
THE SILENT CONTRACT: EMOTIONAL LABOUR OF WOMEN IN INDIAN FAMILIES

Shreyashri Vishakha Vivek Pawar, BALLB, KES' Shri Jayantilal H. Patel College of Law

ABSTRACT

The concept of emotional labour, coined by Arlie Hochschild, is usually linked to professional settings where people need to manage their emotions while performing their duties. The notion, however, can apply to areas other than work-related situations. It acquires even more importance when studied in the context of home environments. For instance, in India, emotions do not occur naturally among family members; they are deliberately created and constantly preserved. Emotional management requires hard work, attention, and self-control, which is most often performed by women.

For women, who play different social positions in the family, be it that of a daughter, wife, mother, or daughter-in-law, it is important to establish relations, predict emotional needs, and ensure that conflict situations do not arise. Such obligations are never recognized or considered work. Instead, these are seen as an extension of feminine nature, which is deeply ingrained within our culture and society.

Emotional labour as a silent contract, that is deeply entrenched within the Indian family structure, is analyzed in this paper. The concept of emotional labour, although not openly expressed, is continually applied to influence behavior and dictate roles. The use of feminist theory, literature, and law as lenses in the analysis reveals the invisibility yet importance of emotional labour.

In addition to that, the discussion also highlights the weaknesses of the legal framework, since they recognize emotional abuse, but do not recognize emotional labour as being labour. This speaks to a larger problem with our society's definition of what can be considered labour. In light of the changing times and gender dynamics in India, recognition and redistribution of emotional labour is very necessary.

I. Introduction

Families have traditionally been viewed as places of warmth, attachment, and psychological safety. It is considered the setting where one can express oneself freely and find comfort when faced with troubles. Yet, the process of sustaining this idealized atmosphere frequently remains unconsidered. Emotional equilibrium in a family is not something that comes naturally; it is rather something that is consciously worked on and maintained.

When it comes to India, though, such division of responsibilities is almost never equal. On the contrary, it has been presumed that such responsibility will automatically fall on the shoulders of women who must take care of others' feelings and help to solve any disputes to make things work. Such actions might not always be mentioned, but they are constantly performed.

Emotional labour is an important theoretical approach that can help us comprehend this issue. Arlie Hochschild defines emotional labour as the management of one's emotions and reactions to the emotions of others based on societal norms. This idea was first introduced in the context of professional settings; however, it can be just as applicable in domestic settings.

In the family set-up within India, emotional labour takes the form of a hidden contract, which involves women carrying out their responsibilities of emotional stability within the family setting without it being openly discussed. Emotional labour is not written or explicitly stated, but it influences how people relate and behave with each other. Women are supposed to carry out emotional labour unnoticed.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the idea of emotional labour as being socially constructed and not an innate trait. The process of normalizing emotional labour is explored, along with its presence in literature and lack thereof in legal systems. In doing so, this paper seeks to reveal the importance of emotional labour in perpetuating gender inequality in Indian families.

II. Research Objectives

- To examine how emotional labour functions within Indian family structures and everyday interactions
- To analyze why emotional labour is disproportionately assigned to women

- To explore how literature reflects and reinforces emotional expectations and gender roles
- To evaluate the extent to which legal frameworks recognize emotional labour and emotional well-being
- To understand how emotional labour is evolving in contemporary Indian society

III. Literature Review

Emotional labour emerged from the book entitled *The Managed Heart* wherein the process of controlling one's emotions is defined as a formalized process that is expected from one's job description. Hochschild demonstrated in her study that emotions are not just a private matter but can be affected by other people, especially in jobs where services are offered. This involves exhibiting certain emotions despite what one feels inside.

While Hochschild studied professional settings, the idea has been applied to domestic situations, where there is even more pressure and constant effort in terms of emotional labour. In contrast to professional emotional labour, which is normally paid, domestic emotional labour does not receive any remuneration nor recognized.

Scholars interested in feminist theory have broadened this debate through the recognition of the gender aspect of emotional labour. In her book titled "*The Second Sex*," Simone de Beauvoir denies the natural attributes that are often attributed to women, especially nurturing abilities. According to her, such characteristics are socially constructed, as they are linked to the definition of what femininity entails.

In the case of India, literature has made a substantial contribution towards fostering these expectations. Women are often depicted as emotionally strong, patient, and selfless. This depiction of women reinforces the idea that emotional labour is an essential aspect of womanhood.

