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Motherhood and Gender Role: A Study of Employed Myanmar Diasporic Mothers in The Greater Toronto Area

This article focuses on motherhood and gender roles concerning first-generation migrant women from Myanmar (Burma) who have relocated to Canada. It explores to what extent the women of the Myanmar diaspora challenge or still maintain their gender norms and relations embedded in the sending country's cultural context while simultaneously juggling the responsibilities among their multiple identities as mothers, wives, and employees through the lens of feminist mothering theory. The investigation is based on a review of maternal theorists and feminist migration scholars who explore the lived complexities of migrant mothers within the context of Southeast Asian migration to Western countries, as well as conducting a qualitative survey interview with eight employed Myanmar diasporic mothers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) in 2020. Based on the findings, the paper argues that feminist mothering should be discussed as a combination of structural conditions (e.g., cultural beliefs, and material and economic demands) and subjective feelings about paid and unpaid work (e.g., domestic and child responsibilities).

Introduction

Despite the growing advocacy for shared parenting and work-life balance, many scholars have provided evidence that mothers remain the primary caregivers in affluent countries such as Canada (Wall and Arnold); the United States (Bianchi et al; Mannino and Deutsch); Great Britain (O'Brien; O'Brien et al.); and Australia (Baxter; Craig). Why do mothers remain the primary caregivers while participating in the labour market and contributing income to the household? As Bonnie Fox has discussed, the source of the problem appears to be because women and men remain intent on taking on conventional gender roles concerning parenthood (Fox 31).

My study of employed Myanmar diasporic mothers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) contributes to the literature on how the invisible immigrant mothers of Myanmar balance mothering and work responsibilities in the host country. Along with the pressures of their mothering roles, the women of the Myanmar diaspora also must endure the traditional gender stereotypes and norms that can emerge with migration and pose new challenges to them in the host community. For example, in the context of Myanmar, gender relations are structured not only via sociocultural norms but also via religious concepts. Nearly eighty-eight per cent of the Myanmar population is Buddhist and believes in the concept of the male power known as "hpon," granted to men at birth. This power positions men on a higher spiritual level than women and establishes them as the "natural" head of the family and household. Moreover, the concept of hpon entails that women are inherently inferior to men in religious status, thereby ensuring that patriarchal power is reinforced and reflected in society and its cultural practices (Tun et al. viii; Tun Thein 3-6; Harriden 26). In addition, my study explores to what extent the women of the Myanmar diaspora challenge or maintain their gender norms when they have to juggle the responsibilities among their multiple identities as mothers, wives, and employees; and contributes to female migration scholarship to understand how the concept of gender equality in the domestic sphere, embedded in the sending country's cultural context, positively or negatively, enhances how migrant women revise their gender relations concerning their spouses in the host country.

My investigation engages with the relevant works of maternal theorists and feminist migration scholars who explore the lived complexities of migrant mothers within the context of Southeast Asian migration to Western countries. For this study, eight GTA mothers were recruited from employed heterosexual couples who migrated to Canada from Myanmar either as immigrants or refugees. Since there is no adequate database of the Myanmar diaspora in the GTA from which to select respondents, a sampling of research subjects was achieved via a combination of convenience and snowball techniques (Bryman and Bell 245). The participants had to meet four specific requirements: (i) older than twenty, and first-generation migrant women; (ii) husbands must be of any ethnic origin also from Myanmar; (iii) living with at least one child under thirteen; and iv) employed (i.e. part-time, full-time, self-employed, and working-from-home) and contributing to the household income. The research participants belong to different ethnic groups of Myanmar. Five are Bamars; two are a mix of Kayin-Bamar and Kachin-Bamar, and one is Kayin. Among the sample, five are Buddhist, two are Christian, and one does not identify with any religion. The age range for my sample is between thirty-five and fifty-four. They have been in Canada for between six years and twenty-one years. Six participants became mothers in Canada (i.e., their children were born in Canada). All speak English fluently and all the names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Theoretical Perspective: Feminist Mothering

Feminist mothering is constructed as a negation of patriarchal motherhood and functions as a counter-narrative of motherhood to "imagine and implement a view of mothering that is empowering to women." The difference in theorizing feminist mothering with other feminist theories is that it is determined more by what it is not in patriarchal motherhood that causes mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 136). According to O'Reilly, feminist mothering does not limit childrearing to the biological mother, and it redefines mothering as being an explicitly and profoundly political and social process (*Matricentric Feminism* 145-47). Moreover, O'Reilly defines feminist mothering as a practice that seeks to grant mothers agency (i.e., mothering practices that facilitate women's power in challenging aspects of institutionalized motherhood), authority (i.e., confidence and conviction in oneself), authenticity (i.e., being true to oneself in making a decision that is consistent with one's own beliefs and values), autonomy (i.e., holding power in the household), and advocacy/activism (i.e., the potential political and social dimensions of motherwork expressed in antisexist childrearing or maternal activism)—all denied to them in patriarchal motherhood.

