MARRIED WOMEN’S CAREERS AND HOUSEHOLD CHORES: A CASE STUDY OF GUWAHATI CITY, INDIA

Parijat BORGOHAIN*, H. N. SHARMA**,

* Dept. of Geography, Cotton College, India, parijat_borgohain@rediffmail.com  
** Retired Professor, Dept. of Geography, Gauhati University, India, hnsharmagui1@gmail.com

Abstract: Working women are an indispensable part of the workforce in every industrial society. But women are still considered to be responsible for taking care of the domestic front in addition to their job responsibilities. Since married working women have to spend a considerable period of time outside their homes in the course of a day, their roles and responsibilities at home have to be completed within a shorter time span. This in turn has often resulted in stress, as women usually have to undertake the major chunk of domestic responsibilities. The present study examines how married working women of Guwahati City in North East India manage their homes and careers and how they cope with the different problematic situations in their day-to-day lives. The study found that women are mainly responsible for numerous household chores such as cooking, looking after sick children and looking after children’s studies in all socio-economic groups of the city. The study was carried out mainly on the basis of primary data collected through a questionnaire for different categories of working women using a stratified random sampling method. Secondary information on the subject was also collected from sources such as books, articles and the Internet.

Key words: careers, household chores, management, consequences.

1. INTRODUCTION

Working women are an indispensable part of the workforce in every industrial society and are making many forays into different fields and occupations on an equal footing with men. In India, especially since independence in 1947, acculturation and modernization of its society has changed many existing socio-cultural norms at home and in the workplace. Also, with the spread of female education in the country and the opening up of many employment opportunities
during the past few decades, the number of women entering the workforce in various capacities has shown an increase. The earlier conservatism regarding girls and women working outside home is gradually fading. Every section of the society from lower to higher levels is in favour of women’s work participation in different categories of occupations. This view is moreover so in the urban context, where there are more employment opportunities. But women are still considered to be responsible for taking care of the domestic front in addition to their job responsibilities.

The present study is about married working women in Guwahati City, the premier city of North East India where the number of working women is increasing day by day (Fig. 1). The population of the city consists of people of different social and linguistic groups belonging to different income categories. The majority of the population is Assamese, followed by Bengalis, Hindi-speaking and other linguistic groups. The Hindu population is the major religious group of Guwahati City followed by Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, Jains and other religious groups.

![Fig. 1. Guwahati city – ward map.](image)

Further, neo-liberalism is today a global phenomenon and its impact has been pervasive in Indian society. It gets reflected in various forms in the country’s
economic, social, political and other aspects of life. However, the degree and nature of impact are uneven in different parts of the country. The metropolitan cities in any case are fast changing both socially and economically and the impacts are being felt in Guwahati City as well.

In addition, with the privatization of many industries in the country, new avenues of employment are opening up, offering economic opportunities to a wide cross-section of people, including women. People’s attitudes and behaviours towards working women is fast changing and Guwahati City being a fast growing city is seen to bear the brunt of changes in a noticeable manner.

It is worth mentioning also that the traditional norms prescribe different roles for husbands and wives on the basis of gender. However, the present day egalitarian values and emerging social and economic conditions tend to undermine the age-old beliefs and traditional role perceptions of spouses in everyday life. Today, no single role or work belongs exclusively to any one gender. And this is especially so in the case of urban areas where the roots of traditionalism are not as deep as in the rural areas.

Domestic workers are common in India and they help in the housework in various ways. Working women belonging to the lower economic groups cannot afford full-time and part-time domestic workers. Therefore, they have to bear the burden of the housework themselves, as traditionally it has been the duty of the women to look after the home and hearth. The type of help rendered by the men in looking after the home depends on their upbringing, customs of society, educational level, nature of employment and duration of working hours, availability of domestic helpers, economic condition and on their outlook on life. Significantly, of course, economic conditions play the pivotal role in determining the ways in which married working women perceive and carry out their roles and responsibilities in their day-to-day lives.

