

## [The Working Mother](#)

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## The Working Mother

The Hindu tradition has been for the mother to stay within her home and care for her family. In recent years women worldwide have started to take employment outside the home. The impact of this trend is a major issue of our time, and not just among Hindus. In a three-part series we listen to both sides-mothers who defend homemaking as a duty and dharma and others who feel the inherited patterns of yesterday need rethinking.

Rani Thilaganathan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

It was May, 1969. Malaysia was at a crossroads. Nightmarish racial riots erupted in our fragile multi-ethnic land, bringing a nationwide curfew. While licking our wounds, the national conscience contemplated its next move. In a small terrace-house in the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur, a family faced another crossroads-should a career-conscious mom continue her teaching job or quit and look after the four children? With the nation's future looking so fraught with social unrest and uncertainty, she easily chose to stay home with her children.

Fast forward to 1995, one generation later, to a relatively stable, upbeat cosmopolitan society. Another mom faces a similar decision. After years of employment, she opts to continue. Her reasoning is quite simple. Money. Money which allows her and her spouse to provide their children a better edge in life-as well as give her exposure to the modern world, greater independence and increased self-satisfaction.

Shanti Thiruchelvan, 32, epitomizes the 90s mother juggling both a career and motherhood. She has two bright, energetic little girls-Kaeshaelya, 4, and Lavinyaa, 18 months, whom she leaves in the care of her parents and an Indonesian maid. "I

find it a satisfying arrangement," she shared with Hinduism Today. "They stay with my mother from Monday to Thursday night. My husband and I take turns to spend weeknights with them in mom's house. Come Friday, we pack the kids and the maid and return home. They stay with us through the weekend, and Monday morning go back to mom's place. It's exhausting for us, but the kids seem to enjoy the adventure, but also look forward to coming home."

Does all this shuttling and juggling from house to house leave much time for quality bonding in the Thiruchelvan family? "There are days when we both return from work exhausted," Shanti admits. "But we've made it a point to spend time with the children, particularly my eldest girl. She's at the age when she asks lots of questions and expects answers. We don't believe in lying to her. Being a working woman has helped open my eyes and mind. Because I am exposed, I tend to have an informed and realistic view when answering her."

And what if there was no mother or maid? "If I'm ever faced with that choice, I'll quit work, and maybe find something to do from home," Shanti said firmly.

Renuga Savari (not her real name) is another mother who's juggling a job and a family. She has three children, ages six to fifteen. Her husband works as a mechanic. "I don't think of myself as a career woman per se, but I can't see myself not working. We need the additional income. It's helped us acquire this house (a three-room terrace). And for that, I'm happy. Today, I don't think it's possible for an average family to survive on one man's income. We have a joint monthly household income of US\$950. After deductions, we have only US\$600. With this, still the children don't get all that they wish, but we give them the best we can."

Like so many other mothers, Renuga is not without occasional doubts. Some nights she reflects on how fast her kids are growing up and wonders whether it is right to leave them on their own so much during these years. She confides, "There is guilt. There have been important milestones and concerts of theirs which I've missed. I've wished to have been there but... Then whenever I feel this guilt, I think of what it was like with my mother. She had seven kids and worked as domestic help. I didn't have half the things my children have. For instance, last year we took them to see the movie Beauty and the Beast and recently The Lion King. It's not something we can afford all the time, but we don't say no. We try to take a short inexpensive holiday once a year."

Renuga is typical of young women nowadays who tend to evaluate their performance as mothers mostly by what they can give the children that they themselves never got-money for movies, fashionable clothes and holiday trips.

For Renuga, an average day begins at 5:30 am. She prepares lunch for the kids and catches a 6:30 bus to work. Her husband serves the kids breakfast and sends the eldest two off to school before leaving for work at 8:00 am. A neighbor looks after the two that are too young for school until the eldest daughter returns from school in the afternoon. "My husband doesn't have much free time. He works long hours. I'm mostly home by 6:00 pm, and then it's cooking dinner and making sure the kids do their homework," she says.