Maternal theorists discuss that women have specific rights in womanhood and motherhood via the concept of feminist mothering, which resists normative motherhood and stereotypical expectations in a patriarchal society. For example, Tuula Gordon's study of feminist mothers explores how these women conduct their lives according to alternative ideologies, which relate to five factors: (i) how they challenge and criticize myths of motherhood; (ii) how they consider their right to work; (iii) how they raise their children in antisexist and antiracist ways; (iv) their co-mothering expectations for their spouses in daily lives; and (v) how they are politically active (149). Similarly, Rose L. Glickman argues that no matter how ordinary the feminist mothers' lives seem from the perspectives of outsiders and casual observers, their feminism intensely resisted conventions (22)

Additionally, Tuula Gordon's study of feminist mothers alerts us to the possibility that resistance entails making different choices about how a woman wants to practice mothering (58). The studies of both Gordon and Glickman, cited above, look specifically at mothers who identify as feminists (44), whereas the women in Horwitz's study, believe that they resist the dominant discourse of mothering but may or may not identify as feminists (45). In this regard, O'Reilly underlines the significant differences between "empowered mothering" and "feminist mothering," even though the two seem similar. Empowered mothering signifies a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood. The primary focus of "empowered mothering," which refers to the theory and

practice of mothering that recognizes how women, children, and society benefit when women live their lives as mothers from positions of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy (O'Reilly "Feminist Mothering" 190-191).

Yet feminist mothering refers to a particular style of empowered mothering which is developed and expressed through a feminist identification or consciousness. Moreover, feminist mothering attempts to balance the needs of women in managing multiple identities (e.g., mother, wife, caregiver, and student/employee). Therefore, a feminist mother is a woman whose mothering, in theory, and practice, is shaped and influenced by feminism (O'Reilly "Feminist Mothering" 191). For example, some studies (Horwitz; Christopher) show that women resist patriarchal motherhood to have a higher quality of life, but their specific resistances are more personal than political and do not originate from an awareness of how motherhood functions in a patriarchal society as a cultural and/or ideological institution to oppress women. Some employed mothers' justification for their choice of employment could be to fulfil their needs, hobbies and interests rather than economic needs and to resist a sexist environment or patriarchal culture. By contrast, those mothers who practise feminist mothering see the development of a mother's selfhood as being beneficial to both her motherhood and her child(ren). They do not see this process as being antithetical to their interests as it is often assumed to be in patriarchal motherhood. They are also empowered mothers because they do not regard 24/7 mothering (i.e., full-time intensive mothering that is demanded by patriarchal motherhood) as necessary for children, and they do not put their children's needs before their own but instead look to motherhood to define and realize their identities as mothers (O'Reilly "Feminist Mothering" 191).

In essence, empowered mothering is a subject of feminist mothering, and its diverse practices constitute the culmination of mothers' efforts to contest sociocultural myths surrounding the right to work, the proliferation of anti-sexist sentiments while childrearing, and the actualization of equitable parenting practices among spouses. Furthermore, feminist mothering embraces and promotes the idea that women need to challenge pre-existing stereotypical notions of the roles of mothers while also striving to find a balance promoting social continuity and well-being. Additionally, feminist mothering is equally concerned with feminist practices of gender socialization and models of motherhood that relate to raising a new generation of empowered daughters and empathetic sons (O'Reilly "Feminist Mothering" 193-95). Feminist mothers are aware that the changes they pursue in childrearing are made possible only through changes in mothering via the feminist concepts of identity and subjectivity relating to all empowered mothers.

Findings and Discussions

Nuances

There are nuances in how Myanmar migrant mothers in my sample practice empowered mothering concerning its potential benefits and how these mothers' subjective or emotional feelings contradict the theory of feminist mothering when it comes to participating in paid work. My participants reconstructed motherhood-mothering about their perceptions of successful motherhood, which were centred on the needs and benefits of their children rather than on the antisexist childrearing and women-centred practices of mothering. This general finding illustrates how mothers put their children's needs before their own, thereby conforming to the third rule of "good" motherhood (i.e., mothers must always put their children's needs before their own) as dictated by patriarchal ideology (O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism* 146).

