



# Redefining Motherhood in India: A Feminist and Intersectional Perspective on Maternal Identities and Social Change

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## ABSTRACT –

*The study explores Indian motherhood complexities through feminist and intersectional perspectives. The study investigates the manner in which deeply instilled cultural norms and religious practices combine with nationalist ideology and legal systems together with economic inequalities and healthcare accessibility to impact mothers' experiences who belong to various segments including Dalits, Adivasis, LGBTQ+ individuals and solitary mothers. This research investigates how these women encounter barriers when practicing reproduction self-control as well as obtaining proper healthcare while dealing with community customs. Through this analysis the article offers specific policy recommendations to establish an equal and just environment that promotes all kinds of mothers throughout India regardless of their position or identity.*

**Key Words:** (Motherhood, Maternal Identities, Reproductive rights, Marginalized mothers)

## 1. Introduction

Indian society has historically considered motherhood as a divine and unselfish duty which forms an essential part of religious practices and both nationalist and cultural backgrounds. The definition of Indian womanhood manifests through the maternal figures Sita and Savitri and extends to Bharat Mata as the national symbol of India. These social constructions both influences how society expects women to behave and steer government policies and the layout of families and the way women view themselves throughout the years. Motherhood exists as a socially made identity whose nature and deployment receive elementary cultural symbolism and substantial political systemization alongside institutional management. The author breaks down universalized motherhood views through an analysis of how maternal identity development depends on gender with other components including caste, class, sexuality and ability and regional influences. Motherhood throughout India exists as an institution that operates within political structures alongside conventions of colonial control and orthodox religious domination as well as public systems of caste leadership and neoliberal influences. Women's maternal identity develops through the combination of biological and loving elements as well as the systemic framework which controls who can parent and establishes the value of care work and decides what maternal situations will be highlighted or ignored. Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow along with other feminist scholars require separate recognition between lived maternal experiences and patriarchal institutional motherhood. Intellectual authority Rich (1976) defines institutional motherhood as a controlling mechanism which directs female body functions while erasing multiple forms of maternity. According to Chodorow (1978) motherhood passes from one generation to the next through a process of gender-based social conditioning. This article uses Kimberlé Crenshaw's thoughts about structural and political intersectionality as an analytical framework to investigate how maternal experiences differ among distinct margins of marginalization. The paper puts emphasis on understanding Dalit, Adivasi, disabled, LGBTQ+ and single mothers' experiences because these marginalized voices challenge traditional cultural storytelling. The different experiences of motherhood reveal the role which healthcare availability with legal legitimacy together with financial autonomy and social acknowledgment play in maternal life. Both upper-caste residential mothers struggle with work-life conflicts but Dalit and tribal mothers endure institutional healthcare misbehavior along with community disdain and governmental disregard. LGBTQ+ individuals and transgender people encounter existing laws alongside societal hostility stopping them from being recognized as proper caregivers. This paper has three fundamental objectives. The examination focuses on the critical assessment of motherhood as an identity which behaves as a cultural creation and a political matter in Indian society influenced by past historical backgrounds combined with present social economic dynamics. The article uses feminist and intersectional methods to analyze maternal stereotypes and showcase the diverse range of maternal practices. Through its policy recommendations this article identifies caregiving activities and reproductive autonomy along with maternal labor opportunities as spaces where authorities can observe both systemic discrimination and acts of defiance. Through this research the paper joins an expanding collection of gender studies that examines real-life conditions of excluded mothers and supports an updated definition of motherhood which promotes shared freedom for all women. The proposed structural change supports global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3: Health and Well-being and SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) in their pursuit of maternal equity. The author opposes private

motherhood duties which are unpolitical by introducing motherhood as an identity that evolves while serving as both a social control tool and an empowering force.

Our social work background allows us to study motherhood as an academic practitioner through the framework of care along with justice and community-focused wellness. This article functions with feminist and intersectional theory to study the everyday experiences of marginalized mothers across India who typically do not fit into mainstream policy or cultural views. Our objectives involve both theoretical development about motherhood and the application of grassroots knowledge toward transformative changes.

### Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative method that uses theoretical study as well as policy assessment in combination with case-related analysis. This research incorporates ideas from feminist theory as well as intersectionality alongside social work, sociology, political science and gender studies for analyzing the Indian socio-cultural setting. This research utilizes a critical literature review of academic literature, policy documents, legal frameworks, and media representations instead of collecting field data because it examines theories of motherhood regulation in addition to maternal experiences. The study enhances its analysis through careful examination of three different maternal case studies including public figures and grassroots activists and socially marginalized mothers. The method makes marginalized voices the central focus because it incorporates a feminist analysis of multiple social positions. By employing such an approach investigator obtain comprehensive knowledge about motherhood dimensions which shapes academic research and national policies regarding maternal justice in India.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Feminist Theories on Motherhood

**Chodorow – psychoanalytic and social conditioning;** Nancy Chodorow researched in "The Reproduction of Mothering" to reveal how mothering duties of women become shaped by social systems and pass through generations according to Fischer (2012). According to Chodorow, women's mothering serves as the base for gender-related social arrangements while it contradicts concepts of natural parenting (Fischer, 2012; Chodorow, 1994). The analysis combines feminist sociological research with object relations theory because she explains how maternal relationships affect women's subjective experience (Bueskens, 2020). The work of Chodorow demonstrates how social structure and mind-based processes create and define gender and sexuality according to Chiang (2017). Feminist social science research together with psychoanalysis owes its advances to her theories which raised significant questions about gender norm construction in public-private spheres (Fischer, 2012; Chiang, 2017). According to this model the universal nature of gender personality differences stems from human female mothering activities (Chodorow, 1994).

**Adrienne Rich – experience vs. institution ;** The feminist movement gained a new perspective through "Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution" (Rich, 1976) written by Adrienne Rich. The researcher Rich differentiates maternal experiences from institutional motherhood while she exposes patriarchal standards through her exploration of maternal identities (Rezvushkina & Karaseva, 2022). Maternal theory along with motherhood studies rely fundamentally on this theoretical difference (O'Reilly, 2019). Through her writings Rich demonstrates how women lack representation in motherhood discourse so she investigates maternal experiences which society ignores (de la Paz, 2022). The analysis conducted by Rich led to the creation of "intensive mothering" which now serves as the basis for investigations into maternal practices as well as maternal identities (O'Reilly 2019). According to Rezvushkina and Karaseva (2022) and O'Reilly (2019), Rich's analysis of maternal depression and identity crisis established a better maternal understanding which promotes feminist resistance and empowers women to redefine maternal practices.

**Firestone – technology, reproduction, and emancipation;** Shulamith Firestone established herself as both a significant feminist intellectual during the second-wave movement and as one of the leading group organizers in the late 1960s US women's liberation movement (Weeks, 2016). "The Dialectic of Sex" which Firestone published at age 25 has become recognized as the first text of radical feminism (Randall, 2014). The strategist Firestone proclaimed the use of technology should allow women to liberate themselves from motherhood while eliminating traditional family structures (Halbert, 2004). She pointed to the family institution as the primary source through which women experience oppression while located within the economic framework (Weeks, 2016). According to Halbert (2004) Firestone provides foundational ideas that advanced into contemporary cyberfeminist writings. Through her work She played a decisive role in creating gender theory as an important foundation for political activism (Weeks, 2016). The ideas presented by Shulamith Firestone remain significant in examining how feminist thought has evolved through time (Weeks, 2015). Firestone served as a pioneering figure within the second-wave feminist movement who advocated liberation of women through technological advances including reproductive technologies (Halbert, 2004). According to Franklin (2010) she visualized how artificial reproduction techniques would enable women to escape biological constraints by breaking down traditional patriarchal family structures. Cybernetic communism according to Firestone envisions economic self-reliance for women and children as well as societal childcare and childcare responsibilities sharing (Power, 2010). At the time when her radical concepts emerged they gained controversy yet her philosophy shaped future cyberfeminist approaches (Halbert, 2004). Modern transgender communities have brought partial fulfillment to Firestone's ideal of a post-revolutionary world that fights against traditional biological sex definitions and gender roles and family structures (Cannon, 2016). The ideas presented by Firestone throughout her work maintain their usefulness for debates about reproductive technology alongside gender equality and family development in today's society.

## 2.2. Intersectionality and Maternal Identities

### Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory – Examining motherhood through multiple layers of oppression (gender, caste, sexuality, ability).

