

Double jeopardy: Examining the burden and bias faced by new mothers working in Indian educational institutions

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ABSTRACT

In the Indian culture, women are usually expected to take up the role of a caregiver for their newborns while compromising on their other roles. Moreover, mothers employed in Indian educational institutions tend to experience dual burden of providing care to their neonates while facing systemic gender bias leading to “double jeopardy” negatively impacting their career in the academia. This qualitative study, based out of Delhi NCR, explores the lived experiences of ten new mothers with children aged 0-2 years who are employed as teachers, lecturers or professors at any Indian educational institutions navigating the challenges of balancing motherhood while maintaining a positive professional trajectory. Using in-depth interviews, the research identifies key themes, including institutional barriers, implicit and explicit biases, and the socio-cultural expectations that exacerbate their struggles. Findings indicate that new mothers often face limited structural support, discriminatory policies, and a lack of accommodation for their dual roles. The study presents crucial topics for discussion such as gender based biasness/discrimination in academia by highlighting the urgent need for policy reforms, inclusive workspaces, and institutional sensitivity to the unique challenges faced by new mothers working in Indian educational institutions. The implications extend to fostering gender equity, ensuring work-life balance, and promoting systemic changes within academic institutions to support women employed in academia.

INTRODUCTION

During pregnancy and the postpartum period, women deal with a variety of interpersonal and professional challenges. However, little attention is paid to the stigma associated with pregnancy and parenthood (Goldstein, 2018). With an emphasis on three areas: workplace, higher education, and linkages with weight stigma-behavioural science draws attention to these problems and their policy consequences. COVID-19 has consequences as well. Motherhood, while often celebrated as a pivotal life event, can pose significant challenges for women striving to balance their professional goals with the responsibilities of parenting. In Indian educational institutions, new mothers frequently face a unique form of “double jeopardy”, a simultaneous encounter with both the tangible burden of caregiving and the intangible bias stemming from gendered expectations (Frasch & Atkinson, 2021; Narayanswamy, 2023). While the physical demands of childcare, domestic work, and institutional responsibilities create one layer of strain, the second layer arises from persistent social assumptions that question a woman's professional commitment and competence post-maternity (Joshi & Singh, 2022). One of the most important things in early childhood nurturing is breastfeeding. Exclusive breastfeeding for six months and a diet supplemented with complementary foods until two years or more is advised by the WHO. Breastfeeding promotes health for both the mother and the child. But for working women, who need to return to work after maternity leave, breastfeeding is a difficult job. Reinstatement of women from childbirth stress and their return to work and family duties is largely determined by variables such as prior health status, parity, breastfeeding, the availability

of social support from family members and friends and work-related variables, i.e., time of resumption of work, job pressure, and work environment. Social support deficiency enhances the employment stress, which subsequently impacts the mental well-being of the employed working mother. It is also indicated that working professional mothers had to either discontinue or hide the practice of breastfeeding when they were at work. But few studies have been conducted in the Indian population to investigate issues of working mothers.

While the evidence is not overwhelming, parental work has been shown to positively impact most children's health and developmental outcomes, such as greater self-esteem, less social and emotional distress, lower risk of being uninsured, higher rates of vaccination and more academic success. Nevertheless, women are encircled by two equally demanding roles: building a career and financial independence, yet still bearing the burden of household chores. It can ultimately leave its mark on women's physical and mental health.

Despite an increase in women's participation in academia, Indian institutions often fall short in providing the support systems necessary for sustaining that participation after motherhood. Infrastructural limitations, such as inadequate parental leave, rigid work schedules, and a lack of on-campus childcare, exacerbate the daily challenges faced by new mothers (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2021; Tejpal et al., 2022). Additionally, the deep-rooted cultural ideals that prioritize a woman's role in the domestic sphere contribute to their exclusion from leadership roles, tenure tracks, and major research initiatives (Krishnan, 2020). These institutional and

interpersonal biases tend to remain unspoken but operate powerfully in shaping career trajectories.