Another issue is that the "supermom model" (i.e., a mother who successfully manages a home and raises her children while also being employed) developed by Myanmar migrant mothers tends to become complicated when analyzing whether it is empowering for these mothers. The continuation of some traditional patriarchal beliefs in the context of the home country along with the choice of employed Myanmar diasporic mothers to prioritize their mothering duties and commitments in family relations within their gendered realities leaves these women in a double shift (unpaid housework and mothering plus paid work). Additionally, being positioned under the supermom model creates extra emotional work, which Arlie Hochschild (1997) identifies as constituting a "third shift" (requiring planning and scheduling quality time for children and managing children's resistance) in the host country.

Moreover, the participants felt that their employment increased their gender power and autonomy in the family by simply engaging in additional roles via the notion of being the "woman" of the house (e.g., decision maker, financial controller, advisor, and administrator). However, these roles entailed an overload of unpaid domestic work. Some examples are as follows:

> My role in the family includes but is not limited to being the decision maker of important decisions such as applying for a mortgage, house moving, financial decisions, etc. This is because my husband is not fluent in English and has not adapted as well as I have. (Maywin).

> I control cash flow of the household income to balance expenses and total income. My husband is very honest with me and reports me any single dollar income of him. He is an engineer, and he knows that he is not good at financing and budgeting. (Lily).

The respondents' perceptions of being a "primary caregiver" are associated with the amount of time spent with their children during out-of-school hours combined with attempts to decipher the needs and desires of their children. This process is also influenced by replacing the mother's absence while working with family members, spouses, and appropriate programs for the children's wellbeing. Such perceptions relate to the "intensive mothering" ideology outlined by Sharon Hays (qtd. in Christopher 75), even though biological mothers do not devote their entire physical, emotional, and intellectual being on a 24/7 basis to their children. The central aim of feminist mothering is to reclaim the power that the mother lost as a result of patriarchy.

The participants indicate that they do not limit childrearing to themselves as the biological mothers. They get fathers to be involved in childcare, and they create happy lives outside of motherhood via nuanced notions of "empowered mothering" (i.e., they seek to attain the following attributes of empowered mothering without challenging normative gender roles: agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism-advocacy). The majority of the participants addressed how they appreciated the benefits of co-mothering with spouses. Particularly, Thidar, Pandora, and Cindy believed that co-mothering benefited the children in two aspects: the children could enjoy the benefits attained from the differing mothering ideologies of two parents, and the children would receive full love from two parents along with a life of safety.

Gender Roles vs. Empowered Mothering

My participants possessed an understanding of empowered mothering in the host country that was different because of the following three interrelated factors: (i) the influence of the sending country's values and customs; (ii) the general attitudes towards "gender equality" concerning married couples, which related to "doing our gender roles, no problem"; and (iii) the lack of challenges in gender renegotiation between spouses (in the host country) due to the general assumption that women's employment contributes to the maintenance of a happy married life.

Historical and political factors have also influenced Myanmar's patriarchal setting and these factors have shaped how diasporic Myanmar women understand their gender roles and womanhood/motherhood while also underscoring how they interpret the meaning of "feminism" in the host country. Concerning social and cultural contexts, a Burmese woman may not necessarily need consent from her husband to work outside of the home if there are extended family members who are available to take care of the children. Myanmar women are responsible for most domestic chores; however, they have considerable authority in the home when it comes to managing cash flow and family finances (Hays 1; Mya Sein 4). Such sociocultural concepts

contribute when the mothers redefined mothering and justify their decisions to work (as being political or maternal activism) after they become mothers:

> Mothers should have their own choices of lifestyle whether being home for children or work outside but with their mothering ways … let my child learn that a good mom/housewife does not need to be with kids always. (Lily)

> We women have so much potential when you have confidence and not thinking that you are a woman but think in a way that we all are equal and human beings. We have to continue supporting to pave the equal rights for men and women. (Cherry)

> Women contribute as much as men in the society. Women are educated and successful in workplaces and raising the family at the same time. We should have rights equally in terms of job place and fairness. (Pandora).

It is a culturally common Myanmar practice that a father's income is given to the mother, who can then design her budget in a very pragmatic way to allow for payments towards food, clothing, shelter, health, and family education (Jotikadhaja and Nyunt 1). In this regard, the participants expressed their additional roles with confidence, pride, and kindness rather than complaining that their husbands lacked skills. Such behaviour results in the participants managing domestic issues in the household via a certain power related to their given gender roles. Some examples are:

> My husband is very honest with me and reports [to] me any single dollar [of his] income.