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

The present study tries to find out:
(a) how married working women of Guwahati City manage their homes and careers;
(b) the type of assistance they receive from their spouses and others in performing their daily tasks;
(c) the ways in which working women belonging to different socio-economic groups cope with the different problematic situations in their day-to-day lives, and
(d) the consequences faced by working women in managing their lives on account of their dual roles.
3. METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out between 1998 and 2005. A cross-section of people ranging from poor to rich married working women of Guwahati City through medium level participants were interviewed with the help of a questionnaire. The method was rigorous, intensive and thoughtful. The questionnaire contained queries pertaining to the domestic, social and occupational lives of married working women of Guwahati City, like who takes care of pre-school children while their mothers are away at work, sharing of domestic duties and responsibilities by both spouses, whether they feel guilty about not spending enough time at home with their children, whether they will give up their jobs if they/their spouses are transferred to another town or city, frequency of social visits, level of job satisfaction, etc. Personal observations have also been made from the survey through unobtrusive measures. A close correspondence has been found between the two sets of conclusions drawn from both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Additional information on the subject has been gathered from secondary sources like books, articles and the internet. The additional information has been thoroughly examined only to build up a strong perspective towards examining this topic. Looking from various angles enables a range of views to be considered in critically analyzing the topic.

The respondents are engaged in diverse occupations ranging from teachers, lecturers, doctors, lawyers, beauticians, clerks, businesswomen, part-time workers, etc. Altogether 400 respondents were selected from different organizations from across Guwahati City using a Stratified Random Sampling Method. Here, stratification has been done in terms of socio-economic groups. Accordingly, samples were chosen proportionately according to the size of the groups.

The surveyed respondents of the city belonging to different linguistic and religious groups have been divided into three income categories on the basis of their total monthly family income (total income of both the spouses). Working women having a total monthly family income of less than equal to Rs. 5000/- (Rs= Rupees) are included in the low-income category, working women whose total monthly family income range between Rs.5001/- to Rs.15, 000/- are included in the middle-income category and working women whose total monthly family income exceeds Rs.15, 000/- per month are included in the high-income category.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Working women play dual roles in their day-to-day lives in looking after their homes and careers. The domestic and occupational roles of the surveyed respondents of Guwahati City are stated below:
Working women have to see to the needs of children and other family members in addition to their own personal needs. Managing all the tasks from cooking, washing, cleaning, laundry, etc. requires a lot of time and energy. Assistance rendered by modern household gadgets, domestic workers and other helpers in performing these tasks relieves the load to some extent. Among the surveyed respondents, 232 have full-time domestic workers and 56 have part-time domestic workers. One hundred and twelve respondents do not have any domestic workers to lend a helping hand.

Indian society by and large assigns traditional roles to husbands and wives regarding domestic labour. Wives are supposed to take care of cooking, cleaning, washing and other household tasks, whereas husbands are supposed to be responsible for shopping, paying the bills, etc. This view is prevalent even today although married working women of Guwahati City are gradually challenging these stereotyped gender roles. The concept of egalitarianism regarding sharing of domestic work is yet to gain ground in Indian society.

Cooking food for the family can be considered as the most important domestic role, which requires investment of time, energy and care. It is found that the wives and other female family members along with the domestic workers mostly cook food for the family with the husbands sometimes assisting them.

It is seen that both the spouses are involved in cooking in the Assamese, Bengali and other linguistic households. But the male spouses of the Bihari and Hindi-speaking households are not generally found to play active roles in cooking. In all the households of the different linguistic groups belonging to different income categories, it is seen that the wives and domestic workers mostly cook food for the family (Table 1 up to Table 3).

### Table 1. Cooking Food (Low-Income Category Linguistic Group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic Group</th>
<th>w</th>
<th>P. C.</th>
<th>w.d</th>
<th>P. C.</th>
<th>h.w</th>
<th>P. C.</th>
<th>o</th>
<th>P. C.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>43.48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.04</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihari</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: w = wife, h = husband, d = domestic worker, o = others.
When we consider the households according to the religious groups belonging to the different income categories, it is observed that the wives and domestic workers cook food in more than 60 per cent of the households. The husbands assist in cooking mostly in the Hindu households. In quite a number of households, the domestic workers cook the food.