Through Intersectionality Theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw demonstrates how gender combines with elements like caste and class and sexuality and ability to affect disadvantaged individuals particularly women through complex interactions. Crenshaw (2019) introduced the concept to study women of color discrimination but its applicability extends worldwide including in India. The Indian context requires attention to intersectionality because caste and class structures enhance the vulnerability of women through their combination with gender. During the Nirbhaya rape investigation the social and legal structures demonstrated contrasting responses because of the victim's gender as well as socioeconomic background (Dey & Orton, 2016). Lower caste women along with members from disadvantaged economic classes experience structural barriers which prevent their access to fundamental rights including education and healthcare and employment (Haq, 2013). Single mothers who are refugees together with homeless women fight multiple typhoon-like challenges derived from racism and financial strain and social alienation and educational barriers that undermine their dignity as mothers (Grant & Guerin, 2018; Glumbíková et al., 2018). These barriers show that motherhood operates beyond gender identity since it develops according to societal positions and institutionalized discriminatory frameworks. Mainstream feminism fails to acknowledge marginal communities such as Indian Dalit women and transgender mothers because its discourse predominantly caters to the needs of privileged women leading to double or triple forms of discrimination according to Mrudula et al. (2013) and George (2023). The Indian legal system along with cultural sentiments maintain stigma toward hijras and non-heteronormative mothers leading to their combined legal invisibility according to Gairola (2020) and Kot (2018). The Intersectionality Theory of Crenshaw finds usage in epidemiological research to understand how multiple social factors affect health inequalities by surpassing simplistic one-dimensional analysis (Mandelbaum, 2020). Healthcare organizations need this approach to tackle public health problems together with gender violence prevention and create welfare strategies that benefit everyone equally. Researchers use this framework to understand marginalized mothers who construct social capital during the process of handling multiple forms of oppression in societies worldwide. The social and political identities of Nepalese women remain subject to gender together with ethnicity class and caste (Dhobi 2024). Such insights demonstrate why a social justice system must apply intersectional lenses in its advocacy work and research and education and policymaking to serve all mothers regardless of how they typify conventional norms.

### Patricia Hill Collins' Concept of 'Motherwork' – Understanding the labor of marginalized mothers beyond biological roles

Research has extended and used Patricia Hill Collins' theory of "motherwork" in different fields. According to Edwards (2022) Black women use motherwork as both an instrument to prepare themselves for political roles and to deal with black family fiscal concerns. The research by Johnson (2013) builds motherwork as an analytical tool for studying Chicana literature about domestic violence resistance and its global significance. Bailey (1994) connects Collins' portrayal of motherwork functions among racial-ethnic women to Ruddick's "maternal practice" structures based on a need to understand various connections to institutional violence within peace politics. Cooper (2007) presents African-American mothers' school selection process as motherwork to demonstrate its functions as community resistance and empowerment. This research eliminates stereotypical images regarding African-American maternal education practices and reveals the systemic educational disadvantages they encounter. The diverse implementation of motherwork demonstrates how this concept helps researchers understand women's activist and resistant behaviors and caregiving practices in various social and political frameworks. Patricia Hill Collins developed the concept of "motherwork" which multiple scholars have employed and improved through their work. Men and women of color utilize motherwork as their social justice instrument to confront violence and oppression according to Johnson (2013). A. Edwards (2022) explains that this concept now functions as a political instrument to ready Black women for political office and combat forces encompassing Black family security. Motherwork serves as an approach for Black mothers to support their children during their educational experiences (Flowers, 2019). Motherwork disrupts conventional theories about mothering which dismiss interrelated perspectives of national belonging and endorse middle-class white norms (Flowers, 2019). The analysis of maternal peace demands researchers to evaluate how various racial and socioeconomic groups relate to institutional violence and military institutions to derive complete findings about motherly work and peace (Bailey, 1994). According to Patricia Hill Collins "motherwork" accepts the essential labor activities of disadvantaged mothers who support their families and communities to survive. Black women develop political activism through their motherwork to secure future political office so they can defend Black family structure against threats (Edwards 2022). Through culturally sustaining pedagogy Black mothers transmit knowledge and guidance toward developing and preserving the brilliance and culture of Black children (Coleman-King et al., 2022). The concept of motherwork appears through transformative and adaptive and integrative actions when Black mothers guide their children through educational experiences (Flowers, 2019). Black women who spent time behind bars use collective and hypervigilant and crisis-oriented forms of motherwork because they need to defend their children from state oversight and intervention. The initiative of these mothers to provide care for their children results in state punishment through criminalization (Gurusami, 2019).

## 3. Traditional Conceptions of Motherhood in India

### 3.1. Motherhood in Religious and Cultural Narratives

#### 3.1.1 Motherhood in Hinduism:

According to Mukherjee (1983) In Hindu mythology Sita together with Parvati serve as archetypal mother figures because women worship their husbands. The characters serve as exemplary role models for Hindu women to follow yet they represent the image of an ideal wife above all other female identities (Mukherjee, 1983). The traditional Hindu "ideal woman" character is generally known for her sexual purity through the example of Sita undergoing the fire test in The Ramayana (Moodley, 2020). The requirement of female sexual purity persists as a core value which affects Indians residing all over the

world (Moodley, 2020). The formal and the village-based traditions define Hindu goddess worship in the religion where Parvati and Sita represent the formal category (Lewis, 2016). Child-rearing practices in Hindu joint families follow the numerous mother representations of Hinduism as multiple "mothers" care for children (Kurtz, 1992). The psychological growth of individuals alongside their maternal knowledge emerges from this particular cultural framework (Kurtz, 1992). This religious system demonstrates multifaceted views about motherhood with cultural and religious and social aspects (Kurtz, 1992). The Hindu Code Bill discourse demonstrated that multiple motherhood roles contribute to determining family laws (C. Sinha, 2007). Children in Hindu joint families grow up under the care of several "mothers" which affects their mental development and future relationship dynamics (S. Kurtz, 1992). The patriarchal structure of Hinduism demands women to submit themselves for the security of their families according to Indian scholar Heena L. Patel (2022). The practice of devotion allows believers to express motherhood in different ways. The Vaiṣṇava documentation presents vātsalya bhāva as a special religious devotion which lets followers interact with their deity through childlike behavior (Florence Pasche Guignard, 2022). In other traditions of bhakti female followers normally express devotion towards god as romantic love partners yet this practice does not apply to Vaishnava tradition. Several viewpoints showcase how Hindu motherhood exists as a three-part system connecting social duties to mental consequences and religious worship.

### ***3.1.2: Motherhood in Islam: Maternal responsibilities under Sharia and Quranic principles. :***

According to Islamic doctrine both parents share responsibilities during child-raising which undermines traditional gender beliefs (Pitrotussaadah et al., 2023). The Quran and Hadith instruct mothers about breastfeeding and childcare duties while fathers must offer financial support according to Nurfitriani (2022). The relationship between spouses for child care earns approval in Islam while disproving male-only child care traditions that are patriarchal (Nurfitriani, 2022). Islamic maternal education prepares women for marriage before pregnancy then guides them through childbirth before teaching them how to care for their infants while developing their spirituality along with emotional and intellectual and social capabilities (Sarnoto & Siregar, 2019). Muslim mothers in contemporary times experience challenges from globalization and technology which they need to address while following Sharia teachings (Shams et al., 2023). The Islamic teachings guide parents toward a balanced child rearing practice which necessitates joint contributions between parents during spiritual education of their children. According to Islamic perspectives motherhood carries great importance for both spiritual development and society but also presents setbacks which require attention. According to the Quran pregnancy plus childbirth represents substantial physical obstacles but motherhood exists as a powerful spiritual journey (Badissy, 2016). Through their role as mothers, British Muslim women oppose patriarchal understandings of Islamic texts and achieve better relationships with women from multiple cultural backgrounds (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2016). Immigrant Muslim mothers develop their parenting behaviors through the preservation of religious values together with cultural customs and cultural integration (Jayyousi et al., 2014). In Islamic tradition mothers assume a vital role in building society through the duration of pregnancy and early childhood development. The family sees wives as key carriers of Islamic knowledge together with cultural elements in their household domain (Younus et al., 2020). Two distinct approaches examine how Muslim women act as important figures in family settings while they affect social interactions bringing both spiritual and social change. Research now investigates the intricate life experiences of Indian Muslim mothers who face difficulties regarding their identity and personal authority as well as social expectations. The act of becoming mothers enables select Muslim women to fight against male-dominated text interpretations while connecting with non-Muslim women (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2016). Research has established the significance of investigating Muslim mothers' lives by exploring their viewpoints when studying their ethnographic experiences within both the Indian cultural structure and Islamic doctrines.

