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Attitudes of Unmarried Men and Women towards Stay-at-Home Husbands in Indian Society

By Rasabattula Srinivas

Abstract

Although at a slow rate, the gender roles of women are changing in India. Today, Indian women are assuming responsibilities far beyond those of a traditional household. However, the question arises: are the gender roles of men changing? Is Indian society open to the idea of a stay-at-home husband? To address these concerns, we conducted interviews with unmarried women and men, followed by a thematic analysis. Ninety-seven percent of male respondents expressed reluctance towards becoming a stay-at-home husband, while 86% of female respondents indicated a hesitancy to marry someone with that inclination. Major reasons cited by males included “gender role conditioning,” “embarrassment,” and “power imbalance in the relationship.” Female respondents cited those three reasons as well, but also added “financial burden on one partner” and “natural liking towards ambitious men” as the primary reasons for not wanting to marry a stay-at-home husband. The article concludes with suggestions for action items that Indian schools, media, and government can take to attempt to change gender roles and attitudes toward stay-at-home husbands.

Keywords: Stay-at-home husband, Househusband, Gender roles, Gender role conflict, Indian family

Introduction

Family responsibilities are among the significant factors preventing women from focusing on their careers (Mayrhofer et al., 2008; Kirchmeyer, 2006; Paa & McWhirter, 2000; Lobel & St. Clair, 1992; Carlson & Kacmar, 2000). If a woman has a stay-at-home partner who manages family responsibilities, this may increase the time and energy available for women to focus on their careers, which may contribute to achieving equal representation and career advancement for women in the workplace.

Traditionally in India, a married woman’s primary role encompassed duties such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and elders. Married men were expected to be the family’s breadwinners. However, in the past few decades, the scenario has changed. Although at a slower rate, women have started working outside the home more often. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey conducted by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, female workforce participation in India has seen a notable increase, rising from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 37% in 2022-23 (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023). From this change, several questions arise: Has the gender role of men changed? Are men allowed to be stay-at-home husbands (or househusbands) in Indian society? In this article, I define a stay-at-home husband as the male spouse of a heterosexual woman who does not work outside the home, does not earn income, and is responsible for household activities like cooking food, washing clothes, cleaning the house, and taking care of children and parents. These tasks were traditionally performed by a housewife.

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Literature Review

Existing literature on stay-at-home fathers highlights numerous negative consequences affecting both fathers and their spouses when the concept of a stay-at-home husband is not embraced in the society. Stay-at-home fathers often face scrutiny, criticism, and ridicule from family and friends, and they may even be accused of exploiting their spouses (Merla, 2008; Shirani et al., 2012). Sinno and Killen’s research interviewing children revealed that children thought it was less acceptable for fathers to stay at home compared to mothers (Sinno & Killen, 2009). Non-traditional parents, such as mothers who work outside the home and stay-at-home fathers, encounter disapproval from society and are liked significantly less than traditional parents (Zimmerman, 2000). Stay-at-home fathers, in particular, face numerous negative social pressures (Rochlen et al., 2010), which deter many from assuming this role (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). Andrea Doucet’s work further explores the societal scrutiny stay-at-home fathers face for not conforming to the traditional breadwinner role. Notably, her study found that even after leaving their jobs, stay-at-home fathers sought “self-provisioning” as a means to make an economic contribution to the family and reinforce masculine practices within themselves and their communities (Doucet, 2004). Self-provisioning refers to the work undertaken by family members using their own tools during their personal time to generate goods and services for their own needs. Doucet argues that rather than challenging existing forms of masculinity, stay-at-home fathers create a new form of masculinity. These findings underscore the importance of providing social support to stay-at-home fathers.