Ranjini Rasalingam worked in a commercial bank where she enjoyed a measure of financial independence, friends and career mobility. She was a mother, with supporting parents and in-laws, and a reliable maid. Late last year, following the birth of her second child, Suhanya and a lot of soul-searching, Ranjini opted to quit the bank and concentrate her energies on raising her son, Kavin Raj, 4, and her baby. "The crux I think was when my maid deserted me and I wasn't too keen on leaving Kavin at the baby sitters. When I was in the office during the day, I was always thinking about how he was. There was just no peace of mind. And later when Suhanya came along, I found that I couldn't remember any of Kavin's milestones, like when he first started eating rice or when his teeth came out. It was depressing. I think that was when I decided to leave the job."

Declining the offer of a maid she decided to take complete charge of her own home and family. The initial months were tough, both on her and the family finances. "I missed my friends, workplace and the lunches. We had to tighten our belt, and the children seem to need my constant attention. There were the other domestic chores to handle as well," she said. Her pining for the office didn't last long. "There were just too many things to do and no time to think. But what I did discover was that domestic life is exhausting. I never used to feel so tired when I worked. But these days, by the time evening comes, I'm drop-dead exhausted," she said.

So although she is physically in the home and not at the office, are the children getting quality time from her? Oddly, Ranjini isn't really sure. "I'm there for them. I take care of their physical needs, but I'm too tired for anything else. Usually when their father comes back, I insist he concentrate on the children. I don't expect him

to do anything but focus his attention on the kids," she relates.

Saraswathy worked as a clerk for 15 years, then opted to quit. With four growing children, it seemed only sensible. Her husband couldn't have agreed more. That was 20 years ago. Today the children are grown up and well settled in life.

Hinduism Today asked her just how the decision came about. She shared, "My daughter had just reached puberty, around 13. I was working. That meant I came home about 7:00 pm every evening. One day I came home and she's wasn't back from school. Nobody seemed to know where she was. I called the school, but they didn't know either. That was for me the moment when I decided family came before all else. As it turned out, nothing untoward happened. My husband had taken her to visit her uncle in Klang and left a note which I didn't notice. Still, it's difficult to explain how I felt at that moment when it seemed that she hadn't come back. We'd been spending less and less time with each other. She was so busy with school, extra classes and friends-friends that I honestly did not even know anything about.

"From the moment I began my new `career' as a housewife, I did not allow myself to wallow in self-pity. A side of me missed the independence and freedom, but I never indulged it. I got into a new routine. Each day I'd wake the kids, drive them to school, come home, prepare lunch and then pick them up again from school and so on.

"Because I had the time, I started teaching my children their native language, Tamil, at home. We made a game out of it. The younger ones copied the older ones. Looking back, I have no regrets. My children have done me proud, and for that I have to thank God for guiding my decision 20 years ago."

### More Money for the Kids

The fact is, a majority of mothers in Malaysia hold outside jobs-part-time, full-time or some time during their child-raising years. To baby-sit their kids during day hours, over 200 daycare centers have sprung up in Kuala Lumpur alone, with prices ranging from US\$40 a month to \$100. And that doesn't include food.

With so many working mothers, babysitting has become big business. The government's Welfare Ministry even organizes childcare courses ranging from six weeks to three months. Those intending to open day care centers must be licensed.

Little or no social stigma is attached to a mom's working-in the sense that she is considered neglectful of her children. And only a few grannies talk about sthree dharma,"a woman's dharma," child-raising and homemaking, as a mother's full-time duty in life. And their talk tends to be more nostalgic, reminiscing of blitheful days making kolam designs, preparing for festivals and making sweets for children than in criticizing today's money-making moms. \*

Rani Thilaganathan is a free-lance journalist and TV documentary maker living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.