### ***3.1.3: "Motherhood in Christianity":***

Christian scripture alongside religious doctrine presents widespread maternal ideologies which lead to marginalizing of women who break away from traditional expectations (Llewellyn, 2016). The Virgin Mary stands as the main venerated figure who represents biological and religious motherhood as well as social motherhood (Lee, 2018). Pastors use this perfect feminine model yet it makes women feel less important thus restricting their authority in ministry institutions (King, 2000). Christian motherhood provides crucial approaches for religious and political system critique as well as justice development across cultures (Oh, 2010). Through various Christian female methods women effectively interrupt maternal guidelines thereby enabling different ways of experiencing both motherhood and not becoming a mother (Llewellyn, 2016). Social motherhood serves as a proposed Christian life purpose for women to combat social disparities according to research by Lee (2018).

## ***3.2. "Motherhood and Womanhood in Indian Society: Cultural Ideals and Expectations"***

### ***3.2.1: The 'Bharat Mata' Ideal:***

Motherhood as a nationalist symbol: Through the 19th-century Bengal 'Bharat Mata' (Mother India) became a strong nationalist symbol which combined motherhood with nationalist enthusiasm (Ghosh, 2020). During the nineteenth century the ideological formation known as Mother India gained popularity through writers like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in his famous novel "Anandamath" (Ghosh, 2020). Although the 'Bharat Mata' icon helped resist colonial domination it simultaneously reduced genuine women's importance through portraying male nationalists as dutiful sons (Chowdhury-Sengupta, 1992). The portrayal of the nation as mother receives criticism since experts argue it implements an elitist and exclusionary approach instead of authentic inclusivity (Gabriel, 2019). The widespread use of maternal imagery in Bengali nationalism exists due to cultural conditions which boosted the acceptance of motherhood beliefs (Bagchi 1990). Narratives implement melodrama to support traditional definitions of family along with motherhood and national identity according to Gabriel (2019).

### **3.2.2: *The Sacrificial Mother: Cultural glorification of self-sacrificing mothers (Savitri, Sita):***

Since Hindu mythology and literature the Indian cultural tradition keeps the sacrificial mother concept at its core. According to Kang (2015) the Hindu traditions focus on Sita as well as Savitri because these heroines exemplify traditional feminine traits of purity combined with submission and dedicated caregiving. Pativratas who represent devoted wives achieve remarkable power through complete devotion while accepting self-sacrifice as their definitive life duty (Kang, 2015). Society remembers widows who practiced sati through literature and inscriptions to create further positive symbolism of self-sacrifice (Singh, 2024). The cultural legend that formed in India affects modern women so that it impacts their sense of self and social position (Miller & Mitter, 1993). The Hindu scripture considers Sita one of the most ideal women because she demonstrates truthfulness and devotion and makes self-sacrificing choices toward human benefit (Senapaty, 2020). Indian cultural ideals from the past influence how women are expected to behave in modern society (Miller & Mitter, 1993).

### **3.2.3: *Pressure to Conform: Social expectations of women to marry and bear children:***

Indian culture puts substantial societal stress upon women, obliging them to get married followed by having children. Statistical data reveal that five percent of married adolescent girls suffer from instant childbearing demands from their in-laws within the first few months of marriage (Dixit et al., 2021; Dixit et al., 2020). Indian couples experiencing family-size pressure show varying levels of communication difficulties but avoid changes in contraceptive usage since this practice remains unusual in their communities (Dixit et al., 2021; Dixit et al., 2020). In India society strictly determines the timing of marriage alongside dictating the choice of spouses and marriage arrangements (Bhargava, 2022). Women refraining from parenthood receive these labels because society associates motherhood with female identity (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018). Some women actively reject the control they face by creating new identity frameworks which transcend motherhood to seek their own freedom and desires according to Bhambhani and Inbanathan (2018). Practitioners dedicate their efforts to fight against social and political systems which control women's lives. Socio Political narratives are forcing women to marry and bear children according to Bhargava (2022).

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## **4. Feminist Challenges to Traditional Motherhood**

### **4.1. *Women's Movements and Critique of Motherhood Norms***

#### **4.1.1: *How feminism has challenged compulsory motherhood:***

Women who choose childlessness in India receive increased attention in feminist research that questions traditional motherhood standards (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018). Traditional Indian society views motherhood as sacred for national development yet mothers face routine ignored and belittled treatment in real life (Dey, 2020). Feminist scholars stress biological and social motherhood differentiation by showing how assisted reproductive technologies failed to improve female reproductive rights and established new reproductive controls (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). An apparent disconnect exists between cultural mother worship in India and its unfavorable maternal health records which demonstrates the multifaceted dimensions of motherhood throughout the nation (Singh, 2022). The feminist analyses have established new definitions for female identity which extend past maternal roles while dissolving patriarchal misconceptions about motherhood throughout India (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018; Dey, 2020).'

#### **4.1.2: *Women's resistance to being reduced to child-bearers:***

Research investigates how Indian women interact with the practice of being reduced to child-bearers through diverse approaches based on their circumstances. The rural community of South India marginalizes women who cannot have children yet these women build their own marriages outside typical family norms (Riessman, 2000). Muslim women from rural Rajasthan actively oppose patriarchal domination by taking covert measures that include stealing belongings along with poisoning people and refusing work duties despite state-backed support for traditional family structures (Moore, 1999). Indian women's movements established themselves as sexual violence fighters by conducting protests and marches in addition to social media activism which brought legal reform and raised public consciousness (Sullivan, 2015). Indian women's groups during the post-colonial era have fought to transform cultural views of sexual identity and defended women against dowry along with rape and contraceptive products. Groups at the community level have created networks to provide self-help services as part of their work to break free from biological limitations of sexuality (Khanna & Price, 1994).

### **4.2. *Education, Career, and Economic Independence***

#### **4.2.1: *The emergence of working mothers and career-oriented women:***

The situation of working mothers in India now emerges through new academic investigations. Female professionals experience difficulties when combining their work ambitions against traditional obligations to become mothers (Sharma & Dhir, 2019; Gupta & Malik, 2021). Shared educational opportunities between men and women have improved but employment equality remains at stake by the combined expectations of paid employment and unpaid childcare duties (Motwani 2023). Working mothers experience career challenges in multiple fields which requires organizations to implement

interventions according to Sharma and Dhir (2019). People who make reproductive decisions face influences coming from their career aspirations together with societal demands along with financial constraints (Gupta & Malik, 2021). The implementation of extended family care policies by the government has not resulted in achievement of equal market participation due to ongoing gender stereotypes (Motwani, 2023). Upper-middle-class mothers in urban areas are building new approaches to combine their employment and caretaking responsibilities (Bhaumik & Sahu, 2021). Research results show how education and career goals merge with maternal aspects in the current Indian social context.

#### ***4.2.2: Delayed Motherhood and Changing Attitudes towards Family life:***

Research currently reveals major transformations in Indian families together with shifting societal beliefs about motherhood. The process of urbanization together with economic advancement caused fundamental transformations in traditional support systems within families (Pradhan, 2011). Research indicates that female voluntary childlessness has risen because women prioritise their independence and work careers (Bhambhani & Inbanathan, 2018). Economic independence coupled with education has given women power which promotes them to postpone marriage and birth of children mainly in urban areas according to Roy (2020). Changes in family dynamics do not diminish intergenerational pressure for families nor do they eliminate traditional cultural influences that affect maternal health at such crucial moments. The cultural belief system regarding traditional diets takes priority over health guidance yet women consistently choose breastfeeding based on cultural norms. The concept of ideal family size together with gender preferences for having children continues to dominate family life in India but urban centers demonstrate progressive changes in these traditional practices. A number of women face constraints in their ability to select freely for important events which include marriage and pregnancy and childbirth (Raman et al., 2014).