Traditional gender roles significantly influence the evaluation of stay-at-home fathers by the larger society. In a study focused on the United States, subjects tended to assess stay-at-home fathers more negatively than stay-at-home mothers, viewing them as less powerful than their wives (Kroska, 2001). A study based in Australia found that stay-at-home fathers often receive less social support compared to both working fathers and stay-at-home mothers, highlighting the impact of societal norms on the support network available to them (Grbich, 1992). The economic contribution of a stay-at-home husband also plays a crucial role in shaping how he is evaluated. Research by Rosenwasser and associates (1985) found that stay-at-home fathers who made an economic contribution were evaluated more positively than those who did not contribute financially. Addressing the challenge of gender stereotypes, an article in the Harvard Business Review notes that while it’s increasingly possible for American women to take a sabbatical for family reasons and then return to work, American men face greater difficulty in taking a work leave due to prevailing gender stereotypes (Johnson & Johnson, 2016).

Not embracing the concept of a stay-at-home husband can have detrimental effects on marital satisfaction, impacting the well-being of both spouses (Rochlen & Mahalik, 2004). Gender role conflict for men is identified as a factor that can particularly affect marital satisfaction. In Meisenbach’s 2010 study on women as breadwinners, participants reported that being the primary breadwinner influenced their sense of control and power, allowing them financial and decision-making authority. While many enjoyed this control, it also led to tensions affecting their marital lives. Participants often took on the responsibility of household work, noting that their husbands contributed only when explicitly asked. Despite valuing their independence, women breadwinners experienced pressures, worries, and stress associated with their role, including feelings of guilt about not being able to devote sufficient time to their children (Meisenbach, 2010). Chesley’s study on stay-at-home fathers revealed that some women in such relationships felt a loss of importance in their children's eyes and experienced jealousy toward their husbands for having more time with the children. Criticism of their husbands’ parenting skills led to conflicts in these relationships (Chesley, 2011).

Despite these negative possibilities, embracing the concept of a stay-at-home father has been associated with positive effects in various studies (Rushing & Powell, 2015). Stay-at-
home husbands reported contentment in their relationships when they receive support from their spouses. Social support emerged as a significant factor contributing to marital happiness (Rochlen et al., 2008). Another study found that stay-at-home husbands experienced less financial pressure and felt more freedom to invest in their relationships (Perrone et al., 2009). Lee and Lee (2018) found that stay-at-home fathers reported high levels of satisfaction, emphasizing minimal changes in their relationships after taking on this role. Couples in non-traditional relationships who openly discuss changes in marital roles, including decision-making and division of labor, are more likely to experience happiness in their relationships. The congruence of marital roles with values and feelings of commitment further contributes to relationship satisfaction (Perrone et al., 2009).

Stay-at-home husbands can also play a pivotal role in supporting the career development of their wives, as evidenced by Chesley’s study (2011). The research found that stay-at-home fathers supported their wives’ employment by managing schedules, alleviating childcare stress, and reducing their wives’ involvement in household work. In a study based in Hong Kong, some men, after returning to work following a period as stay-at-home fathers, reported a heightened family orientation, prioritizing jobs that allowed more time with their families (Liong, 2015). Additionally, a few women respondents in managerial positions noted that their own experience of having a husband who is a stay-at-home father enhanced their empathy for other men at their workplace who want to spend more time with their families (Chesley, 2011).

To mitigate the negative consequences associated with stay-at-home fathers, men can adapt to stress, alter their behavior and perceptions of gender roles, discard traditional ideals, or change their reference points (Kramer & Kramer, 2016; Rochlen et al., 2008). In studies highlighting positive effects, common factors include social support and a shift away from traditional gender role beliefs.

To summarize, existing literature on stay-at-home husbands suggests that not accepting the concept has various negative effects, including criticism, disapproval, lack of support from friends and family, and accusations of exploitation. This non-acceptance also has adverse effects on working women, who often juggle both professional and household roles, leading to increased pressure and stress. The reluctance to embrace the idea of stay-at-home husbands negatively impacts marital satisfaction as well. Conversely, accepting the concept positively influences the mental and emotional well-being of stay-at-home husbands. It also benefits women’s careers by reducing their involvement in household and childcare responsibilities, allowing them more time and energy to focus on their professional pursuits.