On the other hand, modern feminist theory has started criticizing such accounts. According to theorists, emotional labour must be treated as an occupation rather than being a responsibility of an individual by default. Such an approach is necessary for understanding the role of emotional labour in perpetuating gender inequality.

IV. Emotional Labour in Indian Families

Emotional labour within Indian families can be considered a part of daily life. It does not involve only major duties but also minor tasks performed constantly and consistently to build relationships. Such actions are not even necessarily noticed but require consistent effort and mindfulness.

For example, women often have to take care of their relatives from other branches of their families. It could be about celebrating someone's birthday, organizing some events or maintaining contacts in case of separation. Even though such activities might seem trivial, they perform a vital function.

Moreover, women are also supposed to take up the role of emotional mediator in the home setting. It is generally seen that whenever there arises any kind of conflict or disagreement, it is mostly the women who start trying to sort it out. This means that they have to understand various viewpoints, manage emotions and find ways of bringing harmony back into their lives.

If the joint family system is considered then the difficulty level of emotional labour will be further heightened. Whenever a woman comes into the joint family set-up as a daughter-in-law, she has to manage her relations with others on several fronts simultaneously.

The reason why emotional labour is difficult is because it has no end point, and it is always invisible and intangible. Unlike manual labour, emotional labour never ends, and it takes effort to engage in it while at the same time suppressing your own emotions for the sake of others.

Although emotional labour is very important, it is not usually considered a form of work. Emotional labour is considered something that comes naturally to women and something that doesn't require any effort.

V. The Silent Contract

"Silent contract" can serve as a good explanation of the nature of emotional labour in families in India. It is not written anywhere but exists as part of the unwritten culture of society.

Girls since early childhood are taught to be caring, patient, and accommodating, which means that they need to take into consideration the opinions of others. They must put relations first

and try not to create any conflicts. These expectations are reinforced through family interactions, education, and media representations.

With time, the expectations are internalized, influencing the perceptions of women about their roles in the family context. As adults, doing emotional labour stops being perceived as something that one owes to someone else, becoming a normal aspect of life. Emotional work is done naturally by women, who do not expect to be acknowledged.

The society rewards women who play such roles. They are praised for being ideal daughters, wives, and mothers. Those who do not accept the imposed expectations can be criticized.

In such a way, emotional labour becomes a generational tradition due to the fact that the implicit agreement is never questioned.

VI. Representation in Literature

Literature can greatly influence expectations from individuals and culture. In a lot of Indian literary works, women have been depicted as symbols of sacrifice, patience, and endurance

Characters like *Maa Sita* were glorified for their virtues of self-sacrifice and resilience. The depiction of such characters implies that emotional sacrifice is one quality that society expects women to have and enduring difficulties is something women do.

Likewise, in *Nirmala*, the character lives up to the standards imposed upon her by society because of the patriarchy. Through the depiction of hardships faced by a woman within a patriarchal setup, literature illustrates the emotional sacrifices she has to make, yet normalizes it.

Such portrayals in literary works serve both as an indication of the societal norms as well as reinforcement of the same norms. By portraying these sacrifices in a positive light, it promotes the acceptance of such norms and the notion that women ought to embrace them.

However, at the same time, there has been a recent trend towards reevaluating such norms within contemporary literary works. As contemporary literature continues to question gender roles and highlight inequality in emotional labour, it becomes necessary for society to reevaluate its expectations as well.

VII. Legal Perspective

Indian laws have progressively come to acknowledge the various forms of damage suffered by women in the domestic and social spheres. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 has been one of the major steps toward recognizing that violence against women should not be confined merely to physical injury, but it may also manifest itself in an emotional and psychological form of abuse. The latter constitutes an important change since it officially recognizes the importance of non-physical forms of damage to a person's psychological well-being.

Yet, while emotional damage has received official acknowledgment, it fails to include in its framework the daily emotional labour performed to prevent this damage from happening. Emotional labour can be viewed as preventive labour since it entails resolving conflicts, dealing with disagreements, and managing relations in order to avoid any potential disputes or problems later.

Judicial decisions have further contributed to expanding the understanding of emotional well-being and dignity. In *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, the Supreme Court recognized sexual harassment as a violation of fundamental rights under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution. The judgment emphasized that dignity and emotional safety are essential components of equality, thereby acknowledging that harm is not always physical but can also be psychological.

In the same way, in *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India*, the court established that the right to privacy is inherent in the rights of life and personal liberty. This landmark judgment stressed autonomy, dignity, and self-chosenness, all of which have close associations with emotional well-being. In this manner, the judgment established that the right to decide extends beyond the physical realm to include the emotional and personal realms as well.