This dual pressure of excelling in both caregiving and career often leaves new mothers in academia at a disadvantage, affecting their mental health, sense of belonging, and professional growth (Rasquin et al., 2021; Gupta & Bhargava, 2023). By centering the lived experiences of new mothers working in Indian educational settings, this study seeks to unpack the layered realities of this "double jeopardy." The aim is to contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equity in the workplace, while also advocating for institutional policies that enable inclusivity, well-being, and work-life integration. The industrialized working society was not designed for parents, particularly pregnant women, since key periods for seeking upward career progress overlap with women's most fertile ages (e.g., 20s-30s). In addition, conventional working hours (i.e., 9 a.m.-5 p.m.) conflict with schooling and childcare. Therefore, balancing a family and a career is usually challenging. Behavioral science repeatedly demonstrates that pregnant women and working mothers suffer the most disadvantages. Women do significantly more unpaid work than men, including housework, childcare, and elder care (Catalyst, 2017; Gates, 2019; Hoyt, 2010). Women in developed and developing countries spent 2.5 more hours daily on unpaid work than men (International Labour Organization, 2016). Women's balancing act of work and life extends beyond unpaid work to juggling the workplace and childbearing/rearing. The study by Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, and Robinson (2000) explains that although males handle women's roles in daily life, mothers are typically seen to be more involved in raising their children. The strain of juggling official work and family duties grows, causing mental and physical strain.

For a smooth return to work life from childbirth, a new mother requires assistance from individuals in her surroundings. Most times it is observed, nevertheless, that workload following childbirth is not shared equally by both parents. The effort of men towards the cause of childcare and the way they participate in other household works, particularly during this period, was found lacking by Berkowitz and Marsiglio (2007), LaRossa (1988), and Risman (1998). Because of the dual roles that she performs at home and office, the new mother has to take up most of the load (Pew Research Centre, 2015). Consequently, her self-esteem, which is an important predictor of how her career is going (Sadri & Bowen, 2011), suffers.

Along with this, the social and cultural imperative that women shall put family chores first tends to push them to take career gaps or exit the job market altogether, with research observing that nearly 73% of Indian women leave their professions after childbirth (Sharma & Dhir, 2019). This generates high rates of attrition as well as serious losses of capable talent in academe. The psychological and emotional toll is as worrisome. Working women in India often experience high levels of stress, and their mental health burden is further compounded by shift work, sleep deprivation, and internalized guilt (Kadale et al., 2018). They become even more isolated in their work settings due to the lack of peer support and the stigma associated with asking for adjustments. In such a context, motherhood becomes not only a personal transformation but a professional challenge that remains insufficiently acknowledged or addressed by institutional frameworks.

This research endeavors to examine the living experiences of working new mothers within Indian educational contexts, focusing on the interaction of structural limitations and social conceptions that impact their careers and quality of life. By identifying the double burdens here, this work aspires to make an active contribution towards enhanced gender equity as well as academic institutional reform.

Literature Review

The process of becoming a mother is a life-changing time that, although highly individual, crosses over extensively with societal institutions, most notably the workplace. New mothers in Indian schools frequently experience a "double jeopardy": the concurrent pressure of meeting caregiving obligations and institutional and societal discrimination. This dual role is particularly acute in academe, where productivity, availability, and intellectual

engagement expectations commonly conflict with the realities of early motherhood (Dixit & Pandey, 2023; Kadale et al., 2018). The focus of this review is in the Indian context, where cultural expectations tend to put caregiving on women alone, intensifying the pressure of juggling professional and personal selves (Sharma & Dhir, 2019; Narayanswamy, 2023). The review will concentrate on research on Indian working mothers in education, institutional gender dynamics, and the psychological burden of surviving academia after maternity. In so doing, it will underscore the imperative necessity for inclusive policies and practices that recognise and facilitate the dual identities of academic mothers in India.