#### ***4.3. Reproductive Rights and Maternal Autonomy***

##### ***4.3.1: Abortion and Contraceptive Rights in India – Legal access vs. societal stigma:***

India made a major step toward legalizing abortion through the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act from 1971 because it sought to minimize fatalities associated with unsafe medical practices (Dr. Uma V, 2022). This legislation exists with many complexities because its creation is linked to population control goals and eugenics principles instead of establishing reproductive rights protections (M. Sreenivas, 2024). The 2020 Amendment Act raised the gestational limits for abortion from 20 to 24 weeks because it aimed to protect maternal well-being instead of protecting fetal rights (Dr. Uma V, 2022; Asawari Deshpande et al., 2021). The amendment receives praise from reproductive rights activists because its approach demonstrates progress according to Asawari Deshpande et al., (2021). The domain of reproductive rights in India continues to face ongoing systemic and practical barriers (Asawari Deshpande et al., 2021). Diverse countries throughout the world choose between enabling policies and restricting measures to protect reproductive health rights of women (Asawari Deshpande et al., 2021). The Indian public views abortion as a source of controversy even though the practice became legal multiple decades ago (Kumar, 2014). Women have limited access to safe abortions because of unmet contraceptive needs and inadequate service quality as well as insufficient awareness of legal abortion rights (Kumar, 2014). Reproductive rights violation at health care facilities takes place when establishments require consent from husbands or enforce contraception requirements or reject abortion services according to data from Pradhan et al. (2021). Following the 2021 Indian amendment to abortion regulations women who are not married cannot access legal terminations when they need them because of contraceptive failure (Tripathi, 2023). Social norms alongside stigma create two important obstacles which influence women during their abortion journey while impacting their expectations (Makleff et al., 2019). Most women lack sufficient awareness about abortion services while experiencing feelings of judgment and health-related concerns (Makleff et al., 2019). Both reducing stigma toward women seeking abortion and enhancing safe service availability and training healthcare providers about reproductive rights remain vital for ethical abortion care access.

##### ***4.3.2: Surrogacy and ARTs (Assisted Reproductive Technologies) – Ethics and feminist critiques:***

The regulatory landscape for surrogacy in India shows difficulty due to its dynamic nature. The criticism of the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill of 2019 stems from its inadequate understanding of surrogacy complexities and its weak protective framework for surrogates as per Banerjee & Kotiswaran (2020). Surrogacy became legally available in India during 2002 yet since then various issues remain regarding surrogate exploitation together with their mental health and rights protection (Kaur & Chawla, 2021). Fertility industry matches its "baby supermarket" description because it generates dilemmas regarding reproductive marketization together with surrogate mistreatment (Mehta et al., 2022). Critics of the Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021 point out its exclusion of LGBTQ people along with its emphasis on "familial altruism" although this approach may allow discrimination to persist and keep traditional moral norms intact (Kashyap & Tripathi, 2022). An effective surrogacy regulatory debate requires understanding India's social and economic realities in order to develop working mechanisms.

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## **5. Intersectional Perspectives on Motherhood**

### ***5.1. Caste and Motherhood: Dalit and Adivasi Maternal Struggles:***

Multiple studies show that Indian healthcare providers and welfare service providers continue to discriminate against and exclude Dalit and Adivasi mothers throughout their care journey. The research shows that Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe women struggle to access maternal healthcare because they actively face socio-economic discrimination (Das et al., 2022). Healthcare institutions create discriminatory conditions due to the fact that essential rural staff positions remain filled by non-SC/ST personnel (George, 2015). Patients together with healthcare professionals interact due to their

social identities which produce provider-seeker dynamics affecting health care actions and social divisions between Dalits and other community groups (Verma & Acharya, 2018). The process of healthcare service delivery and the identification of beneficiaries is shaped by social and political systems which makes welfare program discrimination more complicated than simple preferences or corruption (Pankaj, 2019). Indian society continues to hinder equal healthcare and welfare service delivery to Dalit and Adivasi mothers throughout the nation. Dalit women in India must endure three layers of oppression which include discrimination based on caste status as well as economic injustice and gender-based inequalities according to research by Sabharwal and Sonalkar (2015) and Chawan (2022). The Indian female population includes 16.60% of Dalits who endure various forms of discrimination across educational, health care and employment settings (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015; Chawan, 2022). Existing social divisions prevent Dalit women from receiving sufficient benefits from programs such as microcredit loans and Self-Help Groups despite the efforts to empower women (Sandhu, 2021). The practice of devadasi exploitation along with sexual violence threatens Dalit women because they face significant risk of abuse (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015; Chawan, 2022). Various elements including caste together with class while taking into account family background and culture and location shape the empowerment level of Dalit women (Kollapudi, 2015). Modern society needs immediate reform efforts and empowerment strategies which focus on the special needs of Dalit women (Sandhu 2021, Kollapudi 2015). Ruth Manorama functions as a prominent Dalit feminist activist in India where she has successfully pushed Dalit women's rights advancement while fighting caste-based discrimination according to D. Pathak (2016) and S. Ngaihte (2018). Her efforts work together with wider initiatives that recontextualize caste discrimination as an international human rights concern since the late 1990s (C. Bob, 2007). Through her activism Ruth Manorama works to empower Dalit women by converting their hardships into empowerment while fighting discrimination that results from both caste and gender hierarchy (S. Channa & J. Mencher, 2013). Through her work she has created significant influence on the fields of Dalit feminism alongside Ambedkarite radicalism and Dalit resistance culture (D. Pathak, 2016). Gathered alongside additional feminist activists of marginalized groups Manorama's voice has served to spread democratic ideas about female agency while revealing shared problems of Indian women across their various backgrounds (S. Ngaihte, 2018).

### **5.2. LGBTQ+ Parenting and Non-Traditional Families:**

LGBTQ+ individuals in India face significant legal and social barriers to adoption and surrogacy. Same-sex couples continue to fight for adoption rights even though LGBTQ+ rights have shown recent progress because the Supreme Court has refused to grant marriage recognition (Ruthvik Nayaka & Talawar, 2024). The process of commercial surrogacy in India requires intricate discussions regarding relationships and identity especially when foreign gay couples engage (Majumdar, 2016). The electronic discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals seeking to become parents obstructs their adoption and fostering endeavors as well as medical access and creates social segregation and healthcare requirements and financial hurdles (Levitt et al., 2020). Gay male surrogacy applicants in India discussed mixed outcomes with their process while showing the importance of a continuous support system (Riggs et al., 2014). Even though Indian legislation now blocks gay men from using surrogacy services the assessment of their experiences remains essential. LGBTQ+ individuals encounter various hurdles when trying to build families that underline the need for complete anti-discrimination protection. Indian laws regarding LGBTQ+ adoption face difficulties even as LGBTQ+ rights have shown progress (Ruthvik Nayaka & Naveen Talawar, 2024). The process of nurturing children becomes difficult for transgender parents because of social isolation and disapproval that generates negative impacts on both parent and child well-being (Ms. Madhu Kumari Ms. Madhu Kumari, 2023). Gauri Sawant demonstrates the journey of a transgender activist who obtained trans rights while becoming a parent through adoption yet encountered numerous obstacles on her path to equality (Kessiya Biju et al., 2024). Laws enabling LGBTQ+ individuals to adopt their children are becoming more accepted yet they differ significantly between nations and such communities still face discrimination (R. Farr & A. Goldberg, 2018). LGBTQ+ parents alongside their offspring require the fundamental support of supportive environments and professional help combined with clear legislative guidelines (Ms. Madhu Kumari Ms. Madhu Kumari, 2023; Ruthvik Nayaka & Naveen Talawar, 2024). The LGBTQ+ community in India maintains its ongoing battle to obtain equal rights together with recognition. Studying LGBTQ+ parenting and non-traditional families in India shows multiple obstacles together with desired aims. Among the Indian sexual and gender minority population located in cities there are strong desires for having children yet societal judgments and discrimination affect their choice of family building paths (Bowling et al., 2019). The battle for adoption rights by same-sex couples in India continues because of existing legal advancements in LGBTQ+ equality (Nayaka & Talawar, 2024). In addition to facing adversities from heterosexism and family rejection and lacking legal protection, lesbian parents worldwide experience the benefits of being community examples and promoters of diversity appreciation (Gartrell et al., 2019). The practice of social work professionals who assess LGBTQ+ foster parents and potential adoptive parents requires specific proactive training and organizational development to better understand diverse sexual and gender experiences (Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield, 2021). The research demonstrates why legislative experts need to provide better clarity while developing extensive anti-discrimination legislation for LGBTQ+ family support.

