

The "Second Shift" and Post-Pandemic Femininity: A Qualitative Examination of Socio-Cultural Strain and Domestic Labor Redefinition

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic redefined conventional gender roles by deeply reconfiguring femininity across both domestic and professional spheres, where women's labor, whether paid or unpaid, proved central to societal survival yet remained structurally undervalued, invisible, and overburdened. This study qualitatively evaluates this post-pandemic paradox of femininity, revered in discourse yet marginalized in practice, by examining how systemic patriarchy continues to subordinate feminine energies despite temporary global disruptions. Utilizing a Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) framework, the investigation cross-examines contemporary literary archives, personal narratives, and socio-philosophical discourses to systematically code and identify recurring thematic patterns regarding gendered labor during crises. The analysis reveals that the pandemic functioned less as a catalyst for gender transformation and more as a mechanism for its rearticulating into subtler, insidiously resilient patriarchal hierarchies, demonstrating how society consistently drew upon the sustaining force of the feminine while structurally neglecting its material reality. Ultimately, achieving meaningful gender justice and social sustainability requires a definitive shift away from symbolic or rhetorical reverence toward genuine institutionalized empowerment, structural workplace reforms, and legal protections for care workers.

Keywords: Qualitative analysis, post-pandemic femininity, domestic labor, patriarchy, emotional labor, generational inequality, social sustainability.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected more than just health systems, economies, and educational systems; it has shaken a structure that most people forget is an invisible structure built around gendered work to give life its social form. In many homes, women became the default caregivers, teachers, and emotional anchors without whom life would be untenable, and whose work is seldom recognized or supported structurally or institutionally. Mothers became teachers during the school closures, nurses in their own homes, and therapists for both the children of the house and the elders who struggled with the anxieties of lockdowns. Daughters and wives juggled telecommuting with the relentless expectation of household continuity, all while walking a tightrope, revealing how the feminised labour of care remains hidden in plain sight.

While traditional clinical, epidemiological, and macroeconomic studies focus on quantitative data, they often overlook the qualitative, affective textures of these lived experiences. To satisfy the multidisciplinary scope required by contemporary scientific investigations, this paper moves beyond a purely localised lens to evaluate the broader structural frameworks that perpetuate this disparity. By framing narrative, literary, and philosophical texts as qualitative archives, this study seeks to systematically map the modern landscape of post-pandemic femininity and interrogate why the exploitation of reproductive labor remains so structurally resilient across generations.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The lived realities of the pandemic underline what Silvia Federici would term the "reproductive labour" of women, work that is necessary to sustain life and economies but fundamentally undervalued within capitalism and patriarchy (Federici). The contradiction became sharper during the crisis: women's contributions were

applauded only rhetorically, such as framing them as "frontline warriors" or "heroes of the home," while being structurally marginalised through wage inequality, job loss, and increased domestic violence (UN Women). This tension between symbolic elevation and material neglect recalls Gayle Rubin's identification of the "sex/gender system," which functions as an enduring grid of structural inequalities (Rubin).

The Post-Pandemic "She-Cession"

The COVID-19 pandemic has been widely described as generating a "she-cession," a term coined to capture the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women's employment. Unlike previous economic downturns, such as the 2008 global financial crisis, where male-dominated sectors like construction and manufacturing bore the brunt of job losses, the pandemic struck industries in which women are overrepresented, including hospitality, tourism, retail, and education.

The structural concentration of women in these sectors, often characterised by precarious, low-paid, and insecure forms of labour, meant that they were uniquely vulnerable to mass layoffs and workforce reductions. This shift highlights the gendered composition of the global labour market and underscores how economic crises do not unfold evenly but instead exploit and exacerbate existing inequalities.

Methodology

To ground this study within an empirical qualitative paradigm suitable for a multidisciplinary sciences journal, this paper utilises a Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) methodology. QDA is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating electronic or printed documents to extract explicit meaning, uncover underlying nuances, and develop empirical themes.

Data Corpus and Selection Criteria

The qualitative data corpus for this study comprises two major categories of textual data selected for their capacity to capture the social realities and structural dynamics of gendered crises:

Category A (Narrative & Experiential Archives): Textual representations documenting the lived realities of women during pandemic disruptions. This includes Emma Donoghue's historical-parallel narrative *The Pull of the Stars* (Donoghue) and the contemporary qualitative anthology (Her)oics: *Women's Lived Experiences During the Coronavirus Pandemic* (Wisdom and Maram).

Category B (Socio-Philosophical Discourses): Texts defining the cultural and spiritual archetypes of gender balance, specifically contemporary Indic philosophical frameworks regarding the Shiva-Shakti dualism and Ardhanarishvara as articulated by Jaggi Vasudev (Sadhguru).