The concept of emotional autonomy was also affirmed in *Shafin Jahan v. Asokan K.M.*, wherein the apex court granted the fundamental right to choose one's own partner regardless of family and societal pressures. The case brings out the contradiction between personal decision-making in respect of emotional issues and society's expectations from them.

Lastly, in *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India*, the court discussed instances of

exploitation by invisible or unregulated labour. Although this case dealt with the issue of bonded labour, it is significant for us in the sense that some form of work remains hidden from the eyes of the public simply because it is not formally recognized as such.

However, there is a crucial aspect about the legal process that makes it incapable of fully addressing emotional abuse. Namely, the law acts reactively – only after damage is done, the law takes action. Emotional labour and its constant nature are not taken into account, resulting in an irony that harm to the feelings is understood, but the efforts behind keeping harmony are disregarded.

This aspect reveals another problem that exists within the context of legal definitions of labour. Traditionally, labour refers to economic activity that can be quantified and formalized. Consequently, emotional labour is left out of legal discourse because it lacks such criteria and cannot be considered.

Thus, although significant changes have been made regarding the safety of women, no changes were made concerning the production of inequality through gendered relations. Acknowledging emotional labour would require changing the traditional concept of work itself. Until then, women are destined to keep on doing unpaid labour and receive no appreciation for their efforts.

VIII. Changing Dynamics in Modern India

There have been many changes witnessed within the Indian society, especially in regard to gender norms and perceptions. Education, career opportunities, and empowerment have helped women venture into new areas that were previously inaccessible. However, there are different effects of this shift on women's lives, depending on whether it is the public or private space in question.

Although women have become more active in economic activities and earning their living, gendered perceptions about their role in the family have remained constant. For instance, most women are perceived as caretakers who provide emotional support to members of the family. Consequently, women are expected to fulfill their roles both in the public sphere as well as the private space.

This dual role is usually referred to as “double burden” or “second shift.” According to this

concept, women have to combine paid labour and unpaid labour performed at the household level. Emotional labour also forms an integral part of unpaid labour because women are expected to maintain relationships, manage family dynamics, and ensure emotional stability.

In the most progressive families, there is an unequal distribution of emotional labour. Men may be involved in physically demanding tasks such as preparing meals and cleaning the house, but when it comes to emotional tasks like remembering significant dates, managing relationships, and conflict resolution, it still tends to be gender-specific.

On the other hand, there is an increasing understanding of mental and emotional health. Discussion regarding these topics is slowly being normalized, especially by younger people. Social media, schooling, and globalization have all played a role in challenging the status quo.

In urban settings, families are starting to develop a more moderate attitude towards sharing duties. Slowly but surely, it becomes obvious that the task of taking care of their feelings is not the burden to be borne by women alone. Nevertheless, such modifications are still very limited and dependent on personal circumstances.

One must also understand that change does not affect everyone equally. If it happens to occur in the lives of educated and urban citizens, the impact of tradition remains strong in other parts of society. The way people behave depends largely on culture, family structure, and other social factors.

Therefore, although modern India offers chances for change, it does show that there will be certain things that will stay the same no matter what. One of them, undoubtedly, will be emotional labour.

IX. Emerging Perspectives: A Gen Z Shift in Emotional Labour

A trend has emerged in recent years where the younger generation, especially Gen Z, recognizes how the dynamics of emotional duties are different from those of past generations. In contrast to their older counterparts who never gave emotional work a second thought, it seems that today's young people are becoming increasingly knowledgeable about emotional labour, mental well-being, and setting boundaries.

Several reasons may explain why this trend is happening now. Thanks to social media and the

Internet, topics like mental health and gender equality have been discussed far and wide. Young people have been exposed to new perspectives through social media platforms, online forums, and global awareness. Consequently, there is now a general understanding that emotional labour is not innate but a mutual obligation.

When talking about personal relations between young people, communication becomes a significant aspect that influences the process considerably. It means that more emphasis is placed on discussion rather than assumption when it comes to emotional expectations. In particular, maintenance of relationships, giving support, handling conflict situations, and other aspects become tasks that require cooperation instead of gender division.

At the same time, the change occurs partly and unevenly. Even though more attention is paid to the issue, it is hard to implement it considering current families and expectations. Many people despite being open to change have to function in an environment which makes them stick to some stereotypes and expectations.

Also, emotional labour itself requires further development and definition. People are becoming aware of the problem and understand that it should be taken into consideration but do not have a clear idea of what needs to be done and how emotional labour should be divided between the people.

