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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială

Review of research and social intervention

ISSN: 1583-3410 (print), ISSN: 1584-5397 (electronic)

Selected by coverage in Social Sciences Citation Index, ISI databases

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Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială, 2011, vol. 32, pp. 95 - 106

The online version of this article can be found at:

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Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University,

Department of Sociology and Social Work

and

Holt Romania Foundation

REVISTA DE CERCETARE SI INTERVENTIE SOCIALA

is indexed by ISI Thomson Reuters - Social Sciences Citation Index



Women's involvement level in housework and level of irregularities in public service: the need for gender sensitive changes in Nigerian work policy

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Abstract

Because of low socioeconomic wellbeing status across most families, women in Nigeria are becoming more and more involved in regular employment, while still maintaining their traditional role of performing housework. Meaningful employment and ensuring a balanced family are quite imperative to Nigeria, but what are the current dimensions of their interaction and how significant could this interaction be? This study utilized a field data generated in Calabar metropolis, the capital city of Cross River State, South Nigeria. Findings reveal that housework, women's traditional role, makes them to sometimes display certain irregularities in their regular employment. This play down by women in their regular employment to live up to societal expectation as home keepers is explained using identity-behaviour link theory. Consequently, the paper recommends appropriate work policies and working conditions that are more women and family institution friendly in Nigeria.

Keywords: housework; public service; work irregularities; gender policy.

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Background of the study

As part of its millennium declarations, the United Nations in the year 2000 came up series of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which its member states were mandated to achieve by 2015. One this goal, precisely the third one, is ‘to promote gender equality and empower women’. The peculiarity of this goal lies in the fact that it has a pivot role in achieving the other goals, considering that women are more vulnerable in terms of underdevelopment and poverty. The primary aim of this goal is to get women mainstreamed into development oriented endeavours like paid employment and other productive activities. Presently, there is still the widely held ideology that housework and child care are primarily the role of women. Thus, a key factor in causing the inequality between men and women in society is the problem faced by women in combining paid employment and family life – a situation still widely reported, even in developed countries (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008).

In society, due to social role expectations, different behavioural patterns are observed in men and women, a phenomenon described as gender role. This refers to the objective differences between what men and women in society are primarily responsible for (Porter, 1982). It also refers to a cluster of socially defined gender expectations that individuals are expected to fulfil (Franzoi, 1996). Based on this, men and women have roles exclusively assigned to them. For women in most societies, including Nigeria, their socially assigned role revolves around domestic activities such as cooking, washing, shopping; collectively described as ‘housework’ or ‘domestic labour’ as Humphrey (1987) describes it. Housework according to Humphrey (1987) became women’s primary role because of the familial ideology which asserts that a woman is primarily supposed to be a housewife and mother. As such, this role is exclusively allocated to women and as (Haralambos, 1980) observed, it takes precedence over other roles as the primary/traditional role of women. To ensure that women adequately perform this role, society employs the instrument of gender role socialization to transmit the values associated with the role into women. Consequently, women render this role priority attention, not only in compliance with societal expectations, but also to ensure the wellbeing of the family, which is a peculiarly important unit of social organization. They as well limit their involvement in activities that may disrupt their adequate performance of the role, and even if they indulge in other activities, they do so as migrants from the domestic domain (Porter, 1982). For the women involved in regular employment, this means dual roles.

By its nature, housework is tedious and time consuming. It occupies women for an average of seventy-seven hours per week (Oakley, 1974). Similarly, regular-employment is tasking and demands a significant level of commitment, especially if a person must make it to the top in a chosen career. Yet, a significant number of women are involved in both, meaning that such women are daring to ‘serve two

