

Women and Household Work: Everyday Realities of Middle-Class Homemakers in Lucknow

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the invisible world of household work undertaken by middle-class homemakers in Lucknow, highlighting its crucial role in shaping family and social life. Through qualitative interviews and personal stories, the study reveals how women's daily work extends far beyond cooking and cleaning. Their responsibilities include resolving family conflicts, providing emotional support, guiding children, and preserving cultural traditions. These homemakers act as the silent backbone of their homes, balancing new challenges brought by modernization with deep-rooted values. The findings underline that household work is not only physical effort but a complex blend of emotional care, relationship management, and cultural stewardship. Despite its significance, this work remains largely unrecognized and undervalued by society. By focusing on real experiences, the research calls for a shift in how housework is perceived—emphasizing that family and community wellbeing rely on respecting and supporting the central role of women's everyday contribution in homes. Recognizing this invisible work is essential for meaningful social progress.

Introduction

Home is often called the heart of a family, and at the center of this heart in many households are women whose daily work gives life to those around them. In Lucknow—a city known for its warmth, history, and culture—middle-class homemakers quietly shape the emotional and cultural worlds of their families. This research begins with the simple but powerful idea that housework is more than chores: it is woven through every meal prepared, story told, festival celebrated, and disagreement resolved. The routines of these women build community, pass on values, and bridge old traditions with today’s modern challenges. What does this mean in real life? It means a mother making Diwali sweets while teaching her children about heritage; a wife soothing household tensions; or a homemaker setting rules, keeping families together, and coping with being stretched thin. Their work, too often overlooked, holds families and communities together. By focusing on real voices and daily moments, this study seeks to illuminate their experiences and remind us that behind every peaceful home is a woman’s world of care, skill, and invisible strength.

Objectives

- To explore how middle-class homemakers in Lucknow manage household work in daily life.
- To understand how these women balance tradition and modern demands in their routines.
- To examine their emotional and cultural contributions to family well-being.
- To highlight the recognition and value society gives to their essential roles.

Research Questions

- How do middle-class homemakers in Lucknow manage household work in their daily routines?
- In what ways do these women balance traditional cultural practices and modern challenges?
- How does household work affect their emotional well-being and relationships within the family?
- What strategies do homemakers use to cope with stress and maintain harmony in their homes?
- How are the social recognition and value of homemakers’ work perceived in urban Lucknow society?

Methodology

This research used a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth interviews with a structured questionnaire to capture the experiences of middle-class homemakers in Lucknow. Participants were selected by purposive sampling from diverse family types. Interviews (conducted in Hindi) focused on daily routines, emotional challenges, and cultural practices. The questionnaire ensured both statistical context and personal stories, allowing even illiterate women to participate through oral responses. Ethical considerations included informed consent and confidentiality, ensuring authentic and inclusive data collection.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses three sociological frameworks to understand household work in a way that feels real and relevant to everyday life. Social reproduction theory helps explain why the invisible, unpaid work women do at home is vital for the survival and happiness of families and society—work like cooking, cleaning, and caring for others forms the backbone of daily living. Gender display theory shows how certain jobs at home reinforce traditional ideas about what it means to be a woman, shaping not just habits but also self-esteem and public respect. Finally, structuration theory points out that while women may feel limited by old customs or family rules, they also find ways to exercise choice and reshape their routines, often blending tradition with new opportunities. Taken together, these lenses reveal that household work is much more than a set of tasks—it’s about relationships, pride, and quietly changing what it means to be a homemaker in modern Lucknow.

Literature Review

The literature on women’s household work in India reveals a world where daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring—are deeply gendered, woven into cultural identity, and often undervalued by both families and society. Classic feminist studies like those of Ann Oakley (1974) and Arlie Hochschild (1989) have emphasized how women’s work forms the unseen foundation of family and community life, yet rarely receives recognition or status. In the Indian context, scholars highlight that these responsibilities are shaped by patriarchal norms, where being a “good” homemaker is tied to ideals of sacrifice, nurture, and respectability (Menon, 2012; Ray & Qayum, 2009).