(a) Global and Indian perspective of Motherhood and career

Motherhood and working careers collide in complicated and frequently difficult terms, with women everywhere juggling the double responsibilities of care work and office output. The phenomenon of the "motherhood penalty" has long been well documented, revealing that mothers, particularly new mothers, face reduced career prospects, earnings disparities, and social prejudices when compared to childless counterparts and even working dads (Torres et al., 2024). These are compounded even further in academic environments, where publication expectations and tenure clocks can conflict with maternity obligations (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). At the international level, scholars have pointed out institutional-level interventions parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and childcare support, as key to preventing the career interruptions brought on by motherhood (Torres et al., 2024). Yet many universities continue to be guided by outdated assumptions about the "ideal worker" being fully committed, present, and free from caregiving responsibilities (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014).

In the Indian scenario, the plight of working mothers assumes special contours owing to sociocultural norms. Research emphasises how deeply ingrained gender norms and institutional weaknesses in Indian academia add to what Dixit and Pandey (2023) call the "dual role conflict." Indian mothers in institutions of learning frequently have to balance domestic duties with demanding professional positions, with limited exposure to maternity leave or systemic support.

The cumulative impact of these pressures is evident in lowered job satisfaction and increased attrition rates among Indian women educators. As Sharma and Mishra (2021) point out, the absence of gender-sensitive HR policies in educational institutions compounds the challenges, leaving mothers to independently negotiate their work-life balance.

(b) Institutional Barriers in Academia

Even if the number of women in academic institutions is increasing, institutional and systemic impediments still prevent them from advancing in their careers, especially for those women who are becoming mothers. Those without family commitments are implicitly favoured by academia's adherence to traditional career timeframes and expectations, which disadvantage those with caregiving responsibilities (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). This is particularly noticeable in the absence of institutional supports that new moms need to balance their personal and professional responsibilities, like flexible work schedules, sufficient parental leave, and childcare availability. Institutions around the world frequently follow the notion of the "ideal worker", someone who is always available, mobile, and dedicated to their profession (Acker, 1990). This expectation not only marginalises mothers but also reinforces a culture where taking maternity leave or requesting flexible schedules is viewed as a lack of dedication (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014). This frequently results in what scholars refer to as the "flexibility stigma," when any departure from accepted workplace practices is unofficially punished by being excluded from important academic events or having fewer possibilities for advancement.

In the Indian context, social norms that assign women to primary caregiving tasks serve to further strengthen institutional impediments. Indian working moms in academia frequently face inadequate maternity policies, a dearth of childcare facilities on campus, and a lack of institutional support during the postnatal transition, according to a study by Kadale et al. (2018). Women are forced to make tough choices as a result of these systemic

flaws, which frequently result in decreased research output or career stagnation.

Recent assessments, like the one by Torres et al. (2024), highlight that these institutional hurdles are cultural as well as logistical, showing up as a dearth of female role models in leadership roles, exclusionary departmental cultures, and implicit biases. Together, these obstacles create what is known as the "maternal wall," which holds that academic moms are less capable, less dedicated, and hence less worthy of promotion.

Rationale of the study

The Indian culture continues to put immense pressure on women to care for their newborn especially during the first few months following childbirth. Working women who have just become mothers can face the brunt of gendered norms at workplace especially the ones employed in academia. New mothers could often find themselves striving for both personal and professional success in turn leading them to experience stress and burnout. The current study is an effort to explore and understand the lived experiences of new mothers employed in the academia in Delhi-NCR. The study would help explore the socio-cultural expectations placed on new mothers by the society and their workplace while they thrive to find a balance between their personal and professional lives.

Despite existing policies on maternity and conversations around exhausting roles of new mothers, very little about it has been understood or implemented in Indian institutions. The experiences of new mothers in academia while caring for a new born has been vaguely understood and undermined. Using in-depth interviews with ten new mothers employed in the academia, this study aims to uncover their personal experiences of managing dual roles and challenges, if any, faced by them. The data would help shed light upon institutional policies around maternity, any discrimination faced due to dual pressures, subjective views of new mothers around support received or any implicit biases faced by them.

The study would help institutions work on creating a more inclusive environment for new mothers while re-working on their policy frameworks to offer more support and any additional assistance needed by them.