### **5.3. Disability and Motherhood:**

Women who have disabilities in India encounter substantial obstacles when attempting to receive healthcare services together with seeking employment opportunities. They face "double discrimination" because discrimination exists because of both disability and gender-related challenges (Chahal, 2021). Disabled women in healthcare face physical obstacles in addition to long waits and facilities that are not accessible and encounter negative treatment from providers (Sharma et al., 2015). Physical obstacles are most prevalent in sexual and reproductive healthcare facilities. The risk levels for diabetes and depression exist significantly higher among disabled women compared with the broader population (Gudlavalleti et al., 2014). Employment statistics indicate that disability status substantially decreases the rates of employment (Gudlavalleti et al., 2014). Several obstacles exist for disabled women that stem from sociocultural factors and economic constraints as well as structural barriers (Chahal, 2021; Sharma et al., 2015). Disabled women in India must overcome multiple barriers which block their path to essential resources and life possibilities because society requires specific actions to enhance their social acceptance and equality. The papers within this compilation analyze the multiple challenges affecting disabled women who give birth and those

from the broader disabled community. Disabled women must face three levels of discrimination because of their disability combined with social biases and gender-related challenges according to Prasanna Udipikar & Mekhala Venkatesh (2023). Disabled people encounter both physical and attitudinal challenges which make it difficult to participate in social settings and secure available opportunities (Prasanna Udipikar & Mekhala Venkatesh, 2023). Through the ages disabled women received social exclusion while scientists deprived them of motherhood potential due to infantilization and de-sexualization (Mcfarlane, 2004). The dependency-nurturance balance becomes troublesome for mothers with disabilities since they risk intimate partner abuse and experience state monitoring of their dependency status (Malacrida, 2007). Some types of dependency relationships offer helpful community resources according to Malacrida (2007). Successful motherhood ends in disabilities which requires women to face internalized ableism while transitioning to an inter-dependent identity (Aunos et al., 2022). The social views about disabled women becoming mothers (Mcfarlane, 2021) have shown gradual improvement despite the existing challenges. (Mcfarlane, 2004).

## **6. Economic, Political, and Social Dimensions of Motherhood**

### **6.1. Economic Impact of Motherhood**

#### **6.1.1. Motherhood and Workforce Participation:**

The gender pay gap and career breaks: The workforce participation of women in India remains low at about 30% despite economic growth and improved education because research shows (Fletcher et al., 2017). According to Das & Zumbyte (2017) the motherhood penalty causes women to decline workforce participation when they have young children. Urban women with advanced education avoid taking jobs because they must handle extensive unpaid household responsibilities (Motwani, 2023). The workforce participation and labor force enrollment rates for women have experienced an ongoing decline since Indian independence until they reached their present historically low levels (Nikore, 2020). Tertiary education disparities and workforce segregation and increasing household income together with occupational barriers explain these employment patterns (Nikore, 2020). The resolution of these matters demands evidence-based decisions from policymakers who should focus on providing better child care services in combination with gender equality quotas and adaptable work environments (Fletcher et al., 2017; Nikore, 2020). The economic effect of motherhood in India results in substantial employment barriers for working women alongside gaps in equality rights. The employment rates of motherhood in Indian urban settings have grown more unfavorable throughout the years according to research by Das & Zumbyte (2017). The discrimination against mothers in employment increases even more in patrilineal communities because of traditional gender norms (Bedi et al., 2018). Economic disparities create significant health variations between mothers and children because illiteracy together with bad economic circumstances play essential roles (Goli et al., 2013). The present family policies work to prioritize women as main childcare figures thus creating an impractical balance of parental duties and resulting in a decrease of working women (Singh, 2023). Research findings establish the necessity to transform gender norms together with financial conditions enhancement and executing consistent family policy systems in order to reduce adverse economic effects from motherhood in India.

#### **6.1.2 Unpaid Domestic Labor: The economic value of caregiving:**

A substantial economic value from lacking compensation exists for unpaid domestic labor especially throughout caregiving duties. Women in rural South Indian communities dedicate longer hours to domestic caregiving activities than men according to research studies which calculated economic values of INR 103,641.8 for women compared to INR 84,610 for men (Suryawanshi et al., 2021; Suryawanshi et al., 2024). Research indicates that patriarchy and male chauvinism contribute to this gender difference (Suryawanshi et al., 2024). Women from less educated backgrounds in lower economic strata of Indian society spend the most time carrying out unpaid domestic duties as observed by Singh & Pattanaik (2020). Informal caregiving delivered by American communities as unpaid work offered \$196 billion worth of economic value in 1997 while formal health care spending remained lower than this figure (Arno et al., 1999). The research evidence underscored that public policy must acknowledge and handle unremunerated household responsibilities.

#### **6.1.3 Costs and Consequences:**

Numerous studies show how Indian women confront major difficulties when trying to achieve work-life harmony between careers and parenting responsibilities. Engineering professionals who are women together with academic professionals encounter multiple responsibilities which cause stress and management difficulties (Mubeen & Karim, 2018). Urban working mothers from the upper-middle class in Kolkata work to redefine their traditional maternal duties while managing both work and child caregiving responsibilities (Bhaumik & Sahu, 2021). Single maternal workers face exceptional pressure to perform both their professional tasks and parenting functions while dealing with unrealistic social demands (Salsabilla et al., 2023). Neoliberal economies with competitive structures and gender-related discrimination make women face the career-motherhood trade-off which sometimes results in delayed pregnancy attempts and infertility or workforce departure (Bhowmick, 2024). Economic participation and future human capital development of a country face difficulties because of these issues. The essential solution to these problems requires institutional backing together with policies that support work-life balance according to Bhowmick (2024) and Bhaumik & Sahu (2021).



## 6.2. Political Narratives of Motherhood

### 6.2.1 State Policies on Motherhood: Childcare Landscape:

The National Education Policy 2020 as well as Integrated Child Development Services function as primary policy foundations for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in India according to Rahaman et al. (2024). India has strong policies supporting infant and young child feeding yet an improvement can be made by developing specific IYCF policies as per Puri et al. (2017). Gender biases persist unintentionally through certain social policies which make women perform most childcare tasks (Singh, 2023). Childhood obesity stands as an increasing health problem in India where present-day health programs primarily focus on undernutrition instead of managing overnutrition. Preventing childhood obesity requires better implementation of existing guidelines as well as new methods that must include health support from multiple sectors nationwide according to Bera et al. (2021). Modern challenges require further advancement in the implementation and development of child-related policies throughout India to achieve effective results.

### 6.2.2. Maternity Benefit Act:

Under the 2017 Maternity Benefit Amendment Act India extended maternity leave from its original 12 weeks to 26 weeks (Singla, 2022). Indian maternity leave surpasses nations within the classification of low- and middle-income yet it falls below the length of time provided by high-income countries (Santhiya K Mahalakshmi S, 2023). Legal rights to benefits provide insufficient protection since numerous women experience poor pregnancy-related conditions including inadequate nutrition and lack of rest and insufficient healthcare (Drèze et al., 2021). Despite its gender equality and child development goals through the Act, challenges remain because it provides limited coverage and might contribute to hiring-related discrimination (Singla, 2022). The maternity leave policy in India demonstrates greater generosity than the United States because its Family and Medical Leave Act provides no pay for mothers during their leave period (Mondal & Pandey, 2018). Better maternity benefit implementation together with enhanced pregnant women need recognition stands as an urgent priority toward workforce equality and women support (Drèze et al., 2021; Santhiya K Mahalakshmi S, 2023).

### 6.2.3. Nationalism and Motherhood:

Indian motherhood exists within many complex political ideologies. Hindutva enforcement during COVID-19 depends on fictional maternal storytelling and fake scientific explanations which Hindu nationalists use according to Kinnvall and Singh (2022). South Indian reproductive processes demonstrate the way gendered identities emerge within restrictive systems that accept male children through births of mothers only (Hegde, 1999). Indian motherhood underwent changes through national development processes while political forces elevate mothers to Matri Shakti status though they experience daily disregard (Dey, 2020). During the Kangla Fort protest in Manipur mothers utilized patriarchal idioms of motherhood for resistance against state violence through spectacular protests which disrupted social norms according to Ray (2018). Indian nationalist discourse has used "Bharat Mata" (Mother India) as an influential national symbol which binds motherhood with nationalist ideas. Middle-class males in 19th century Bengal assumed the role of devotional children who served their mother nation according to Chowdhury-Sengupta (1992). The representation of the nation as mother typically functions in an exclusive and privileged way that favors established norms of family system and motherhood practices yet marginalizes social diversity (Gabriel, 2019). The gendered discourse gives men the role of safeguarding the nation-mother while disregarding genuine women (Gupta, 2021). The Indian culture developed its maternal symbolism through Bankim's "Bande Mataram" then Tagore made his iconic Bharatmata portrait in 1905 which led to both the 1947 Partition and 1990 Ayodhya event according to Atwal (2020). Mother India functions today as a multifaceted symbol that links nationalist goals to the specific gender narratives that build the nation. The analyzed research sheds light on how motherhood functions in conjunction with politics along with resistance movements within Indian society.

