will become old by then and can manage well.' I felt that was true. So now I am away from my children. Every time I go home, it's always heart-breaking to go back, but what to do? My husband is very supportive. He is managing both the children."

By being away from her young children for long periods has put Divya through significant psychological pressure of not meeting up to the 'maternal standards' of the society. She is seen to engage in a kind of psychological stoicism which is most often left out in the literature on maternal stoicism. Employing these coping mechanisms help the women in blending into the 'ideal employee' perceptions of the organization. In the next theme, however, we try to investigate whether this has any significant correlation with their efficacy levels as questioned previously.

### **The Mothering Workers**

In this theme, we can see a kind of a culmination to the entire identity of the 'ideal' formation. For different women, however, the perception of the ideal has different characteristics to it, although, in its very essence, it means managing all of their roles together in a better sense. Many studies have already found that financial independence is a critical factor for improved self-efficacies in mothers. For Anita, her ability to afford the right daycare and to meet the needs of her children, without seeking the help of her spouse who works abroad, are often her primary sources of efficacy. "Day-cares are so expensive you know, but we have no choice especially when our families are not very supportive. People ask me why I work. I tell them for not depending on my husband for the smallest of needs of my children, something I really cherish. Suddenly I am no more earning for myself, it's for them. It makes me feel very nice...confident about myself."

Women have also noted significant changes in the way they saw their work, post becoming mothers. Reshmi, who still works at the hospital where she gave birth, has learnt to become more empathetic to her patients. "I was in labor for more than 10 hours. It was very taxing on my body. I worked with women in labor half my career. I knew what it would be like. Still it was bad. I have seen many senior nurses misbehaving with these poor women when they wail, it was a government hospital. I have always felt bad. There was another woman along

with me who was in labor. Because the nurses there were my colleagues, they took care of me well. But not the other women. I still feel very bad for all of them. There is no empathy, it's all just cases. I have made sure now to treat all the women I have assisted with utmost care. My son's birth has changed my life."

Veena feels all the more efficacious with her career going steadily up, with several publications and projects to her credit. Her organization gives the facility of childcare to the working women, which has only helped her single-handedly take care of her daughter. She feels that her role as a mother has helped her increase her productivity as an academician as well."Last year, I had four publications, all in top journals. I've 5 PhD students and two ongoing industry projects. We have an on-campus daycare, so my worry about my daughter is taken care of. I just drop in to meet her anytime. Nowadays she doesn't want to see me -she only says 'mumma, you go.' My husband has relocated to Bangalore from the US, so he comes home every weekend. I feel like a supermom indeed. This is my perfect life."

At least 26 out of the 29 participants in the study have mentioned that stoic practices helped them improve their performances at the organization, thereby fulfilling their identity needs at the workplace. This also has had a positive impact on their overall efficacy levels as successful working mothers, efficiently balancing both the private and public spheres.

## **Discussion**

The 'ideal motherhood' occupies a prime role in all of the participants' self-perceptions as seen in the narratives. This can be understood through the self-determination theory, which concerns people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs. However, what is to be understood here is that these women not only try to blend into the private spheres of ideal motherhood but also into the always-on-the-toe masculine expectations of the workplace as well.

Interesting to note here is the coping mechanism of stoicism or 'working through spells of pain' - both physical and mental, employed by these women while negotiating the dissonance between both the spheres and through the blending-in processes as well. Stoic practices, primarily through ill-health, by pregnant women, is termed as 'pregnant presenteeism' (Gatrell, 2014; Warren & Brewis, 2004). Reflecting on reasons for their stoic approach to paid work, mothers in this study cited their wish to maintain separation between the borders of the 'private' world of reproduction (Ashforth. et.al, 2000) and their workplaces. Their primary fears focus on any leakage, between these borders, which would result in the corporeality and mutability of their maternal bodies. They fear that this leakage causes their intellectual capital, or 'sociality', to diminish especially in masculine workplace structures (Haynes, 2008 a, Haynes, 2008 b; Witz, 2000).