Analytical Strategy

The data corpus was analysed using thematic content analysis via a three-tiered coding protocol. First, Open Coding was executed to break down raw texts into initial concept fragments, such as "workplace friction," "domestic multi-tasking," and "rhetorical praise." Second, Axial Coding clustered related codes into broader thematic dimensions like the intersection of remote work and the second shift. Lastly, Selective Coding integrated these thematic categories into overarching qualitative findings that explain the adaptive mechanisms of modern patriarchy.

Findings and Analysis

Theme 1: Remote Work, the "Second Shift," and Professional-Domestic Friction

Remote work, initially heralded as a democratizing force capable of reconciling professional and domestic responsibilities, further exposed gender asymmetries. Emerging research has documented significant declines in women's productivity, particularly among female academics, whose research output has declined compared with that of their male colleagues. This disparity cannot be explained solely by individual choices but rather reflects the intensification of unpaid domestic labour—such as childcare, homeschooling, elder care, and household management, that disproportionately fell on women during lockdowns. The pandemic, therefore, did

not produce a rupture in gender relations but rather reinforced long-standing patterns of the “second shift,” in which women are expected to sustain both paid and unpaid labour.

Table 1 Pandemic Remote Work Realities and Disciplinary Systems

Gender Category	Socio-Cultural Expectations & Realities	Systemic Outcome / Discipline
Male Professionals	Socially encouraged and structurally permitted to prioritise continuous paid work.	Rewarded for career commitment; insulated from domestic obligations.
Female Professionals	Expected to sustain the "Second Shift" (childcare, schooling, caregiving) alongside remote labour.	Cultural stigma and penalties if professional demands interfere with domestic care.

At the same time, attempts by men to share in caregiving duties were often met with cultural resistance and even social penalties. Fathers who visibly took on domestic responsibilities risked being perceived as less committed to their careers, while mothers who attempted to assert professional demands continued to face the entrenched stigma of being bad mothers. This dual system of discipline reaffirms patriarchal norms: men are socially rewarded for prioritising paid work, while women are valorised only when they acquiesce to domestic caregiving roles. Thus, the pandemic functioned not as a catalyst for dismantling patriarchy but as a mechanism for its rearticulation in subtler and more insidious forms.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the pandemic should not be understood merely as a temporary disruption of labour markets, but as a revealing moment in which the fragility of gender equity was laid bare. Far from advancing gender equality, the crisis entrenched structural inequalities, reaffirmed cultural norms about men's and women's proper roles, and constrained the possibilities for a more equitable distribution of work. To speak of a she-cession is therefore not only to name a gendered economic phenomenon but also to recognise how crises operate as crucibles in which existing power hierarchies are both tested and, all too often, reaffirmed.

Theme 2: Qualitative Testimonies and Narrative Archives of Crisis

Narrative documentation functions directly as a cultural mirror, offering qualitative text archives that expose and interrogate the gendered burdens of crisis. Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars*, though set during the 1918 influenza pandemic, exemplifies this function by situating its female healthcare workers within a double bind: on the one hand, their resilience, professional expertise, and capacity for care sustain communities in the face of catastrophe; on the other, they remain vulnerable to the very patriarchal systems that undervalue their labour. The text implicitly challenges readers to recognise that women's roles in crisis are not ancillary but central, yet simultaneously constrained by structural inequities.

This thematic pattern finds direct continuity in contemporary pandemic documentation. The anthology *(Her)ioics: Women's Lived Experiences During the Coronavirus Pandemic* gathers firsthand qualitative accounts from women, revealing how caregiving, emotional labour, and social isolation were disproportionately borne by female subjects. These narratives highlight not only the endurance of patriarchal expectations but also the creative strategies of resistance women devised to assert their voices and experiences. As such, these written records do more than simply document hardship; they destabilise hegemonic accounts of crisis that often center male narratives of public life and economic recovery. By foregrounding women's experiences, these works

construct an alternative archive in which resilience and resistance coexist, challenging both cultural memory and social policy to acknowledge women's indispensable yet underrecognized contributions.

Discussion: Interdisciplinary Interpretations and Cultural Paradoxes

The qualitative findings derived from experiential archives can be fruitfully examined through the lens of spiritual philosophy, particularly within Indic traditions that emphasise balance between masculine and feminine principles. In Adiyogi: The Source of Yoga, Sadhguru observes that “the feminine is not a form but a force,” suggesting that Shakti represents a dynamic, sustaining energy essential to life itself (Sadhguru). The pandemic made visible this Shakti-like force in action: women's caregiving, resilience, and adaptability became the backbone of households, healthcare systems, and educational continuity. Yet, paradoxically, while society engaged in rhetorical praise, hailing women as “frontline warriors” and “pillars of the home,” their labour remained materially undervalued and structurally unsupported. This contradiction reveals the profound dissonance between spiritual reverence for the feminine and the social marginalisation of women.