## 6.3. Social Dimensions of Motherhood

### 6.3.1 Stigma Around Single Mothers and Unmarried Mothers:

The research shows Indian single mothers encounter major social discrimination together with considerable challenges in daily life. According to Das (2016) three main barriers prevent single mothers from achieving emancipation—the obstacles include social discrimination together with class inequality and heteronormative community pressure. Minor single mothers suffer from social discrimination and stigma and as a result they encounter lower socioeconomic potential and diminished self-confidence according to the research by Rusyda et al. (2011). The results from Babu (2024) demonstrate that Indian women who choose not to become mothers experience similar discrimination as those who fail to meet traditional motherhood roles. Bhatt & Chauhan (2024) track the expanding trend of single-parent households whose heads are mostly mothers through various recurring difficulties they face. Research findings show how Indian women confront social problems from both economic and psychological perspectives when they fail to maintain traditional family structures and motherhood roles. Indian research about unmarried mothers exposes a complex sociological matter that impacts numerous social domains. The number of unmarried mothers keeps increasing and this rise happens mainly among teenage girls who possess minimal education (Katke et al., 2014). The heteronormative societal environment causes these women to endure both condemnation and social discrimination because their rights continue to be discussed intensely (Das, 2016). Decision-making about child relinquishment or acceptance among unmarried mothers stems from different cultural as well as personal elements (Bos, 2008). Children born to Devadasi mothers and unwed mothers face psychosocial problems that stem from inadequate resources and insufficient family backing and unsafe living conditions according to Puthanveedu & Kasi (2020). The intervention of social workers helps to handle these cases effectively because some mothers decide to bring their children back together with their fathers (Katke et al.,

2014). Unmarried motherhood in India creates societal challenges because of movements in social classes and stigma and effects of economic neoliberalism (Das, 2016).

### **6.3.2. Social Determinants of Maternal Health:**

The research data on maternal health in India demonstrates multiple interacting social governance factors that influence how healthcare services are used. The utilization rates of pregnancy registration and antenatal care and facility deliveries are lower among poor illiterate Muslim women (Arnab Dey et al., 2018). Research reveals religion plays a distinct role in South Asian maternal and child health statistics because Muslims maintain lower composite coverage index scores than cases of Hindus and Buddhists (A. Kachoria et al., 2022). Female construction workers who are migrants encounter specific pregnancy difficulties because of inadequate housing standards coupled with reduced healthcare capabilities and occupational pregnancy dangers (D. Ravindranath & Iannotti, 2019). Pregnant women who reside in urban areas of Tamil Nadu face multiple pregnancy-based obstacles that stem from healthcare access plus socioeconomic status combined with cultural practices (S. Janaki & Prabakar, 2023). The research confirms the necessity of focused interventions which manage multiple social determinants to enhance maternal health quality throughout India.

### **6.3.3 Challenging Gender Norms in India:**

Academic studies about gender norms and social stigmas in India demonstrate multiple complex obstacles which affect women during their reproductive years and their educational journey. Motherhood exposes women to discrimination in workplace situations where patrilineal communities exist (A. Bedi et al., 2018). Studies show that community programs focused on gender norms achieve stronger outcomes for changing gender equity attitudes and male participants show greater response than females (S. Schensul et al., 2015). Women tend to fear and expect negative experiences from reproductive healthcare providers because of abortion-related stigmas combined with common beliefs about their behavior which intensifies when they are older and married according to S. Makleff et al., (2019). Creative girl empowerment programs work best when community members participate thus improving adolescent girl mental health alongside extending school attendance and postponing marriage engagements. Using this method creates positive changes in gender norms which minimizes the punishments faced by people who violate the norms (A. Andrew et al., 2022). The research reveals why community-based elements need attention for gender equity improvement.

### **6.3.4 Social Dimensions of Maternal Experiences:**

New research about maternal social behaviors focuses on how societal rules interact with maternal experiences. The norms shaping modern motherhood include attentiveness and forward-thinking as well as employment and self-control and contentment according to Schmidt et al. (2022). The maternal role norms both exhibit steady characteristics and demonstrate expanding levels of diversity. Motherhood represents through social understanding all aspects from pregnancy through prenatal care to delivery methods and breastfeeding according to Professora Auxiliar et al. (2013) and M. S. Carneiro et al. (2013). Clinical professionals need to employ holistic biosocial-humanistic care models which unite scientific information with female natural understanding according to (Professora Auxiliar et al., 2013; M. S. Carneiro et al., 2013). Evolution in motherhood perception occurs because of societal changes combined with advances in reproductive technology which contradict traditional motherhood definitions (Kanchan Biswas, 2022). Research results demonstrate the crucial need to recognize the social institution of motherhood because it transforms based on cultural influences as well as technological progress and individual differences.

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## **7. Regional Variations in Motherhood**

### **7.1. Rural Motherhood in India: Limited access to healthcare and education:**

The restricted availability of healthcare and educational facilities produces adverse consequences on maternal health experiences throughout rural India. Women encounter limitations in accessing maternal healthcare services because they must travel long distances while having poor access to transportation along with high service costs (Sarma & Rempel, 2007; Bredesen, 2013). The education level of mothers plays a positive role in their healthcare use but educational shortages lead mothers to depend on unverified information shared by their friends and relatives (Sarma & Rempel, 2007; Das & Sarkar, 2014). The poorer health conditions experienced by Scheduled Tribe populations during pregnancy stem from economic status and education levels while showing worse outcomes than Scheduled Castes according to Yadav and Jena (2020). The way healthcare services are used depends heavily on cultural elements and religious practices combined with family tradition (Bredesen, 2013). Pregnant women experience multiple types of obstacles that comprise feelings of shame in addition to receiving insufficient medical professional time (Das & Sarkar, 2014). Rural India needs better healthcare access and enhanced educational programs and socioeconomic help as primary elements for enhancing maternal health outcomes. The way pregnant women experience their pregnancy depends on different medical treatments along with nutritional confusion and care delivery methods (Naveen Bagalkot et al., 2022).

### **7.1.2 Rural Motherhood in India: Early marriages, high fertility expectations:**

Researchers now analyze the various elements which drive the pattern of births in India. Early marriage and childbearing continue to be common practices mainly affecting ethnic groups and people with limited educational backgrounds (Khanna et al., 2018; Marphatia et al., 2021). Research shows India

reached low fertility levels equal to high-income countries thanks to early birth termination together with sterilization practices following the birth of two children (Park et al., 2023). elements that encourage in-laws to push for immediate childbearing affect the way couples communicate about family planning decisions (Dixit et al., 2021). A decrease in parental support for daughters starting young produces an earlier marriage (Marphatia et al., 2021). Post-childbirth fertility rates in India present non-traditional patterns when compared to other countries which require targeted interventions that focus on gender norms education as well as promoting social equity to enhance reproductive outcomes (Khanna et al., 2018; Park et al., 2023).

### ***7.1.3 Influence of Panchayat and local norms:***

The employment odds of mothers receive negative impacts from gender norms because women who belong to patrilineal societies encounter higher barriers to work compared to matrilineal descent communities (A. Bedi et al., 2018). The panchayat system that establishes quotas for women in politics demonstrates social realities about gender that hinder fundamental empowerment efforts (B. Vissandjée et al., 2005). Women in panchayats continuously establish their status as rural leaders by efficiently overcoming social and economic barriers and societal stereotypes to join local governing bodies (Nirmala Buch, 2009). Studies have shown that rural motherhood in India takes various forms because it interacts with both embedded cultural traditions and transformations within political systems.

## ***7.2. Urban Motherhood***

### ***7.2.1 Nuclear families, career–motherhood conflict:***

Research investigates contemporary Indian middle-class metropolitan working mothers who show how they handle their dual responsibilities between career and maternal duties. Women are transforming conventional maternal roles by handling both social norms and personal growth objectives (Bhaumik & Sahu, 2021; Bhandarkar & Kulkarni, 2024). Gender inequalities intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic to make mothering more exhausting because working women took on heavier household duties and stress responsibilities (Mazumdar et al., 2023). As Indian mothers adjust to motherhood, they typically experience conflicts between different roles together with identity restructuring in their personal life (Bhandarkar & Kulkarni, 2024). Motherhood receives elevated status in India which results in mothers being trapped in domestic roles according to Shirodkar (2021). Research findings reveal that successful gender equality demands better policy support for unrecognized household work together with family responsibility sharing and maternal mental health backing (Mazumdar et al., 2023; Shirodkar, 2021).