Given the important cultural influences on marriage and relationship dynamics, it is essential to note the lack of studies on stay-at-home husbands in the Indian cultural context. This research gap likely stems from the novelty of this concept in Indian society as compared to Western societies; the large majority of the literature discussed above focused on the United States and Europe. Furthermore, the current literature on stay-at-home husbands predominantly examines the acceptance or non-acceptance of this concept and its consequences for both men and women in stay-at-home husband relationships. However, there is a lack of research on the attitudes of unmarried men and women toward the idea of a stay-at-home husband. In other words, no studies have interviewed unmarried men about whether they want to be a househusband, or unmarried women about whether they would be happy to marry someone who wants to be a househusband. As such, the objective of this study is to understand the attitudes of unmarried women and men in India toward the concept of a househusband.

**Research Methodology**

To understand the attitudes of unmarried men towards stay-at-home husbands, a total of 122 unmarried men were asked the question “Would you like to be a househusband after

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marriage?” where the term was defined as “just like a housewife who stays at home and does household work.” Out of these 122, 53 respondents were studying in School of Open Learning, a college in Delhi where economically and socially disadvantaged people study, and 69 were MBA students at a prestigious MBA college. The family incomes of these MBA students were much higher than the family incomes of students at the School of Open Learning. This sample was chosen to see if there would be any difference in the attitudes of respondents from different economic strata. Responses were collected through in-person interviews in October and November 2020.

To understand the attitudes of unmarried women towards stay-at-home husbands, a total of 120 unmarried women were asked the question “would you like to marry a person who wants to be a househusband after marriage?” Out of these 120, 59 were from NCWEB center, a college system where women from underprivileged sections of the society study on weekends. 61 were students at a prestigious MBA college, and the family incomes of these MBA students were much higher than the family incomes of students of NCWEB. This sample was chosen to see if there would be any difference in the attitudes of respondents from different economic strata. Thematic analysis of the responses was done, and the results are presented below.

**Results**

**Attitudes of Unmarried Men toward Househusbands**

When asked if they want to be stay-at-home husbands, out of 122 unmarried men, only 4 (3%) said they want to be a stay-at-home husband. Out of these 4 respondents 2 were from the School of Open Learning and 2 were from the MBA college. This response (97% of the respondents did not want to be househusbands) indicates that they are deeply conditioned to be breadwinners of the family. The concept of a househusband was completely strange for them until we posed this question to them. The reaction on their faces after hearing this question was a mix of surprise and shock. The thought of a stay-at-home husband had clearly never occurred to them as a possibility. When asked for the reason for not considering this as an option, they gave answers such as these, with some giving one reason and others giving multiple:

- “The thought never came to me.”
- “People will insult me for not doing any work.”
- “People will say that I am not a male.”
- “I don’t want to be dependent on my wife for money.”
- “I will become a puppet in the hands of my wife, if I do not earn.”
- “She will play with me.”
- “She will abuse me if I do not earn.”
- “Life will be boring as a house husband.”
- “What will I do staying at home all day when all my friends will be at work?”

Overall, these answers can be categorized into the following broad themes, in descending order of frequency:

1. Gender role conditioning: Men are so deeply socialized in their gender roles that they do not consider househusband as an option. The concept of a househusband was strange for them. (N = 110)
2. Embarrassment: Fear of being looked down upon by society and relatives (N = 32)
3. The power imbalance in a relationship: The fear of being dominated by a wife. (N = 25)
4. Boredom: The fear of not having anything to do. (N = 19)

**Attitudes of Unmarried Women toward Househusbands**

When women were asked if they would be willing to marry a man who wants to be a stay-at-home husband, out of 120 unmarried women, only 14 (12%) said that it would be acceptable to marry a man who wants to be a househusband, provided she earns enough money for the family. However, when asked “How much income is enough?”, they could not come up with a number. Out of these 14 respondents, 11 (9%) were from the MBA college and came from relatively high economic strata, and 3 (2.5%) were from the NCWEB college who were from relatively low-income strata. This difference is probably because people from high-income strata are more exposed to the idea of equal rights and responsibilities of both genders.