masters' (housework and regular-employment) side by side. This is the case in Nigeria, where many women are going beyond their traditional role of attending to house work to becoming involved in domains like paid employment, not only for economic, and socio-psychological benefits, but also in the response to the need to participate in societal development. However, considering the burden of handling these two responsibilities will place on the shoulders of women, examining the relationship between observed work place irregularities among women in paid/regular employment and their level of involvement in domestic work becomes imperative to a developing country like Nigeria. Like most other developing countries, Nigeria has become involved in sponsoring and conducting academic researches, as well as sharing experiences with development practitioners and other stake holders on gender issues and ways of mainstreaming women in the country. Although Nigeria instituted policies and set up structures to support the empowerment of women and gender equality, most of the approaches have been welfarist. There has never been a strategic and sustainable approach to these issues, not until 2008, when the country came up with the National Gender Policy and the institutionalization of the Gender Management System (Bungudu, 2008). The policy has among other things women's involvement paid employment/labour force as one of its thematic focus. In addition, the policy seeks to build capacity in women, as well as increase their contribution to overall development of the country. Disturbing however is the fact that no aspect of the policy addresses issues bordering on women and family, and no consideration is given to the fact that their socially assigned gender role of taking care of the home and children is still strongly upheld in the Nigerian society.

This paper therefore addresses itself to seeking answers to these crucial questions: Does involvement in housework significantly interfere with women's performances in regular employment? If it does, what are the dimensions of irregularity that could be observed from such interference? Lastly, what implications will this hold for gender equality development in Nigeria?

Literature Review and Theoretical framework

The involvement of women in regular-employment has become necessary because, like their male counterparts, it was evident that their effort was needed to facilitate industrialization, which itself was expanding at a high rate. Besides, working gives them an opportunity to earn income with which to supplement family income, and by so doing cope with the huge financial demands of modern life (Sutcliffe, 1971). Furthermore, income from regular-employment gives women a level of economic independence (Haralambos 1980, Porter 1982). Moreover, housework according to Haralambos does not attract such benefits as pension, insurance and holidays, which regular-employment attracts. Lastly, women

take up regular employment because of such socio-psychological reasons as the pleasure of meeting people, instead of being cooped up in their homes all day (Myrdal & Klein 1968), to suffer the monotony and social isolation which according to Oakley (1974), is associated with housework. Today, countries of the world set percentage targets for women participation in different aspects of the society that are men dominated sector.

Crucial as women's participation in regular-employment may be, housework is still viewed as and has remained their traditional role. Consequently women render it priority attention and would more or less treat with less care any social engagement that will hinder their adequate performance of this role. Burke and Reitzes' (1981) *identity-behaviour link theory* offers an explanation in this regard. Following their study among college students, Burke and Reitzes observed that individuals are motivated to formulate plans and achieve levels of performance that reinforce, support and confirm their social and personal identities. This implies that women's identity in society as home keepers could make them to so aspire to adequately live up to the expectations society holds for them in this regard that in the process, they end up playing down on other aspects of social life like regular employment and its demands. Thus, in a study among working class women in America, Porter (1982) observed that none of them was in doubt that their 'real work' was essentially to maintain, service and take responsibility for the care of their homes, husbands and children.

Eagly (1987) in his social role theory asserts that virtually all of the documented behavioural differences between males and females can be accounted for in terms of cultural stereotypes about gender and the resulting social roles that are taught to the young. The consequence of this in society is that individuals begin very young to aspire to learn and display their social roles in the society. This first starts by a type of self labelling called gender identity; the knowledge of oneself as male or female and the internalization of this fact into one's self-concept. Gender identity in turn shapes not just the self-concept of individuals, but also how they respond to their social roles as expected by society, even if the outcomes are to their disadvantage (Franzoi, 1996). Again this theory draws attention to the fact that women are likely to give house work more attention even at the expense of their other involvements, given that they have come to internalize the fact that it is the social role associated with their identity as women.

Contemporary studies have shown dramatic changes in women's roles in the family and the labour market especially since the latter half of the twenty-first century. Not only have their labour force participation rates increased (Goldin, 1990; Spain and Bianchi, 1996), evidences also show a decrease in the amount and relative proportion of household labour they perform (Artis and Pavalko, 2003; Sayer, 2005) Also, their supports for gender differentiated roles have declined (Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Brooks and Bolzendahl, 2004, Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001), even though the situation is slightly different in

developing countries because of the prevalence of culture in defining the gender roles, which in turn promote or deter women's participations in paid work (Miller, 1981).