**Mothers formed stronger identities due to improved efficacy levels as a result of prolonged practices of stoicism.**

Moving a step beyond the stoic coping mechanism is where the 'new efficacy' levels of these women are determined. Concerned with the motivation behind choices people make without external influence and interference, it was found that the mothers formed stronger identities due to improved efficacy levels as a result of prolonged practices of stoicism. However, even these stronger identities face burnouts after a certain period, due to the lessened pace of further identity formations after finding a real solace in the newly formed better efficacies. However, surviving the expectations of the organization would still require more than improved efficacies, which is where perceived organizational support comes into play. Participants spoke in great detail about how the various actors in their organizations helped them ease the navigation process between the two spheres, maintaining their improved efficacy levels (Alcover et al., 2018). We find that the burnout these women face at certain stages in their careers was tackled by a right amount of perceived organizational support.

**Future Directions, Practical Implications & Limitations**

Contextually, the stoic maternal practices at the workplace have not been explicitly dealt by extant studies, even

though there is significant work from the western context. Therefore, along with the identity formation and role conflicts in working mothers, their coping mechanisms (sensemaking and stoic practices) are detailed in this paper. Also, explored are the effects of stoic practices on the efficacy levels of the working mothers, which is a contribution to the literature.

This study explores only the lived experiences of the biological mothers' journeys. Also, we have solely dealt with middle-class working mothers in this study, which limits its span in several ways. Most of the women here, do have space in their families to exercise the choice of not working, which is not the case with the majority of lower-income groups where women's income is substantial. Identity formation for women with lesser choices could be more sophisticated, and is an area which could be researched on further. Future research could also focus on the social defense mechanisms and unconscious biases surrounding the work-family power dynamics that come to play in an organization and how it impacts women's career progress, by helping them ease out their transition. Further, longitudinal studies could explore the preparation periods of returning mothers during the various stages of maternal leave and post-partum. Such studies could probe if there are specific organizational support groups that ensure this period is less demanding.

The main practical implications of the study could be the policy changes. It is high time that organizations started allowing flexible work hours,

telecommuting, part-time work options and second careers as a policy. Inclusion of these mothers into all the spaces is a crucial element to maintain equality in the organization. Also, most of the participants have suffered from the lack of a mentor in their workplaces to help them navigate through motherhood. Ensuring women representation in higher levels of management could effectively address this issue. The 'othering' of the maternal body in the workplace is discussed widely in organizational literature. This is in close relation with the discourse on 'abject appearance' which finds its roots in abjection or casting off (Kristeva, 1982; Butler, 1993). Such discussions on policies, higher education curriculum, organizational training and talent management programs would prove to be useful in the de-stigmatization of motherhood.

The scale of the study is one of the critical limitations. While 27 respondents are significant enough for a qualitative study using IPA, the validity and generalizability of the study can only be determined by slightly higher sample size. This study involves strictly cross-sectional data, all taken at a certain point of time in their journey of motherhood. Since identity is likely to change over time, the study fails to capture the transition of their identities beyond this point. Most of the working mothers were constrained by time and space to talk without any prejudices. While interviewing them in the organizations meant they would not reveal much about their problems in that particular environment, fearing further problems; interviewing them at home meant they could not reveal much about their

familial problems. It was challenging to find a neutral space to nurture better conversations.

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**Appendix 1 Participant Profiles**

Name (changed for anonymity)	Designation	Nature of Organization
Amrita	Sr. Software Engineer	IT
Anita	Nurse	Medical
Anjali	News Director	Visual Media
Divya	Accounts Officer	PSU
Elizebeth	School Teacher	Private-funded school
Geeta	Nurse	Medical
Hima	Graduate Trainee Engineer	R&D
Indu	School Teacher	Private-funded school
Jyothi	Upper Division Clerk	PSU
Jabeen	Research Associate	R&D
Jeena	Business Analyst	Private Consultancy firm
Kavya	Junior Engineer	PSU
Kriti	Patent Analyst	Pharmaceutical
Lakshmi	Asst. Systems Engineer	IT
Lavanya	Asst Professor	Graduate School
Mira	Graphic Designer	Animation
Nikita	Aviation cum Grooming Trainer	Aviation
Nandita	School Teacher	Private-funded school
Preethy	Asst Section Officer (P&A)	PSU
Priyanka	Pediatric Psychiatrist	Medical
Reshmi	Nurse	Medical
Ramya	Research Associate	R&D
Sandra	Flight Crew Trainer	Aviation
Smita	Research Associate	R& D
Tara	Staff Nurse	Medical
Deepika	Jr Designer	Architecture
Veena	Scientist	R&D
Yukta	Test Engineer	Electronics/Technology