The frequency of male spouses assisting their wives in the kitchen also gives us an idea of the sharing of domestic responsibilities. It is observed from the study that 88 husbands assist their wives in the kitchen daily, 118 husbands often assist their wives, 140 husbands rarely help their wives and 54 husbands never help their wives in the kitchen. Three hundred and fifty wives are in favour of their husbands assisting them in the kitchen.

Among the linguistic groups of the city, it is seen that in general as the income level rises, the frequency of male spouses assisting in the kitchen decreases. The frequency of Assamese and Bengali husbands assisting their wives is found to be more than the husbands of the other linguistic groups. This may be due to the fact that the status of Assamese and Bengali women is higher than the status of women.

### Table 2. Cooking Food (Middle-Income Category Linguistic Group).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic Group</th>
<th>w</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
<th>w.d</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
<th>h&lt;w&gt;</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
<th>o</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>36.25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24.59</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30.52</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>48.65</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmi</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83.33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: w = wife, h = husband, d = domestic worker, o = others.

### Table 3. Cooking Food (High-Income Category Linguistic Group).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic Group</th>
<th>w</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
<th>w.d</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
<th>h&lt;w&gt;</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
<th>o</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>P.C.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39.58</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40.62</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15.63</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: w = wife, h = husband, d = domestic worker, o = others.
of Bihari, Hindi and other linguistic groups in their respective societies. (Fig. 2, 3, 4).

Fig. 2. Frequency of Husbands assisting in the Kitchen (Low-Income Category).

Fig. 3. Frequency of Husbands assisting in the Kitchen (Middle-Income Category).
Among the religious groups it is seen from the study that in the low income category households, more Hindu husbands assist their wives in the kitchen than their Muslim counterparts. Among the middle-income category and high-income category households, it is observed that the frequency of Hindu husbands assisting their wives in the kitchen decreases as the income level rises whereas in case of Muslim and Christian husbands, the percentages are seen to increase with the rise in the level of income.

Shopping for the family is one of the major roles of working women. Buying vegetables, cereals, clothes and other goods requires lots of time and energy. These roles are performed by both the spouses and sometimes by other persons.

When considering shopping for vegetables according to linguistic groups, it is observed that in the majority of the linguistic groups belonging to the different income categories; more than 50 per cent of the shopping of vegetables is carried out by the husbands followed by shopping by both the spouses, wives and other persons respectively.

Shopping of cereals by different linguistic and religious groups belonging to different income categories also reveal that except for Assamese respondents belonging to low-income category and high-income category, and Hindi dual career households belonging to high-income category, more than 50 per cent of the shopping is carried out by husbands followed by both the spouses, wives and others respectively.

Among the linguistic groups it is seen that both the spouses buy clothes in about 78 per cent of households belonging to all the income categories.
Similarly, in relation to religion, it is seen that both the spouses buy clothes in about 76 per cent of households belonging to all the income categories.

Both the spouses buy the goods required for the family, other than cereals, clothes and vegetables in 70.97 per cent of the surveyed households belonging to low-income category of Guwahati City, 62.45 per cent belonging to the middle-income category and in 79.58 per cent households belonging to the high-income category.

The study has indicated that in totality, in the middle-income category linguistic and religious groups, the involvement of both the parents in their children’s studies is more than in the other two income groups. The study has also revealed that more mothers are involved in looking after their children’s studies than the fathers when all the surveyed respondents of the city are considered.

Looking after children when they fall sick is one of the major responsibilities and a major cause of worry for working mothers. Among the surveyed households, only the Assamese husbands belonging to the low-income category and Assamese and Bengali husbands belonging to the middle-income category stay back to care for their sick children. In all the other linguistic groups belonging to the different income categories, the female spouses mostly care for the sick children. A few Assamese and Bengali respondents belonging to the middle and high income categories leave their sick children in their domestic workers’ care while a few leave behind their sick children at home to be cared for by persons other than the domestic workers.