Materials and Method

Aim

The study aims to explore and understand the different experiences of new mothers employed in the academia in Delhi-NCR. It would primarily focus on uncovering the burden and bias faced by new mothers while parallelly managing their personal and professional front.

Objectives

- To explore the challenges (personal and professional) encountered by new mothers employed in the academic sector in Delhi-NCR.
- Understanding the institutional policies and their implementation that have been created to support new mothers in the academic sector.
- Understanding the burden, implicit bias and any form of discrimination (experienced and perceived) encountered by new mothers in the Indian institutions.
- Exploring the socio-cultural-gendered responsibilities and expectations that new mothers are subjected to.
- To explore the possible reforms that could be implemented in institutional frameworks to help new mothers ease into their dual role transition.

Research Methodology

The current study adopts a phenomenological qualitative research design which aids to understand the lived experiences of new mothers who aim to thrive and find a balance in their personal and professional identities. Phenomenological design would help in deeply understanding their subjective experiences and perceptions about the dual role they have taken up in their lives. Ten women were included as participants for the study who had become a mother in the last 2 years and were employed in Indian institutions in Delhi-NCR. The women who were included had not been diagnosed with post-partum depression following childbirth and were selected through a convenience and snowball sampling method.

The objectives of the study were accomplished through qualitative semi-structured interviews of ten new mothers employed in the academic sector residing in Delhi-NCR. The narratives obtained were analyzed using the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA).

Ethical Guidelines

Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form before being included in the study which established guidelines of the research and participant data confidentiality.

Results

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were later analyzed using Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Themes were derived by thoroughly reading each case over three times. The subjectivity of each case was preserved through their exclusive verbatim.

Theme 1: Invisible burden of dual roles

"Severe postpartum depression, and at work I felt irritated as body was not allowing neither was my mental health but I had to push myself to work and take therapy." (Participant 6)

"It has always been a second thought on proving myself, self-esteem has been impacted." (Participant 4)

IPA Insight: Majority of the participants described a sense of feeling burdened by their dual roles which impacted their mental and emotional health adversely. Their burden felt unrecognised both at home and work.

Theme 2: Institutional negligence, insensitivity and policy disparities

"Better policies, flexibility, less workload" (Participant 2)

"Indian institutions are not supportive, only allowed for half days while I was breastfeeding" (Participant 4)

"Flexibility in work timings, better leave policies, infrastructure conducive enough to bring child if anytime needed" (Participant 6)

IPA Insight: The lack of post-natal accommodations in Indian institutions such as feeding rooms, creche and flexible working hours left new mothers feeling frustrated.

Theme 3: Professional underestimation and implicit biasness

"Nothing as such, just sometimes denied appraisals thinking that she is a new mother, so wont contribute much." (Participant 1)

"New mothers are often perceived as less committed to their work, leading to fewer high-responsibility projects or leadership opportunities." (Participant 8)

"Colleagues or managers might assume a new mother can't work late or travel, even without asking her directly.- this has been happening with me every time there is an opportunity." (Participant 4)

IPA Insight: It was a commonly observed phenomena among participants to feel implicit bias. They reported feeling replaced in their research project responsibilities, being replaced for important assignments and not receiving appraisals for the year following maternity.

Theme 4: Experiencing disintegration of self-identity and mom guilt

"I am in a constant battle of performing in both my roles as a professional and as a mother but I feel like I am failing at both sometimes." (Participant 1)

"I used to believe in my abilities as a mother but I've just started doubting myself a lot lately." (Participant 5)

IPA Insight: Most of the new mothers shared that they felt a sense of being stuck between two social identities and found it hard to regulate it.

Theme 5: Supportive colleagues

"While my HOD and Dean made things challenging, I did find support in my friend who happens to be my colleague." (Participant 2)

"Just talking to a few colleagues made it little better." (Participant 6)

"At least my team members heard me when I cribbed." (Participant 4)

IPA Insight: Despite of being burdened and having a deep sense of emotional conflict, participants also expressed that having supportive colleagues helped them ease into their roles.