The first reaction on most of the women’s faces after hearing this question, echoing that of the men respondents, was a mix of surprise and shock. The concept of a stay-at-home husband was so strange and unknown to them that they were taken aback when they heard this question. After a sense of shock and surprise, a burst of small laughter could be heard (out of 120 respondents, 85 of them laughed). It was difficult to interpret this laughter. Was it laughter or derision directed at the role of the stay-at-home husband? Or was the laughter simply because of the unfamiliarity of the question?

When asked the reasons for not being willing to marry a man who wants to be a househusband, we got the following types of answers from women. Some gave only one reason, and some gave multiple reasons:

- “In this day and age, we need both husband and wife to work to run the family, otherwise it will be too much burden on me.”
- “The trait of being a ‘man’ is his ability to earn.”
- “How can I tell my relatives that my husband is a house husband?”
- “What will people think?”
- “People will laugh.”
- “I like ambitious men.”
- “It's okay if he doesn’t want to work to earn, but he should work on something and not stay idle at home.”
- “Staying at home will create a power imbalance in the relationship, and I don't want that.”
- “Working is important for self-respect. He will regret it later. I will not marry such a man.”
- “Nowadays in big cities where we stay, it's difficult to survive with income from only one person.”
- “Income will not be enough if only one person works.”

Overall, the reasons that the women gave for not being willing to marry a man who wants to be a househusband can be broadly categorized into the following themes, in descending order of frequency:

1. Gender role conditioning: Women are deeply conditioned to expect that men’s role is to be the breadwinner of the family. The thought of a househusband never crossed their minds. (N = 90)
2. Social embarrassment of having a househusband (N = 42)
3. Financial burden on a single person (wife) (N = 25)
4. Preference for ambitious men (N = 21)
5. Power imbalance in the relationship (N = 14)

Conclusions

In summary, both unmarried men and women exhibited a strong adherence to traditional gender roles, with the majority expressing resistance to the idea of a stay-at-home husband. Social conditioning, fear of societal judgment, concerns about financial stability, and the desire for ambitious partners were prominent factors influencing their attitudes. While it might be assumed that women would be more supportive of the concept of a stay-at-home husband than men would be, the laughter observed among women upon hearing the question suggests a combination of surprise, discomfort, and perhaps dismissal of the concept. These findings underscore the persistence of traditional gender norms and the challenges that both men and women face for resisting norms in contemporary Indian society.

Female respondents from MBA colleges belonging to higher-income strata exhibited a greater willingness to embrace the concept of a househusband compared to female respondents from lower-income strata. This divergence may be attributed to the varying levels of exposure to concepts such as feminism and gender equality among these respondents.

Recommendations

Based on the thematic analysis and the identified attitudes of unmarried men and women towards the concept of a stay-at-home husband, several suggestions can be considered to address the challenges and promote more open-minded perspectives:

1. **Promoting Gender Equality Education**: Implement educational programs that promote gender equality from an early age. This can include integrating discussions on diverse family structures and challenging traditional gender roles in school curricula.

2. **Awareness Campaigns**: Conduct awareness campaigns targeting both men and women to challenge stereotypes and encourage open dialogue about non-traditional gender roles. Highlight the benefits of shared responsibilities in a household.

3. **Role Modeling**: Showcase positive examples of households where responsibilities are shared or where stay-at-home arrangements are successful. This can include media portrayals, real-life stories, or campaigns featuring individuals challenging traditional roles.

4. **Support for Stay-at-Home Parents**: Establish support networks for stay-at-home parents, both men and women, to address concerns related to isolation, boredom, or power imbalances. This can include community groups, online forums, or counselling services.

Implementing a combination of these suggestions in India could contribute to a more inclusive and accepting societal mindset, encouraging individuals to consider and embrace non-traditional gender roles, including the concept of stay-at-home husbands.
References


