



'The care crisis within': gender division of labour and care work in middle-class families in Kerala during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the facets of gender disparities in care work and emotional labour within dual earning households that have aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic. An online qualitative survey and in-depth interviews carried out among 50 heterosexual, middle-class, and upper-middle-class working parents in Kerala, India, in the post-pandemic period, indicate that working mothers faced time poverty and additional work burden during the lockdown period, while they tussled between work from home and (care) works at home, as external support mechanisms were suspended during the pandemic. The findings illustrate that the disparities in division of labour are immense and are associated with more feminized labour such as cooking and childcare responsibilities, and that the spouses normalize such disparities. I further argue that the glorification and magnification of voluntary involvement of men in care work further problematize the dichotomy. I construe that the egalitarian gender perspectives expressed by the respondents are premised on the concept of gender equality as something to be achieved *outside* the family, and not *within*. Here, I illustrate how the working wives and mothers are compelled to over-compensate for ideas of *femininity* and *motherliness* associated with the figure of the housewife, through this *imposed volunteering* of care work.

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1. Introduction

Care work encompasses the labour which involves services essential for the development and well-being of human beings, community, and society, and consists of activities such as domestic labour, the bearing and rearing of children, and assisting and taking care of young, old, sick, and disabled people. This physical, emotional, and affective labour distorts the binaries between care/labour, identity/activity, material/emotion (Graham, 2022), and cognition/embodiment (Müller, 2019). Care work is heavily feminized, and both active and supervisory care work—paid and unpaid in the public and private

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