Theme 6: Suggestions for new mothers in the academia

"Take care of yourself first, in order to not transfer the trauma to your child, then think of anything else in the world" (Participant 1)

"Speak up for yourself, breastfeeding is a basic right and shouldn't be compromised due to bad employers." (Participant 4)

IPA Insight: All participants had important suggestions for all new mothers going through similar situations and wanted them to prioritise themselves.

DISCUSSION

The current study was structured around assessing the burden and subtle bias encountered by new mothers who are employed in Indian educational institutions situated in Delhi-NCR through semi-structured interviews with each participant. Ten women who were included in the study had given birth in the last 2 years and did not receive any formal diagnosis of postpartum depression. The interview questions were structured around understanding the socio-cultural expectations and bias faced by new mothers at work and home, the gendered norms around motherhood, institutional policies and support and how new mothers manage their professional and personal lives.

The study uncovers the difficult position of new mothers trying to find balance between their professional and personal responsibilities in a complex scenario of Indian society and Indian educational institutions. Culturally, women in India are expected to play the role of a primary caregiver for their new born while hustling at work that could leave them feeling exhausted and burdened. The issue is significant in India due to deeply embedded patriarchy which creates challenges for new mothers like receiving subtle form of bias at work and gendered norms at home while providing care for the baby. They end up facing exaggerated levels of stress as they end up having fewer work opportunities and responsibilities while also feeling small as a nurturer to their child (Ghosh, 2021; Savat, 2021).

There have been noteworthy measures by the government such as the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 and the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 that emphasise and work around stating and protecting rights of women at their workplace (including new mothers). Despite having policies in place, employers and workplaces fail to execute them for their employees leading to discrepancies and gaps in the support and benefits received by new mothers in Indian educational institutions. The situation is worsened when lack of support and understanding for new mothers is accompanied by cultural stigmas that view them as the lesser committed employees making their professional stance very difficult and questionable (Nisha, 2023; Srivastava, 2025).

The authors met the objectives of the study through executing semi-structured interviews with ten new mothers who were employed in the Indian academic institutions. The manuscripts were analysed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis technique (IPA). The themes that were derived through the analysis were invisible burden of dual roles, institutional negligence, insensitivity and policy disparities, professional underestimation and implicit biasness, experiencing disintegration of self-identity and mom guilt, supportive colleagues and suggestions for new mothers in the academia.

The theme, "invisible burden of dual roles" aligns with another study (Phillips et al., 2019) that reported how new mothers are expected to carry dual responsibilities of nurturing as well as excelling with great professional output. It also sheds light upon the ignorance of institutions about the emotional labor that women silently battle with. Another study (Bhattacharyya & Banerjee, 2020) conducted in the IT sector of India suggests superficial efforts made by professional spaces to demonstrate gender equality, standardizing male centered professional spaces and supporting patriarchal beliefs and attitudes at Indian workplaces. The results of this study coincide with the current study which also reports new mothers experiencing gendered bias and being replaced in responsibilities as they were seen as being non trustworthy employees because of their new born child.

The fourth theme, "Experiencing disintegration of self-identity and mom guilt" can be understood through the work done by Gilligan (1982) which thoroughly explains how women usually derive meaning out of ethical difficulties. They usually approach these concerns while maintaining a focus on love, care,

relationships which leads them into difficult spots like self-doubt and internal conflicts. Motherhood and caregiving roles in cultures like India where women are expected to compromise and sacrifice could prove to be detrimental for their self-identity.

Another researcher (Bailyn, 2002) reported results very similar to theme three of the current study. His study suggested that academic institutions make benign attempts to display gender equality and mask gender discrimination. Due to which women who are new mothers often experience discrepancies in receiving any appraisals, funding and career growth.

The current study underlines some very crucial matters that need to be addressed by academic institutions in India. There is a strong need for institutions to build infrastructure that could support the needs of new mothers such as feeding rooms and a well-equipped creche. Higher management of academic institutions needs to uphold the importance of implementing the policies in place to support new mothers and also re-work on understanding the needs of their women employees to ensure gender equality. This would help Indian academic institutions retain and empower their women employees.

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