There are empirical studies showing that women's employment patterns are shaped by their responsibilities for unpaid labour in families (Hersch & Straton, 1997; Kalleberg and Rosenfeld, 1990). Moreover, women who reject the idea of gender segregated family roles are more likely to enter paid labour market than are women who believe that men should be the family primary economic provider while women focus on household activities (Cunningham, 2008, Cunningham, Barber and Thornton, 2005; Fortin, 2005; Vella, 1994). Women's responsibilities for family work may influence employment characteristics by decreasing the amount of time and energy women have available for regular or paid employment, leading to a propensity to work in certain types of jobs, or increasing the potential for discrimination by employers who believe certain employees will be less productive due to their domestic responsibilities (Becker, 1991; Noonan, 2001). Even researchers who study women with a more egalitarian attitude towards gender differentiation in family roles still assert that women's employment pattern are more likely to be shaped by job and family context than individual orientation toward gendered family roles (Gerson, 1985; Risman, Atkinson and Blackwelder, 1998; Tallichet and Willits, 1986). Thus, it is essential to remember that when women 'choose' to combine their commitments to domestic work with paid employment, the choices they make and their orientations to same are primarily outcomes of a relatively narrow range of choices and the socially constructed expectations of women roles and responsibilities.

The Case of Women in Public Service in Calabar, Nigeria

This study is based on primary data generated within Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, South-South Nigeria. Calabar metropolis was chosen because as the state capital, and it hosts a recognizable number of government institutions where an adequate number of women could be reached to serve as samples for the study. The metropolis commonly called Calabar, is one geographical location divided into two local government administrations - Calabar Municipality and Calabar South Local Government Area- to facilitate grass root political administration.

A total size of 500 female public servants was selected from a population of different federal and state government establishments in the area. Of this number, 250 were married while 250 were single.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in the study. In-depth interview and focus group discussion were used to generate items used in the development of questionnaire to ensure construct and content validity of the variables of interest in the study. The questionnaire was made up of two parts. The first part contained items on the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while the second part had scales on women's involvement in housework and their dimensions of irregularities at work. These were structured using the four point Likert type of scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. Indicators for housework were grouped under the components of childcare and dropping/picking from school; house cleaning and laundry, cooking, serving and attending to visitors and shopping for the family. Based on the measurement scales as earlier mentioned, the scales underwent summative rating procedure to generate scores of level of involvement in housework across the respondents, the procedure enabled the categorization of the population into different levels of irregularity (low, and high) and as well involvement in housework (high, average and low). A test-retest of the instrument on 45 subjects produced a reliability of 0.85.

A field survey using the developed instrument was adopted to generate data for this work. To facilitate equal representation of the sub-groups that make the female population of the public servant, samples were drawn by means of stratified random technique. Subjects were first stratified based on proprietorship – federal, state and local government establishments; thereafter stratified according to marital status- single and married. Simple random sampling was then used to select respondents in each stratum. The sample in each stratum was selected to be proportionate to the population of the strata. To avoid hasty responses, an interval of three days from the day the questionnaires were administered was allowed before retrieval. Also, to compensate for wrongly filled, lost and damaged questionnaires, 20 extra ones were issued to make up for such losses. Through this way, the required sample size of 500 (250 for each of single and married female public servants in the area) was arrived at. The field data were subjected to descriptive statistics and Chi-square analysis to draw inference.

Findings

The summary of qualitative analysis revealed that respondents, both single and married, had a very strong perception of housework as stressful job. However, the married women's perception of house work as stressful job was stronger than that of single women, some of whom like most of the married ones were mothers and heads or de facto heads of households. This confirms the observation of

Haralambos (1980) that housework is dull, tedious and unfulfilling. Additionally, the qualitative approach identified four forms of job irregularities prevalent in the study area; occasional lateness to work, occasional absenteeism, tendency to decline being shuttled between locations in the job and tendency to prefer particular kinds of jobs.