This new approach can be viewed as a transition stage in Indian society. On one hand, it questions the implicit contract that has regulated emotional obligations in the past but still fails to overturn it. What is important about this transition is not its finality but its potential to set up a new standard for emotional labour in the future.

X. Analysis and Discussion

The endurance of emotional labour as a gendered burden cannot be viewed in isolation from the bigger picture of social institutions influencing people's lives. The influence of cultural norms, upbringing, education, and media contributes towards the perception that emotional labour is something only women should take up.

One of the main reasons behind the invisibility of emotional labour is the fact that it is not tangible. Emotional labour lacks the characteristics that physical and economic labour possess, thus, making it very difficult to quantify the effort involved. No indicator exists for the amount

of emotional labour being performed.

One of the most powerful examples of emotional labour in action can be seen in urban Indian households. Think of a professional working lady residing in a metropolitan city such as Mumbai. During the day, she would have been busy handling work-related obligations. Upon returning home from work, however, she has yet another list of tasks to accomplish.

At home, there is pressure on her to check up on the family members, communicate with the relatives, remember the birthdays and anniversaries, and iron out any differences within the family. In some cases, she might be tasked with solving emotional conflicts to prevent them from escalating. These tasks are not considered work, but they consume a lot of emotions.

Even in cases where other family members participate in the physical aspect of housework, emotional chores are always left for her. It creates an imbalance, whereby the emotional well-being of the whole family relies on one person.

This scenario illustrates a very crucial fact: modernity does not eliminate emotional labour; it creates more. With women becoming engaged in activities beyond domestic chores, the previous tasks become equally demanding.

Another aspect that helps keep emotional labour around is linked to identity. Socialization teaches women that it is their role to feel fulfilled by caring and taking care of people emotionally. It becomes challenging to critique such roles since it would mean that one is avoiding one's duties.

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that emotional labour in itself is not harmful. The capacity to take care of people and to create strong interpersonal relationships is a fundamental part of any social interactions. The problem lies in the fact that these tasks are not shared among all parties.

Not recognizing emotional labour can lead to various mental issues related to burnout and exhaustion. The person who has been taking care of everyone else all the time will eventually be depleted of their energy reserves. However, since emotional labour is invisible, it is hard to identify its effects on a person.

In order to overcome this challenge, it is vital to start looking differently at labour and to reconsider what type of tasks should be included in that concept.

Moreover, change needs to happen on both personal and societal levels. Cultural stories which glorify self-sacrifice and endurance should be challenged. Media, literature, and education might play a part in changing those stories.

This new paradigm, especially when it comes to younger generation, implies that emotional labour is not completely invisible anymore. It still does take place, but it becomes more noticeable and is being challenged. Awareness regarding mental health, personal boundaries, and equal responsibility is a sign that things are changing in this regard. This process is still slow and inconsistent; however, it hints at the future where there could be an equal distribution of emotional duties within families.

Finally, dealing with emotional labour involves changing our perceptions from seeing it as an inherent obligation to seeing it as a mutual responsibility.

XI. Conclusion

Emotional labour remains one of the most overlooked yet essential aspects of family life in India. It operates as a silent contract that assigns responsibility to women without formal recognition or acknowledgment. This contract is not written or explicitly stated, yet it shapes everyday behavior and expectations.

This paper has demonstrated that emotional labour is not an inherent characteristic but a socially constructed responsibility. It is reinforced through cultural norms, literary representations, and social conditioning. While legal frameworks have made progress in recognizing emotional harm, they have not addressed the continuous emotional effort that sustains relationships.

The invisibility of emotional labour reflects a broader issue in how work is defined and valued within society. Forms of labour that are not measurable or economically valued often remain unrecognized, despite their importance.

Achieving meaningful gender equality requires more than legal reforms it requires a shift in societal attitudes. Emotional labour must be acknowledged, valued, and redistributed among

all members of the family. This does not mean eliminating emotional care but ensuring that it is shared rather than imposed.

As Indian society continues to evolve, there is an opportunity to rethink traditional roles and create more balanced family structures. Recognizing emotional labour is a crucial step in this process.

Until this shift occurs, emotional labour will continue to remain an invisible burden, and equality within domestic spaces will remain incomplete.

As Indian society continues to evolve, emerging perspectives especially among younger generations indicate a gradual shift toward recognizing and redistributing emotional labour. While this transformation is still incomplete, it represents an important step toward more equitable and emotionally balanced family structures.

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