### ***7.2.2 Access to childcare, modern parenting debates:***

The research examines how urban Indian mothers handle work alongside childhood duties. Working mothers in Kolkata are breaking traditional maternal standards through their efforts to seek career success (Bhaumik & Sahu, 2021). The extended "mothering load" faced by professionally engaged mothers grew worse during the COVID-19 pandemic because this situation unveiled gender-based inequalities in parenting duties and child care work (Mazumdar et al., 2023). Adult-child continuity education and character development take precedence for urban Indian parents because traditional and global influences merged by Gupta (2019). Urban Indian mothers have fewer employment opportunities although economic expansion and rising levels of female education have occurred because young children negatively affect mothers' work participation (Das & Zumbyte, 2017). Research demonstrates the importance of creating public policies which provide child-care support and recognize non-market housework and aim to advance gender equality to enhance employment opportunities for Indian mothers in urban areas.

### ***7.2.3 Access to childcare, modern parenting debates:***

Academic research now investigates how urban Indian mothers experience motherhood and practice child caregiving. J. J (2022) discovered that non-working mothers acquired better knowledge about child rearing while practicing superior caregiving methods than working mothers. The parenting methods of Indian parents focus on adult-child continuity and education values and developing character alongside their need to adapt to global parenting trends (A. Gupta, 2019). Despite social conventions women in urban India are pursuing the decision to not become mothers thus breaking traditional gender norms. Different parents have different motivations for leaving work to become sole caregivers since they seek independence while pursuing their personal aspirations (Chandni Bhambhani & A. Inbanathan, 2018). Various research demonstrates the changing patterns in child raising and motherhood across urban India which combines traditional family values with contemporary global trends.

## ***7.3. Tribal Motherhood***

### ***7.3.1 Communal child-rearing practices :***

Research investigations into maternal practices in different tribal communities of India confirm distinctive childrearing methods exist throughout various tribal groups. K. Seema & K. Begum (2008) presents evidence indicating Kuruba and Soliga tribes in South India share child care duties between parents yet motherhood work remains primarily within the maternal domain and fathers maintain discipline functions. The Bharia tribe located in Madhya Pradesh encounters specific problems in maternal health care and child-nurturing practices because their status as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) (Singh & Patel, 2021) makes them susceptible to healthcare issues. The child-rearing attitudes in Himachal Pradesh are impacted by socio-economic

conditions as well as cultural elements but contain several ongoing poor practices (Gupta & Sharma, 2022). A West Bengal PVTG population continues their ancestral child and maternal care methods while integrating knowledge of modern medical practices (Tarafdar, 2022). Research analyzes why tribal populations need supportive services that protect their diverse infant caregiving methods along with maternal healthcare needs.

### **7.3.2 Resistance to mainstream healthcare and education systems:**

The Indian tribal communities encounter major obstacles when they try to obtain healthcare services dedicated to maternal and child care. Multiple difficulties prevent service access including financial limitations, transportation difficulties, inadequate systems and cultural diversity patterns (Bharti et al., 2023; Madankar et al., 2024). Traditional cultural norms see pregnancy together with childbirth as natural events which produce reluctance toward hospital birth services (Contractor et al., 2018). Multiple risks such as harmful traditional cultural behaviors and restricted access to healthy diets result in unfavorable health conditions among mothers and their children (Madankar et al., 2024). Government initiatives for healthcare improvement through incentives have failed to lower maternal and infant mortality rates among tribal populations (Sengupta, 2019). Maternal health services require reorientation along cultural lines to ensure community trust along with the preservation of beneficial tribal traditions (Contractor et al., 2018). Behavior change interventions with socioeconomic condition remedies can enhance tribal communities' healthcare utilization statistics according to Sengupta (2019) and Madankar et al. (2024).

### **7.3.3 State vs. community autonomy :**

Multiple challenges and possibilities emerge from studies focused on tribal Indian maternal health care. Tribal women typically do well in making choices within their household settings but their involvement in community activities remains restricted thanks to limited education levels and joblessness (G. Das, 2012). Traditional practices acknowledge pregnancy as a natural process but practitioners choose community birth for most expectant mothers unless medical expertise becomes necessary during risks (S. Contractor et al., 2018). A higher level of autonomy among women leads to increased utilization of pregnancy care services particularly in South India as well as other factors relating to village-level infrastructure and healthcare access (Ritesh Mistry et al., 2009). Various risk elements negatively affect maternal and child health for tribal communities through practices harmful to them and unhealthy food access and healthcare facility accessibility (Minal Madankar et al., 2024). Maternal health improvement in tribal populations demands a service transformation into culturally respectful care alongside trust-building and protection of positive native customs and simultaneous elimination of economic barriers (S. Contractor et al., 2018).

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## **8. "Motherhood Reimagined: A Case Study of Iconic Indian Women"**

Traditional nurturing positions together with self-sacrificing roles have traditionally determined motherhood in the Indian cultural context. Multiple Indian women today have established unique definitions of motherhood through their actions which challenge traditional norms while breaking social barriers to showcase unconventional motherhood roles.

### **8.1. Single and Spinster Mothers: Choosing Motherhood on Their Own Terms :**

Indian women today deliberately exercise an independent decision to have children instead of considering motherhood as a traditional marital or domestic responsibility. These women resist judgement while demonstrating through their actions that love along with commitment and courage represent what makes a real mother instead of marriage status. The beauty queen Sushmita Sen broke social stereotypes in life by adopting both daughters as a 24-year-old unmarried woman. Through her brave choice she demonstrated how women possess complete authority over their bodies and emotions and show that women can create an encouraging atmosphere for their children without marriage. Continuing her role of motherhood brought her into the position of advising other women who chose divergent approaches to family and life legacy. Actress Neena Gupta gained attention in both her professional career and personal life upon choosing to be a single parent to fashion designer Masaba Gupta. During an era that heavily condemned single mothers within media industries Neena Gupta advocated her life choices with both truth and dignity. Her life demonstrates both persistence and dignity as she protects her daughter from criticism through her powerful relative independence. The actress and director Revathi joined the story of single motherhood when she adopted a child as her only parenthood experience. The actress displayed identical resolve in both her life and career by undermining traditional society's belief that only wedded women can be mothers. Her life story demonstrates the subtle social transformation where women embrace motherhood independently from outside approval. Bollywood actor and entrepreneur Sunny Leone made an interesting contribution to this discussion after she and her husband adopted Nisha from rural Maharashtra before having their twin children through surrogacy. The public stared at Sunny with disapproval for her past actions until she proved herself as a fully present and loving mother which ultimately transformed public perception about family building with love and honor. Her narrative demonstrates how transformation and acceptance led to motherhood which brought redemption to herself as much as to her children. This group of women has completely shifted how Indian society understands motherhood. As society evolves people understand better that motherhood emerges from loving dedication along with purposeful commitment and emotional strength rather than from marriage. They demonstrate that single and spinster motherhood represents both strength and power alongside courageousness rather than any kind of compromise.

## 8.2. *LGBTQ+ Mothers*

**LGBTQ+ Mothers: Redefining Motherhood Beyond Gender :** LGBTQ+ parenting in India is shaping new definitions of motherhood through its focus on love and care despite existing against biological and gender-related traditions. Their outstanding actions confirm that motherhood develops through learning experiences instead of inherent factors and parenting transcends biological boundaries of gender. Transgender activist Gauri Sawant from Mumbai embraced an orphaned girl whose biological mother perished from HIV/AIDS to create a new definition of motherhood. Gauri demonstrated a groundbreaking act within a hostile society by adopting this child because she approached parenthood through a combination of elegance and profound dedication and unwavering love. Her development as a caregiver is showcased through Vicks' "Touch of Care" campaigns which demonstrates that maternal care exists beyond physical boundaries. As a mother in life she embodies maternal character that perseveres through stigma while defending weak children and promoting equality between them all. This signifies motherhood as the choice to commit protection and support regardless of cultural antagonism. The position of college principal held by Manabi Bandopadhyay demonstrates an important aspect of transgender motherhood in India. She demonstrates motherly influence as an educator even though she does not fit the conventional definition of domestic parenthood. Through mentoring students she has supported several hundred to find strength and compassion which they perceive her as holding for them particularly among students who identify as queer or marginalized. As India struggles with social acceptance Manabi Prince functions as an example of the intellectual, emotional and moral potential of motherhood to emerge through regular caregiving activities and educational mentoring. Together Gauri and Manabi show how women must reject societal restrictions that bound only cisgender females to the motherhood term. Through their lives and options these two individuals demonstrate motherhood exists outside gender-specific rights because it represents the fundamental human practice of brave compassionate lengthy care. The two women serve as markers of inclusive family development that will help shape a future which constructs families through love and personal choice and absolute connection.