The study has revealed that in the case of 162 surveyed respondents of Guwahati City, the husbands pay the electricity, telephone and other bills, in the case of 14 households the wives pay the bills, in the case of 75 households, both the husbands and wives pay the bills according to their convenience and in the case of another 144 households, other persons pay the bills. Five households do not have electricity.

It is seen from the study that only 6 working mothers take their children to school. The children of 219 respondents go to school/college by school/city buses, children of 93 respondents are conveyed to school/college by their fathers, 19 respondents’ children are conveyed to school/college by their drivers whereas children of 18 respondents are conveyed to school/college by other persons.

One hundred and six (26.5 per cent) of the surveyed respondents have pre-school children. Fourteen pre-school going children are looked after by female relatives, 58 pre-school children are looked after by domestic workers, 4 pre-school children are looked after in baby care centres and 6 pre-school children are looked after by other persons (Fig. 5).
The occupational roles of the working women depend on the nature of job, official designations and status, duration of working hours, whether engaged fulltime or part-time in their jobs, whether their jobs are permanent or temporary, etc. As the nature of jobs of the respondents varies greatly, roles and responsibilities also vary. Among the respondents, 29 (7.25 per cent) have to go on trips outside the city.

It is found from the study that among the respondents, 212 working women prefer challenging jobs with high responsibilities, 30 working women prefer flexi-time jobs and 158 working women prefer jobs with short duration of working hours (Fig. 6).

Many working women of Guwahati City consider their careers to be secondary to their domestic responsibilities. When asked if due to some unavoidable circumstances they are required to give up their jobs or careers how many of them will comply, 201 (50.25 per cent) of the female respondents replied in the affirmative. The reasons stated for giving up their careers are many, including the fact that they mostly earn less than their husbands, they are more responsible for looking after the families, they are more capable of looking after their children’s education and well-being, etc.

As a result of their dual responsibilities at home and at the workplace, many working women face problems in managing their homes and careers. Many measures are adopted for the smooth functioning of their domestic lives. These include restricting the number of children so that they are able to provide more time to their upbringing and education and living in unitary families.
surveyed respondents, 32.25 per cent have one child each whereas 39.75 per cent have two children each and 78.5 per cent of the respondents live in nuclear families.

![Graph showing type of jobs preferred by respondents.](image)

**Fig. 6.** Type of jobs preferred by the respondents.

The prevalent traditional division of labour at home in most societies often results in the woman doing 70 to 80 per cent of the household chores. This is also found to be applicable to married working women residing in Guwahati City. The difficulty with this traditional division of labour is that women’s responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, washing clothes need to be repeated daily, no matter how tired or stressed they are while husbands may perform their share of chores like shopping or cleaning the car according to their convenience.

The modern family is struggling through a modifying role definition. Ambiguity exists concerning ownership of responsibilities and prioritization of tasks. The study has found that, in many cases, working women undergo role expansion rather than role redefinition. Working women, on account of their dual roles are slowly bringing about changes in the roles and responsibilities of family members. The ways in which married working women in Guwahati City are managing their lives and the resultant consequences are summarized as follows:

Although it is the wife who is usually responsible for almost all types of domestic work inside the home and she also goes out to work, domestic workers, husbands and other members of the family do, to some degree, share the burden of the housework. But the frequency of spouses helping their wives in the kitchen greatly varies with some husbands never helping the wives in the kitchen as
already stated. Moreover, all working women cannot afford domestic workers and household appliances like fridges, mixer-grinders, and ovens for reducing the work burden. As a result, it is seen that although there has been some modification in the domestic roles, female spouses still continue to be responsible for the domestic work.

With both the spouses doing all sorts of domestic roles, the boundary between 'male roles' and 'female roles' are gradually merging in many cases giving rise to egalitarian norms in the management of home. As both the spouses do not have much free time at their disposal, duties like marketing, paying electricity, telephone and other bills, helping the children in their studies, taking the children to school/college are performed in many cases by persons other than the parents, as already indicated in the study.

Changes are also noticed in looking after pre-school children. Crèches have come up in different areas of Guwahati City to look after small children of working women who do not have alternative childcare arrangements at home. Food habits are also found to be changing like eating out in restaurants, the use of readymade food products, readymade spices and cooking of meals that require less cooking time.