Even as the economy and education expand opportunities for women, middle-class homemakers remain primarily responsible for the emotional and practical management of home. Data shows urban Indian women spend three times longer on unpaid work than men, a gap that holds true regardless of education or income (NSSO, 2019). Class and caste complicate this picture: many in the urban middle class employ domestic workers from poorer backgrounds, creating new power dynamics but not necessarily redistributing the household burden (Dickey, 2000; Ray & Qayum, 2009).

Recent research suggests household work is also critical for transmitting tradition and sustaining cultural identity, especially in cities like Lucknow where joint family systems, syncretic customs, and modern influences coexist. Authors like Uberoi (2005) and Donner (2008) reveal how homemakers, through everyday rituals and family stories, bridge the past and future, shaping not only homes but broader social values. Despite growth in women’s employment, the “double burden” of paid and unpaid work persists, with growing stress and little societal acknowledgment (Chauhan, 2017).

Taken together, this literature highlights the need to recognize housework as both essential and complex, combining physical, emotional, and cultural labor that sustains not just families but social life in modern urban India

Key Findings and Personal Stories

Emotional Work

Priya, a graduate homemaker, shared: “Last month, my husband and his brother fought over family property. I spent hours listening, trying to calm them. I barely slept. The mood of the house depends on me, but sometimes, it’s exhausting. People think only work outside is real—housework takes more out of me.” Neha, another interviewee, said: “When my husband’s work stresses him, I listen, make tea, try to cheer him up—but I keep my own worries hidden.” Both described themselves as “the glue” holding families together, but admitted the pressure sometimes gets overwhelming.

Preserving Traditions

During Diwali, Priya taught her children to make sweets and draw rangoli, but felt frustrated when they preferred phones to stories. Neha tries to teach chikankari embroidery and Janmashtami rituals, but often finds her daughter distracted by cartoons. Their commitment to passing on values and customs is strong, but technology and busy lives make it more challenging.

Raising Children

Child discipline often merges stories, culture, and clear rules. Anjali set strict phone-free dinner times and told family histories to encourage respect. Priya uses stories from the Ramayana to guide honesty and routine. These actions reveal how women shape future generations—not just through discipline, but through culture and example.

Implications and Suggestions

- Household work deserves recognition not just as chores, but as vital emotional and cultural work.
- Programs and policies should value homemakers’ contributions, with opportunities for community connection, emotional support, and social recognition.
- More research—across cities and classes—can deepen understanding and foster change towards valuing women’s home work in society.

Conclusion

Women’s household work in Lucknow is a story of strength, skill, and quiet resilience. Though often called a “woman’s world,” home is far more than a site of chores—it’s a place where women manage relationships, care for loved ones, teach values, and preserve culture, sewing together the daily fabric of family life. Discussion on this topic reveals that homemakers are not just keeping houses running; they are the architects of emotional safety, routine, and heritage. Every meal prepared, every festival organized, and every conflict resolved is a moment where women shape the heart and memory of their households.

The study’s findings highlight that, while household work is invisible in formal statistics and too often undervalued, it demands extraordinary emotional and organizational intelligence. Women navigate challenges such as the lure of technology for children, modern stresses, changing family structures, and persistent traditional expectations. Many manage

helpers from different social backgrounds, negotiate tension between tradition and modernity, and create homes where the values of Lucknow's rich culture blend with new ways of living. Beyond the practical, their work fosters resilience and hope: by passing on traditions, setting routines, and offering emotional care, they guide families through conflict and growth.

Crucially, society's recognition of this work is still lacking. The conclusion draws attention to the urgent need for respect, support, and visibility for homemakers, calling on families and policymakers to reevaluate what counts as valuable work. Only by truly seeing and honoring the woman behind the work can we build fairer families and communities, where her contribution is fully celebrated—not just in words, but in daily practice and public life. Recognizing women's household work is the foundation for real social progress and a more inclusive future.

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