Chapter 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study focuses on the conceptual framework of ‘Symbolic Interaction’ and ‘Gender Inequality’, because these two theories lend themselves admirably to understanding the dynamics of ‘work-life balance’ of women professionals. They are particularly significant because, each of these theories also provides a unique perspective and, an answer to why women are not equal participants in the labor market.

3.1 Perspective of Symbolic Interaction.

“Symbolic interaction” is a social psychological theory developed from the work of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead in the early part of the twentieth century. According to this theory, people inhabit a world that is in large part socially constructed.

The premise underlying this theory is that individuals develop personality through interaction with others and by using meaningful symbols to help define themselves (Cooley1909) According to Cooley, the idea of ‘looking-glass self’ is that children determine who they are, based on how they imagine others see them and their positive or negative reactions to those imagining. (Cooley 1909) Cooley, in his theory of a "looking glass self," argued that the way we think about ourselves is particularly apt to be an imagining of other people's appraisals and that our self-concepts are built up in the intimate groups that he called "primary groups."

Akin to the ideas of Cooley are those of Mead regarding the ‘Generalized Other”? The ‘Generalized Other’ is simply an amalgamation of all the socially approved values and behaviors
necessary for optimal social adaptation and interaction. “The self is a social emergent. This entails that individuals are the products of social interaction. The self is something, which has a development. It is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.” (Mead 1934: 179)

Though the symbolic interaction perspective emerged from the sociological analysis of George Herbert Mead, it was Herbert Blumer who took Mead’s ideas and developed it into a systematic sociological approach. Blumer coined the term ‘Symbolic interactionism’in1937, and according to him, the term refers, to the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or “define” each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. This mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the behaviour of human beings.

3.2 Perspective of Gender Inequality

Theories of Gender Inequality have the following themes.

1. Men and women are unequally situated in society. In comparison with men, women get less of the material resources, social status, power and opportunities for self-actualization.

2. This inequality is not the result of any differences; (biological or psychological) it results from the organization of society.
3. Though individual human beings vary from each other, in traits, potentials etc, no significant pattern of difference distinguishes the sexes.

4. It is possible to change the situation. The theorists assume that both men and women will respond to an egalitarian situation. (Ritzer, 1992)

Both, Liberal feminism and Marxian feminism conform to this theoretical position. ‘Liberal feminism’s explanation of gender inequality begins with an identification of the sexual division of labour, the existence of separate public and private spheres of social activity, men’s primary location in the former and women’s in the latter, and the systematic socialisation of children so that they can move into the adult roles and spheres appropriate to their gender’. (Ritzer 1992: 463) According to the liberal feminists, the society or social system that restricts women’s access to public sphere and confines them to the private sphere creates gender inequality. To them, the public sphere provides true rewards of social life, like, money, power, status, and opportunity. When women’s access to the public sphere is prohibited or, restricted, and when they are burdened with private-sector responsibilities, gender inequality is established.

Marxian feminism brings together Marxian class analysis and feminist social protest. The most notable exploration of the issue of gender inequality is presented in ‘The Origins of the family, Private property and the State’, (Engels 1884) and the major arguments of the theory are the following:

1. Woman’s subordination results not from her biology, but from social arrangements.
2. The basis for women’s subordination lies within the family, which is patrilineal, patriarchal, and hence women are confined to the home, have no job outside the house and hence have no economic independence.

3. The legitimization of such a family system.

4. The emergence of private property.

5. The emergence of exploitation.

Thus according to Marxian feminism, “women are unequal to men not because of any basic and direct conflict of interest between the genders, but because of the working out of class oppression, with its attendant factors of property inequality, exploited labor, and alienation.” (Ritzer 1992: 201)

3.3 Significance of the theories of Symbolic Interaction” and “Gender-Inequality” to the present study

With women having demolished almost all professional male monopolies, gender barriers at work is assumed to have become extinct. Indeed, it is not unusual today to find women in any profession. Skillfully handling even the toughest jobs like, that of even the astronaut or the space-ship traveler, women have proved that they are not behind the men folk in any activity and enterprise.

However, though women have made inroads into traditional male bastions, it has not been a smooth sail for them. Constraints of several kinds and dimensions emerge and restrict their career prospects. Studies across the globe have shown that men outnumber women at the middle and senior levels in any profession. Potential advancement ladders are found to be shorter and promotions, less frequent for women, in comparison with men. Studies have also found out that men advance
faster, farther, and with greater compensation. Besides, women are usually concentrated in occupations that match the picture of women portrayed in traditional gender stereotypes. Why is this so? What holds women back? Why is it that women withdraw from getting ahead?