Pattern and Effects of Interaction between women’s involvement in housework and the work irregularity

Table 1 presents the incidence pattern of dimension of the interaction between women’s involvement in housework and job irregularities. The incidence and direction of relationship is depicted by the percentages shown beside the corresponding frequencies. Interestingly, the incidence level of irregularities did not have any in the moderate range. From the table, the incidence of work irregularity can be relatively explained by incidence pattern on the extent of involvement of housework by women. Generally, low incidences of involvement in housework (41.8 percent) tend to influence the exhibition of low level of work irregularity (52.80). The level of irregularity decreased as degree of involvement increased (High (3.20) and Average (23.8)). Analysis of the incidence pattern along the high irregularity category suggests also there is a proportional correlation between high and average involvement in housework and high level of irregularity at work.

To determine the extent of interaction, effect and the form of dependence, the chi-square analytical tool was used as shown in table 2, with each respective column and row indicating the discrepancies between the observed frequency and the expected frequency counts. Computational outcomes shows that the Calculated $\chi^2 = 33.7$ is greater than the Tabulated $\chi^2 = 5.99$ at 0.05 probability level. This suggests a clear significant and positive relationship between women’s involvement in housework and the level of job irregularities, considering the pattern of display between observed and expected frequency.

Table 1. Percentage Response of Subjects According to Incidence Pattern between women’s involvement in housework and the work irregularity.

Irregularity Level	Level of Involvement in House Work			Total
	High	Average	Low	
Low	16(3.20)**	119(23.80)	129(25.80)	264(52.80)
High	56(11.27)	100(20.00)	80(16.00)	236(47.20)
Total	72(14.40)	219(43.80)	209(41.80)	500(100.0)

***Note that the figures in bracket are the percentage distribution.*

Table 2. Chi-square Analysis on Women's Involvement in Housework and the Level of Work irregularity

Irregularity level	Level of Involvement in House Work			Total
	High	Average	Low	
Low	16(38.0)**	119(115.6)	129(110.4)	264
High	56(34.0)	100(103.4)	80(98.7)	236
Total	72	219	209	500

**Note that the figures in bracket are the expected frequencies.

Calculated $\chi^2 = 33.7$

Tabulated $\chi^2 = 5.99$, at 5% level of significance.

Discussion

Based on the self reporting instrument as used in this study, the result in Table 1 shows various dimensions of involvement in housework and how the rate of job irregularities have been among the female public civil servants. The general incidence patterns are depicted on the row and column labelled total on table 1. With regards to the level of women involvement in housework, a very low proportion of women (14.40%) were highly involved in housework. while most of the women (85.60%) were either moderately involved (43.80%) or had low level of involvement (41.80%).

This finding tends to corroborate the assertions that there is reduction in the extent of housework performed by working class women (Artis and Pavalko, 2003; Sayer, 2005; Goldin, 1990; and Spain and Bianchi, 1996). This implies that participation of women in circular work is creating a transiting shift in the status of sex differentiated roles by culture. It has also promoted supply of informal employment at household level for relatively unskilled mature individuals, who are hired to handle some of the domestic concerns in order to enhance employed women's health status, as well as minimize their employment unfriendliness. The later scenario is becoming popular especially in better off households with under aged children. Beside, depending on the nature of their economic engagements, husbands are getting largely involved in once predominantly feminine ascribed tasks (Brewster and Padavic, 2000; Brooks and Bolendahl, 2004).