## 8.3. *Political Mothers*

The political office of these women showed their natural maternal competence through symbols or through dual performance of political authority and maternal duties. Kiran Bedi demonstrated how a disciplinarian mother can achieve justice combined with prisoner rehabilitation by showing that all individuals including criminals possess transformational potential as motherhood teaches us. She combined authority and warmth when raising her daughter with equal integrity that she extended to herself and others. The unmarried C.B. Muthamma campaigned against IFS gender discrimination while establishing opportunities for future female officials despite lacking biological children. She conducted her protest with quiet determination to demonstrate fair and moral principles while showing the matronly force that creates better prospects for the future of children. West Bengal governor Mamata Banerjee has gained the moniker "Didi" but people see her as both a maternal figure and protective strong leader through her way of governing that combines intense emotion with strong protection for her people and their needs while dedicating herself to women empowerment of the marginalized communities. During her time in office Sheila Dikshit former chief minister of Delhi applied her nurturing and visionary motherly qualities to transform Delhi into a modern city that combined efficient urban planning with cleanliness and human-centered design. She offered political guidance to her son through patient support and show of public values while maintaining her personal life. Former Diplomat, Meira Kumar, the diplomatic manner of combined with her emotional intelligence brought her success as the first female speaker of the Lok Sabha and as a mother. Ila Bhatt, deployed SEWA to raise numerous female self-employed individuals while strengthening their economic status and building solidarity between them and simultaneously caring for her family. These women accomplished institutional and community development through their vision combined with empathy and resilience and patience and moral clarity regardless of childbearing. The definition of true motherhood extends beyond biological relations because it represents both an approach to living and service work that actively protects and creates value greater than a single person.

## 8.4. *Mothers in Sports: Redefining Strength and Sacrifice*

Many Indian sportswomen contest the conventional thinking that motherhood should prevent athletes from achieving peak performance in sporting events because they combine these dual identities with exceptional success. Athletic mothers demonstrate motherhood does not reduce athlete identity instead it builds an athletic identity which obtains greater motivation together with unmatched determination and strengthened toughness. Mary Kom establishes the perfect example of achieving balance between athletics and motherhood through her position as six-time world boxing champion and Olympic medalist. The mother of four took even greater dedication after each pregnancy to exercise her boxing again along with nursing her babies and watching her developing children. Her life extends beyond medal-winning achievements because she represents an athlete who demonstrates steadfast mental resilience while making sacrifices to become stronger when people doubt her abilities. According to Mary her children served as motivation since she stated "I fight for my children." The birth of her son became a motivation for Sania Mirza to regain her tennis skills at Grand Slam level and establish her position as India's top female tennis star. The personal story of her life demonstrates both extreme discipline and a strong sense of self and the regaining of personal space in an environment that typically forgets about mothers. The sportswoman embodies more than athletic talent because she advocates for all working mothers who follow both child-rearing and career ambitions. Athletes Dipika Pallikal Karthik along with Anju Bobby George and numerous other female competitors make up a growing group that recognizes women's ability to simultaneously support families and achieve national victory. Through their accomplishments these women demonstrate that motherhood empowers us with the ability to multitask excellently under stress and to model exemplary leadership to others. Through their achievements these women demonstrate to younger people particularly girls around the world that family life and career goals can exist harmoniously. They represent a powerful shift: from viewing motherhood as an obstacle in sports to recognizing it as a profound source of strength, grounding, and inspiration.

## 9. Mothers as Agents of Social Justice, Resistance, and Community

Indian motherhood has expanded beyond household cares to develop into an agent for social opposition which combines compassionate action and transformative impact on systematic structures in the country. Maternal instincts empower certain women to provide comprehensive care for their families and lead their communities toward social progress during demanding situations.

### 9.1. Mothers as Social Justice Figures:

The Indian nation considers Savitri Bai Phule its first female instructor because she stands as the paradigm of Indian feminism. With her husband Jyotiba Phule she fought against discrimination while educating and helping women and Dalits even when faced by intense opposition. She gained fame for her approach to nurturing reform which produced future generations instead of creating traditional family units. Through both her literary writings and local advocacy activities Mahasweta Devi delivered messages of tribal mothers alongside disadvantaged people in her nation. Through her activism she protected communities by engaging in storytelling which empowered women and defended land properties. This showed how maternal care can exist through storytelling.

### 9.2. Mothers of Movements :

Irom Sharmila displayed motherly characteristics through her enduring nonviolent hunger strike which lasted 16 years while fighting the implementation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Her selfless cause arose from compassion for the lost children that allowed her to represent political motherhood together with silent determination. Muslim mothers from Shaheen Bagh emerged to lead anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) demonstrations when elderly female protesters including grandmothers maintained their position for extended weeks during civil action to display maternal defiance. While wearing traditional shawls these determined women converted their natural maternal understanding into public activism thus giving new meaning to maternal vocal power.

### 9.3. Community Mothers :

Sindhutai Sapkal who established herself as the "Mother of Orphans" nurtured 1,500 abandoned children through her maternal care and these children now support other children in their care. Her nurturing work without having children demonstrates that maternal essence comes from caring services and emotional understanding and establishing feelings of belonging with others. Women from Bastar and Kashmir and North-East regions lead on-the-ground rights movement activities to protect their children and their local communities including their cultural heritage. The civic nurturers of these communities transform their homes' kitchens and outdoor spaces into locations where they can resist oppression.

## 10. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The paper strives to open new perspectives on Indian motherhood through analysis of everyday lives from caregivers whose status differs from conventional patterns. Through the combination of intersectional feminist theory combined with social work approaches the analysis demonstrates that motherhood exists on a continuum because it both changes across society and faces opposition based on caste, class, regional and gender identities alongside disability and sexuality statuses. Maternal identities which vary across diverse groups remain hidden in public policy frameworks and welfare structures as well as cultural representations while causing both structural barriers and mental distress to these populations.

A justice-based approach should replace normative assumptions as the basis for developing maternal frameworks that lead to inclusive societies which support mothers and caregivers. Society needs to recognize caregiving duties as collective responsibilities which should not burden traditional families with sole female care providers.

### Institutional and Structural Policy Recommendations

#### Establish Creche Facilities Across Sectors

Apart from other constraints, working mothers face the absence of proper childcare facilities as an essential matter which does not allow mothers to balance their employment obligations in academic fields and healthcare and informal job sectors. All institutions should implement on-site crèches with flexible work organizations that serve every employee who needs care regardless of gender but whether they provide care responsibilities.

The government must provide complete support to parents who are single and unmarried along with members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Welfare programs together with adoption procedures and benefits in workplaces need to eliminate their dependency on marriage throughout the system. Government-established aid programs and adoption possibilities with health service access and housing assistance should support single women as well as LGBTQ+ individuals looking to care for and adopt children.

#### Inclusive Maternal Health and Mental Health Policy

Maternal health programs require modifications to serve better the medical needs of both Dalit, tribal, disabled and queer mothers. Mental health care systems need to accept every facet of maternal feelings starting from rage to ambivalence to burnout beyond medicalized traditional practices through efficiently built community programs.

### Collaborative Policy Formation

Maternal policies need to be developed by a team of caregivers along with grassroots leaders and feminist researchers and social workers to correctly reflect the realities of mothers. The policy development efforts need to harmonize with Sustainable Development Goals SDG 3, 5 and 16 to support health maintenance and promote equality and justice.

### Future Directions

The documentation of how marginalized mothers experience life needs additional research efforts in both Indian urban, tribal and rural areas. Mainstream data exclusion occurs frequently so qualitative and participatory research methods serve to collect such voices. Social work practitioners and feminist researchers and legal scholars must maintain collaboration to rebuild caregiving systems using an equalizing framework and structural justice standards and care ethics principles. Motherhood redefinition requires us to inquire about more than who provides care because it also asks who gets recognized as a mother. Future policy analysis and scholarship as well as activist efforts should be directed by the discovered answers.

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