ABSTRACT

A Sociological Study of Motivations, Problems and Changes in the Life Style of Single Working Women of Aligarh

Gender inequalities are a well established fact and found in almost all societies in different shades and forms. In almost every society, women's roles were defined in terms of status as daughters, wives and mothers. Their existence revolved round their homes. Men on the other hand were not home-bound as they earned the daily bread for the family. They, therefore, enjoyed exclusive rights and a preferential position within the family. Their economic activities outside the home brought them power and prestige. Their status was directly weighed in terms of their productive activities. Men have been able to establish themselves as superior to women through their control of material and social resources. As a result, women in general and Indian women in particular remained subservient to men and believed that they could never be as bold, clever or intelligent as the men. They adhered to the norms of society and accepted their subordinate position vis-à-vis men.

It can be then be assumed that problems and challenges faced by women -- especially single women, seem to be related to the status and role structure of society. Status and role are defined by cultural
ideology, norms, beliefs and values. This would then mean that the very perception of men and women, their relative statuses and roles are ideologically defined and sanctioned by society. Thus, men and women are expected to follow a set pattern of behaviour or play a social role which, in turn, determines their relative status in society.

The present study of educated unmarried working women of thirty five or above thirty five years of age in Aligarh was undertaken with a view to understand and analyse the motivations, problems and the complex factors which bring about changes in their life styles.

The case study method was used and a purposive sample selection enabled the researcher to locate fourteen unmarried working women for the study. The field data were collected personally by the researcher over the period between 2000-2002.

The following are the objectives of the study:

i) To examine the motivations which led women to remain single and to take up gainful employment.

ii) To understand and analyse the factors that may have played a role in delaying their age at marriage.

iii) To examine and understand the relationship of marriage and career in the lives of women under study.
iv) To analyse changes in the life styles of single working women as a result of gainful employment.

To understand the problems associated with the single status of women.

The hypotheses for the present study were developed on the basis of the existing literature on the subject, combined with the researcher's own observations. The following hypotheses emerged:

i) Working women are not always motivated by economic necessity to take up gainful employment.

ii) Attainment of higher education and a specific career pursuit/involvement leads to advanced age at marriage.

iii) Employment and greater opportunities to remain outside the home affects the lifestyles of single working women.

iv) Single working women enjoy more freedom and authority within the family and in society.

v) Single working women face certain problems related to their single status and the traditional value system within which they work.

vi) Colleagues and male compatriots are contemptuous towards single working women.
Less respect is accorded to these women because of their unmarried status.

The case study data of fourteen unmarried working women have shown interesting results. These case studies were carried out to understand the motivational factors responsible for encouraging women to remain single and to take up gainful employment.

The fact that certain women opted to remain single and exist independently indicates that these women, advertently or inadvertently deviated from the established norms. This aspect is in itself an interesting form of social behavior which needs to be understood further. Alternatively, some women were forced by circumstances to remain single and to take up gainful employment. Such situations in their lives also need to be understood. These various conditions in the lives of these women have brought about changes in their life styles.

It was also hypothesized that such women would encounter certain problems related directly or indirectly to their single status as well as to their employment status. This hypothesis was partially supported.

The results also reveal that the desire to have an independent identity in society is the most important motivational factor that led educated women to take up gainful employment though it cannot be
singled out as the only factor. Educational and occupational opportunities for women, urban exposure and prolonged stay in an educational institution specially in a University which may be considered as an institutional arrangement for developing modern outlook in every walk of life seems to have affected the attitudes of these women and motivated them towards pursuing a career. Their parents may have sent them to educational institutions for other social considerations rather than economic reasons alone, but these institutions have motivated them to prepare for a career. This is evident in some of the studied cases.

Parents' educational and occupational status, specially that of the father, motivates the occupational goals to a greater extent. It was found that in most cases, educated parents encouraged their daughters to pursue careers. Most of the women from urban educated and well-to-do families were provided with an environment conducive to their realizing their occupational goals.

The study also pointed out that though the desire to be financially independent plays an important role in motivating women to take up employment, it cannot be considered the only factor affecting their educational and occupational pursuits. Rather the desire to have an independent identity and an individual status in society appeared to
be the most important factor that inspired and motivated women to be gainfully employed.

Changing socio-economic conditions and consequent educational and occupational opportunities available to women as well as their increasing participation and achievement in outdoor activities appeared to have affected the attitudes of women in contemporary society making them aware of their individual status and identity.

Women’s employment and supportive and encouraging atmosphere in educated urban middle and upper class families was found instrumental in making them conscious of their identity and status. Moreover, their exposure and stay in modern secular educational institutions do effect their educational and career plans. However, the desire to attain a higher level of education for social reasons rather than for economic reasons was also visible among some women and even more so among their parents.

On the other hand, for some women, employment meant not only an additional income but also an independent provision, which would set them apart in social standing as compared to the ordinary non-employed women.

Economic reasons were also found to have a remarkable impact as an important motivational factor affecting the educational and
occupational pursuits of women. A desire to be economically independent was quite apparent among most of these women as was the desire to have more luxury items, consumer goods, modern gadgets and amenities in order to change their lifestyle to keep pace with the changing demands of social life.

Economic necessity arising from the responsibility of running the house motivated women to be gainfully employed but it was found more effective in changing the direction of their occupational pursuit specially when some women had to assume the responsibility of their natal family at a young age.

The role of urban residence and urban exposure, in addition to family’s guidance and educational atmosphere, in guiding and changing the direction of occupational pursuit.

Physical handicap or incurable disease was also a motivating force making them realise that they can lead their life independently and can keep themselves busy as employed women.

Moreover, some women were guided by their desire to be in a particular occupation simply out of their love for a particular type of occupation.
The employed status of some women brought about changes in their life styles and gave them confidence to take important family decisions which hitherto they had not been able to do. They became assertive and some of the women voluntarily opted to remain unmarried. Most of the women, however, remained single involuntarily due to various socio-economic and personal reasons. Their single unmarried status though was not considered to be either an exceptional or extraordinary phenomenon. People, however, viewed this sympathetically, yet eyebrows were often raised.

The women from well off families did not appear to be affected by changes in their employment status. Their life styles remained almost the same, but they did experience a sense greater freedom, confidence and independence.

Women hailing from lower middle socio-economic backgrounds were affected more. Changes in their life styles were most observable in their dress patterns, dietary habits, language, participation in politics and mass media, and sources of entertainment. The employed status and urban residence of Muslim women affected their purdah practices. It was found that the Muslim respondents gave up the practice and moved about freely.
Some women through their employment could assume the position of the 'head' of their natal family and were treated like a 'son' thus securing a highly respectable position in the family and society. Elevation of their status notwithstanding they felt that they had missed the boat of marriage.

Where employment brought positive benefits for women, it also brought some associated problems. These women suffer from depression, emotional and physical insecurity and other psychological and problems of loneliness. Their incompetence at work is attributed to their being 'frustrated' because of their single status.

Some women who occupied higher cadre positions than men did not receive any supportive or cooperation from their male colleagues.

It is apparent from the results that most of the respondents desired matrimony so that they could share their life with someone they could call their own. Since they regretted their single situation, they suggested that women should get married at the 'right' age so that they could lead a 'complete' life.

It can be concluded that all the hypotheses were partially proved. No hypothesis was rejected outright.