Furthermore, the results on table1 also clearly reveals high incidence, about half (47.20%), of irregularity in regular employment. This is a worrisome revelation and would definitely increase should there be no distinct labour policy to create or make public service work-hours patterned to be more women and family

institution friendly; to accommodate for instance, the peak hours of dropping and picking children at school ('school runs'- a task which also extends to the immediate nutritional attention children get on getting home) and other family and child care commitments. Based on the qualitative interaction, one of the main drivers of job irregularities in public service is this "school runs". This phenomenon has become a cover for working class mothers, and sometimes fathers to exhibit some forms of the irregularities at work. Of course, effective household management is desirable for a balanced and sustainable development of any society. Equally, high irregularity incidences within an organisation are not acceptable, as such would have serious and non-mutually exclusive implications on development dynamics with consequences that could only be imagined.

The analysis of the interaction across the levels of the variables in table1 as well as the result of Chi-square statistical analysis in table2 revealed that the pattern of the interaction effect was positive and its contingency coefficient expressing the extent of interaction was sufficiently high. This further affirms that lowest display of irregularity was prominent among women with low involvement in housework and vice versa. This implies that the irregularity level among women in regular-employment in the Nigerian public service could be reduced if there is periodic enhancement of earnings and labour policy review to accommodate the increasing pressure of socioeconomic demands. This is imperative because quality man-hours accountability and current public service work time pattern are neither women nor family institution friendly. A typical example of this in Nigeria is the banking sector where a woman can start work as early as seven o'clock in the morning and closes as late as eight or nine o'clock in the night, with little or no time to attend to family issues. This has been so worrisome that, as revealed in our field interactions, some women are asked by their spouses not to take up or resign from such jobs. Some young men have even decided not to marry female bankers while some unmarried women have declined taking banking jobs. This of course, will not promote gender equality in the sector. If women, mothers particularly, are grossly involved in regular employment, it could lead to the neglect of some salient but crucial family responsibilities among young and growing families, which are vital to the sustainability of society. Therefore, as earlier noted, effort should be geared towards either reducing women's involvement in housework especially during official hours or factoring in time allowance for women to attend to family related issues. A cue can be taken from the United Kingdom where the Women and Work Commission recommended that employers should make flexibility in employment practices part of corporate working culture that quality and affordable childcare be extended to all working mothers (Women and Work Commission, 2006).

Conclusion

From all indications, housework, due to its tasking nature poses a challenge to women, especially to those in regular employments. Notwithstanding, being that it is their traditional role it takes precedence over other roles. Women themselves are left with little or no choice than to ensure adequate compliance with the expectations society holds for them in that regard. Thus, it is not surprising, as observed in the study, that those of them in regular-employment at times end up performing a little short of expectations, because they are caught in the web of “serving two masters” - house work and paid work.

In the context of desirable and balanced family unit and sustainable development of the society, there is an urgent need for the private sector, as well as government and policy makers to realize this and create work policies that are both women sensitive and family institution friendly. There is also need for employers and superiors in work places to have an accommodating attitude towards female employees and subordinates, especially the married ones, should they occasionally display lateness, absenteeism, reject changing location, or prefer particular job descriptions. This is not suggesting that individuals should hide under the challenges of housework and consistently display these irregularities in the work place. Rather, there should be alternative plans to ensure that the expected outcomes or productivity at work is achieved. The position of this paper is that if women have accepted to be part of the labour force (regular-employment), they should also rise to the challenges involved. However, in the event of occasional irregularities or short falls in their performance, arising from taking care of the home front, which is a primary expectation, held for them by society, the same society should accommodate this by way of appropriate labour policies. Above all earnings should be appropriately enhanced and periodically reviewed to enable women in regular employment to hire assistants at home. By so doing, they would be in a better position to deliver quality services at work, without jeopardizing raising a healthy and balanced family, which is a building block of a sustainable and healthy society.

Based on the results in the study, it can be concluded that housework is very demanding to both married and single women in the area; that occasional lateness to work, occasional absenteeism, tendency to decline being shuttled between locations in the job and tendency to prefer particular kinds of job description are the prevalent forms of irregularities displayed at work by women in the area; and finally, that there is a significant and positive relationship between women's level of involvement in housework and the level of irregularities displayed at work.

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