Can’t we find answers to these questions in the two theories cited above? As Symbolic Interaction theory states, individuals develop personality through interaction with others. There are various aspects of socialisation, one among them being the division of labour by gender, which reinforces the subordinate status of women. Everywhere societies divide tasks between men and women. Two tasks that fall into the women’s lot everywhere are the nourishment of newborn infants and food preparation. In the ideology of separate spheres, the gender based division of labor in most cases make domestic roles the primary careers of women; extending personal services to the husband and care for the needs and proper socialisation of next generation. It has been observed that women have usually been socialized to view the attainment of this goal as an ideal.

Further, gender socialisation affects the aspirations, motivations and attitudes of women towards work. Most women persist in seeking jobs in areas traditionally labeled as ‘women’s work’, knowing that they will earn less. Family work and adult work patterns all convey the idea that women should be subordinate to and dependent on men. These traditional views have great power over women’s lives.

Through socialization, we preserve and transmit the traditional ideas regarding gender-roles and stereotypes regarding men and women and hence even today, men are given the primary role of breadwinners (work orientation), whereas women are to be responsible for the nurturance of children and the maintenance of the family (family
The findings of this study reveal that women are still socialized to believe that looking after the family is their first priority in life and that achieving career recognition is secondary to their role as wife and mother. Even the highly educated professional women are developed through the stereotyped traditional roles to be primarily homemakers, and hence they give priority to the roles of wife and mother than to their professional role. The traditional gender-roles are so internalised that women professionals often ask themselves “Is it worth making this many sacrifices to my family in order to climb up the occupational ladder?” and more and more women are saying, “My family comes first”. Hence compromises and sacrifices are made on the career. This is how in most cases women achieve work-life balance, remarked the respondents of this study.

The stereotype roles for women (home-maker) are socially constructed as stated by the theorists and it does not make a difference even if they are highly educated professional women. The roles to which all women are primarily assigned tend to be marital and family oriented. In addition, women are rarely shown to be able to successfully combine marriage and employment. In turn, this societal definition of woman and her role, create certain social expectations for her behaviour as well. The findings of this study disclose that at work as well as at home, women habitually allow themselves to be ruled by these belief structures that have been ingrained in them for years. They allow themselves to be influenced by various traditional norms and values, which in turn restrict their natural inclinations. Consequently, even the highly educated and well placed women professionals’ career goals and aspirations are limited by rigid traditional beliefs; norms and values. They are faced with the dilemma of fulfilling the traditional expectations of their roles, as wives and mothers along with their career role. The pressures of the traditional expectations compel them to identify strongly with the familial role. At
the same time, the career role too is dear to them and hence they are pushed and pulled between the two roles and inevitably, they are prone to conflicting ideas, values and that lead to the issue of role-conflict

According to the gender Inequality Theory too, even though men and women are unequally placed in the occupational scenario, this inequality is not the result of any biological or psychological difference. As the theory advocates, it is the existence of separate spheres of activity for men and women that has led to the inequality between men and women. Through socialization, a man is made to understand that his major roles, including those of husband and father are realized in the realm of work. His earning capacity and economic prospects determine the prestige of his family and his own self. Thus men are to have principal occupancy in the ‘public domain’ but, for women, the major role is within the ‘private domain’ – the home and the family. Besides, men are also socialized into the expectation that theirs will be the dominant presence at work. Hence it will be difficult for them to accept women of all categories, even the highly educated, into their sphere or to permit their full participation. The findings of this study show that the gender stereotypes and the expectations it produce about both what women are like and how they should behave result in devaluation of their performance, denial of credit to them for their successes, or their penalisation for being competent. Hence, as the gender inequality theory postulates, the present study find that the descriptions of and prescriptions for women result in conflict of interest between the genders, exploited labor, and result in alienation. The unconscious reflexive type of negative stereotyping of women can also be attributed to the existence of gender inequality in the contemporary Kerala society. The present study documents that it is ultimately the dichotomisation of male and female spheres of activity and qualities that has led to the emergence of biases against women.
The balancing acts employed by women professionals in this study, to achieve equilibrium between work and family also express the significance of symbolic interaction theory and gender inequality theory. It is seen that for most of them, the idea of work-life balance mean to move the pendulum away from work, and, more towards home. They attempt at such a course of action either because they place family at the center place or because they are taught that qualities of women are incompatible with qualities expected in a successful leader and these throw doubts among women as to whether they are suitable for top positions. All these leave the women professionals of Kerala, with the age-old battle between career and home.