> My husband also always asks me to decide for child matters [even though] he may suggest something. (Cindy)

> I am [the] advisor of the family because I enjoy suggesting better ways. (Myat)

> I make most of the final decisions on my own because I want to share the burden of responsibility with my husband and help him keep his peace of mind. (Cherry).

Concept of Gender Equality

Another interesting point is that the majority of the participants understood gender equality consists of four aspects: respect; autonomy; sharing domestic work and childcare; and complementing different skills and different gender roles. In essence, they believed that these were the key elements of their gender relations. Among the participants, the meaning of "respect" was not viewed as

"superior or inferior" dynamics due to being men and women. Additionally, the participants emphasized that "respect" was a means of maintaining love between the spouses. For instance, Pandora affirmed that she enjoyed gender equality at home: "My husband gives me respect with love. We have no superiority because of men and women. Respecting each other is the key to our relationship."

"Respect" became interrelated with attaining "autonomy," for example when the husband did not reject the wife's decision of not wanting to be a full-time housewife. Cherry explained that she enjoyed gender equality and self-identified as a feminist: "I do quite enjoy gender equality at home. I appreciate how he adapts to my nature of being a feminist and respects my decision for not wanting to be a full-time housewife. I want to be active, productive and contribute to society." Cindy, Thidar, Mar Mar, Maywin, and Myat indicated that they did not have gender issues and that they enjoyed gender equality in their homes because their husbands shared childcare duties and domestic work when required.

In summary, the findings from this section suggest that traditional patriarchal beliefs concerning gender equality within the contexts of the sending countries influence subjective aspects of motherhood. All the participants from my sample do not regard their mothering responsibilities as oppressive or as an example of gender discrimination. Moreover, the continuation of some traditional patriarchal beliefs that hold these mothers responsible for caregiving positively contributed to developing empowered mothering (i.e., possessing the attributes of agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism-advocacy). General meaning and practices of empowered mothering pertain to respecting and appreciating gender roles rather than challenging gendered childrearing, which contributes to the general participant assumption of "doing our gendered roles, no problem."

Are They Feminists?

When I asked whether they self-identify as feminists, six responded "yes" because they supported and practised gender equality at home. Some of the mothers self-identifying as feminists still follow Myanmar traditions, such as offering the first-choice morsel to their husbands when having a meal together and considering the husband as "Lord of the forefront of the house" or "Ein Oo Nat" via notions of "respect" and "love." They did this regardless of whether or not they identified with a religion (i.e., Buddhist/Christian) in the survey questions. Two mothers emphasized the importance of gender equality beyond the family by expressing concerns about the issue for other women in society.

In contrast, two other participants indicated that they are not feminists and do not have gender issues at home where they enjoy gender equality. For these

two mothers, "gender equality" is more personal than political, although they nonetheless qualify as empowered mothers whose mothering practices represent a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood. Specifically, these two mothers consistently emphasized the importance of co-mothering when enduring employment and motherhood challenges in Canada; co-mothering is one of the key factors when it comes to reframing "good mothering" and engaging in a renegotiation of gender roles in a new land. Overall, my participants signified a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood via their own choices and ideologies, which arose about how they wanted to practice mothering. From a feminist researcher's point of view, I conclude that most of my participants tend partially to seek feminist mothering via their perceptions of empowered mothering. I say "partially" because they do not emphasize antisexist childrearing and maternal activism, which are the significant and essential tasks of feminist mothering addressing the needs of mothers on behalf of children and feminist childrearing for children.

Historical and political factors have also influenced Myanmar's patriarchal setting, and these factors have shaped how diasporic Myanmar women understand their gender roles and womanhood/motherhood while also underscoring how they interpret the meaning of "feminism" in the host country. Social rejections of feminism in Myanmar and the general reluctance of Myanmar women to identify as feminists have happened because there is no actual Burmese translation of the term "feminism," which is mostly referred to as "ei-hti-ya-wada" (or "female ideology"), meaning something that focuses only on women's issues. In this regard, most Burmese people perceive feminism as biased in favour of women or as an ideology that promotes female dominance and misandry. Such a misperception has cultivated divergence and competition between men and women rather than fostering social cohesion and gender complementarity. As a result, many men tend to perceive feminists as misandrists. Additionally, the Burmese method of translation and negative labelling has turned many people away from feminist causes (Than et al. 1-2).