Other consequences include residing in a place that is favourable from the location point of view in terms of accessibility so that less time is spent in commuting to work. The study has found that working women play active roles in decision-making. As they earn their own money, they also decide how and where to utilize the money.

The study has revealed that about half of the respondents are ready to limit their work commitments. If the job is transferable, the whole family usually has to shift resulting in disruption of social links. Children’s education also sometimes suffers in such cases. Another consequence is the feeling of fatigue, as working women have to undertake dual responsibilities of work and of looking after their homes. Sometimes, the quality of service is also affected as working women cannot devote fully to their careers due to their various domestic responsibilities.

Children of working mothers sometimes feel neglected and may suffer from emotional insecurity, which may also restrict their physical growth if there are no alternative arrangements to look after their physical and emotional needs. Sometimes domestic workers also ill-treat children left under their care. It is seen that children place limits on women’s career advancements and are the main cause of stress of working mothers.

Economic self-sufficiency plays a vital role in the emotional and psychological conditions of a person. When both the spouses work, the female spouses can also fulfill their emotional needs and are less threatened by the
responses of the male spouses in all walks of life. Working women many a time are able to hold ground gracefully in domestic and other matters due to their economic and social power.

Working women often suffer from physical and mental stress. The nature of job, the duration of working hours, distance to workplaces, mode of travelling, the kind of relationship the employee has with her supervisor along with the working environment are the biggest prompts of stress. Stress experienced at work sometimes spills over to the home environment.

**The findings of the study are enumerated below:**

1) The study has revealed that in performing domestic roles like cooking, it is usually the wives and the domestic workers who cook the food with some Assamese and Bengali Hindu husbands helping. The husbands belonging to other linguistic and religious groups are not generally found to play active roles in cooking food.

2) Regarding the frequency of male spouses helping in the kitchen, it is seen that only 22 per cent of the husbands assist their wives daily in the kitchen.

3) Shopping of cereals and vegetables are mostly done by the male spouses; while shopping of clothes and other goods are done by both the spouses in the majority of the households.

4) The study has revealed that looking after children’s studies and looking after them when they fall sick are the duties of the mothers in a majority of the households.

5) It is seen that the majority of the pre-school children of the surveyed working women are looked after by the domestic workers during their parents’ absence from home.

6) The study has also revealed that many working women prefer jobs with short duration of working hours. 7.25 per cent of the respondents have to go on tours.

7) Working women tend to juggle more of the home responsibilities and are often forced to subordinate their career growth for the benefit of their spouses and families.

8) The study has further revealed that half of the female respondents are ready to give up their jobs if required, due to unavoidable circumstances.

9) Working women experience fatigue as they have little time for rest and recreation. Domestic workers play an important role in sharing domestic work. 67 per cent of the respondents have domestic workers.

10) The boundary between 'male roles' and 'female roles' are gradually merging in many cases giving rise to egalitarian norms in the management of home.

11) Eating out in restaurants, use of ready-made food products, readymade spices and cooking of meals that require less cooking time is gaining popularity
among working women of the city.

12) Children of working mothers sometimes feel neglected and may suffer from emotional insecurity. Working mothers in turn also suffer from role conflict and feelings of guilt about neglecting their children.

5. CONCLUSION

It has been found that many married working women tend to give more importance to their domestic roles and responsibilities than to their careers. However, at the same time, it is seen that many married working women of Guwahati City have succeeded in managing their careers and domestic duties effectively and are enjoying the fruits of their economic freedom. Variations exhibited by the working women of different linguistic and religious groups of the city in the performance of the various roles are found to be negligible. But the working women belonging to different economic categories do show some variation in the performance of the various roles in the management of home and work. Working women also get a chance to interact with a broad cross-section of the society, which helps them to broaden their outlook in life by learning from others’ experiences. Further, working women have their own identities and they feel more confident in leading their lives. The number of married working women in Guwahati City is showing a rising trend which indicates that more changes in the domestic, social and occupational fronts are foreseen in the near future.

REFERENCES


www.wpunj.edu.