Moreover, as Elizabeth Jane Tregoning Maber has discussed, the term "feminism" has been viewed as problematic within various contexts of Myanmar society, where English language terms are employed for a variety of strategic reasons that include both emphasis and obfuscation (423). Traditional groups and state-sponsored women's groups in Myanmar (e.g., the Maternal and Child Welfare Association [est. 1991]; the Myanmar National Committee for Women Affairs [est. 1996]; and the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation [est. 2003]), which was formed by the military government and led by the wives of generals and other authorities, regard feminism as a tool of Western neo-imperialism that allows the West to exert control over developing countries. These traditional groups believe that feminism demands radical imposed change while ignoring the values of local people. Moreover, these

state-sponsored women's organizations only serve to strengthen traditional and patriarchal notions of femininity, thereby beginning a rivalry of ideology between the traditional femininity existing inside the country and the progressive feminism that existed outside the country (Tun et al. 10, 15).

Two out of the six participants self-identifying as feminists understood that the terms "feminism" or "feminist" relate to gender equality beyond the family (i.e., more political than personal issues), though they have maintained that they enjoy gender equality at home.

> We have to continue supporting equal rights for men and women. But beyond doubt, we still do have gender discrimination and we are not quite there yet even though we are in the twenty-first century. (Cherry).

> I think I am a feminist if I relate to how I perceive gender-related issues. For example, I dislike [women being] treat[ed] unfairly (domestic violence by men at home, wage differences at work, different requirements for school admission to certain institutions and politics especially in Burma), as well as restricting women in dress and their women's rights. In my home, I am fortunate to enjoy gender equality. But what about other women? Gender equality is not only for one family and one community. Therefore, we [both men and women] continue to support with regards to equal rights for men and women. We also should be role models for our children to respect gender equality from one generation to another. (Lily).

These two mothers believe that gender equality does not pertain to only one single family or community but instead has more to do with society (e.g., violence against women and equal rights/equal pay between men and women). In particular, two of the participants indicated their concerns about gender equality in Myanmar and girls/women being unfairly treated in university admissions and the political arena. They also emphasized the importance of receiving continual support from both men and women in Myanmar to challenge these issues from one generation to the next.

By contrast, some participants simply related the term "feminism" to the gender issues they experience at home. They do not self-identify as feminists so long as they enjoy gender equality in their homes (i.e., the issue of "gender equality" is more personal than political). My observations relate to empowered mothers' differing perceptions of "feminism" and underline the possibility of a rivalry of ideology existing between traditional femininity and progressive feminism within the same diaspora (i.e., the feminism rooted inside Myanmar and the progressive feminism existing outside the country).

Conclusion

I acknowledge that my interview participants are not representative of all migrant Myanmar women residing in Canada. Nonetheless, this article reveals how cultural and traditional beliefs travel via mothering practices from the Global South to the Global North; it contributes to the existing literature on motherhood studies by providing an overall caregiving narrative focusing on the minority of employed Myanmar diasporic mothers who have been underresearched in mothering and migration scholarship. My participants do not limit childrearing to themselves as the biological mothers; rather, they get the fathers involved in childcare so that they can create a happy life outside of motherhood via a nuanced notion of empowered mothering (i.e., they seek to attain the attributes of empowered mothering—that is, agency, authority, autonomy, authenticity, and activism-advocacy—without challenging normative gender roles).

The findings suggest that these mothers maintain some aspects of the patriarchal culture of the home country via assumptions about their own traditional values and cultural beliefs, thereby reinforcing empowered mothering when it comes to switching gender roles. This phenomenon is not regarded as a problem by the spouses. Most of the participants seek feminist mothering via their perceptions of empowered mothering. However, they do not emphasize antisexist childrearing and maternal activism, which are the essential tasks required by feminist mothering. In the Myanmar cultural context, it seems that firm gender divisions between men and women are not perceived as discriminatory but as upholding feminine privilege oriented towards fairer gender concepts. Such beliefs about gender roles and gender equality in the Myanmar context reinforce how men perform the role of the "good man" of the house and women perform the role of the "good woman" of the house. The foundational belief for Myanmar women pertains to upholding the overarching cultural belief that mothering is their normal duty—a belief that is unrelated to notions of oppression.

In summary, the findings from my empirical work underline how feminist mothering fails to consider the possibility of contradiction between theory and mothers' subjective or emotional feelings when it comes to participating in paid work. Consequently, I argue that feminist mothering should also be discussed as a combination of both structural conditions (e.g., cultural beliefs, material, and economic demands) and subjective feelings about paid and unpaid work (e.g., domestic and child responsibilities) rather than relying on a consistent framing of feminist mothers as absolute nonpatriarchal mothers. This is because no patriarchal setting is quite the same or continues to be the same over time when it comes to culture, racial dynamics, and social class differences (Kaufman 162).

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