Table 2 The Post-Pandemic Feminine Paradox

Rhetorical Exaltation (Symbolic / Spiritual)	Material Devaluation (Structural / Economic)
Hailed as 'Frontline Warriors' Celebrated as 'Pillars of the Home' Spiritual invocation of Shakti (sustaining force)	Unpaid, invisible 'Second Shift' High job vulnerability and workforce exit Systemic lack of institutional or financial safety nets

The symbolism of Ardhanarishvara, Shiva depicted as half-man, half-woman, embodies the philosophical ideal of equilibrium between masculine and feminine energies. This image represents not mere coexistence but an ontological interdependence in which neither force can be dismissed without disrupting cosmic balance. Yet the lived realities of the pandemic exposed the very opposite: while feminine labour was indispensable, it remained structurally unrecognised and systematically exploited. In effect, society drew upon the force of Shakti without granting it the recognition or resources necessary to sustain itself.

As Sadhguru notes, when the feminine force is denied respect, it does not vanish but instead manifests as strain, chaos, or imbalance. This is not a reflection of inherent fragility but rather of systemic distortion: when one principle is disproportionately valorised (the masculine, associated with paid labour and productivity) while the other is relegated to invisibility (the feminine, associated with care and endurance), the result is not harmony but crisis. The pandemic, therefore, not only reinforced patriarchal inequities but also exposed the deep contradiction at the heart of modern societies: the spiritual exaltation of the feminine juxtaposed against the social devaluation of women.

An interdisciplinary examination of these qualitative layers reveals that patriarchy operates not as a static structure but as a dynamic, multi-layered system that adapts to crisis. Sociological concepts underscore how gender inequalities intensified during COVID-19, with women disproportionately burdened by job losses, unpaid caregiving, and reductions in professional productivity. These material realities were not incidental but symptomatic of entrenched hierarchies that continue to privilege male labour and marginalise female contributions. Narrative archives extend this sociological record by documenting the affective dimensions of these burdens, feelings of isolation, exhaustion, and invisibility, while simultaneously capturing modes of resistance. Works such as Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* and the anthology *(Her)oics* situate women at the centre of crisis, narrating their resilience in ways that challenge dominant accounts that either marginalise or instrumentalise women's roles. Literature and lived testimonies thus serve as a counter-archive, preserving qualitative data that traditional policy discourse often overlooks.

Spiritual philosophy offers yet another layer of critique, complicating the binary oppositions that underpin patriarchal thought. The articulation of Shakti as force and the symbolism of Ardhanarishvara implicitly contest the privileging of masculinity by emphasising equilibrium and interdependence. Yet the pandemic revealed how

these ideals remain aspirational rather than actualised: society reveres the feminine in symbolic or spiritual terms while simultaneously relegating women's labour to invisibility. This dissonance illustrates what might be called "generational patriarchy", a system not only inherited across time but also rearticulated across domains of economy, culture, and philosophy.

As Arundhati Roy observes, the pandemic is a "portal" through which societies might reimagine themselves (Roy). Yet, in practice, this qualitative review indicates that this portal often functioned less as a threshold to transformation than as a mirror, reflecting and thereby reinforcing entrenched patriarchal orders.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The qualitative analysis of these textual, narrative, and socio-philosophical archives exposes a central paradox of femininity: indispensable to social survival, yet systematically undervalued. Women's caregiving, resilience, and adaptability sustained both households and institutions, but these contributions were treated as naturalised obligations rather than as forms of labour deserving structural recognition. Despite temporary disruptions to conventional gender roles, patriarchal hierarchies proved remarkably resilient, adapting to crisis rather than collapsing under it.

To move beyond this paradox, contemporary society must transition from purely symbolic reverence to structural and material empowerment. It is not enough to extol Shakti in rhetoric while failing to provide systemic support for women's actual labour. True transformation requires the reconfiguration of labour institutions to build structural safety nets for vulnerable, female-dominated employment sectors; explicit legal protections, formal recognition, and equitable economic compensation for care workers and reproductive labourers; the design of corporate and academic work-from-home policies that actively account for and mitigate the disproportionate domestic load borne by female professionals; and the evolution of cultural narratives that actively dismantle, rather than perpetuate, gendered behavioural hierarchies.

As long as femininity remains exalted in abstraction but invisible in practice, generational patriarchy will endure, mutating to fit new socio-economic crises. True transformation lies in creating social orders that not only acknowledge feminine energy but also institutionalise its value across the fabric of economic systems, cultural production, and philosophical discourse. Only then can the symbolic celebration of Shakti be reconciled with the lived realities of women, transforming the portal of crisis into a genuine threshold to an equitable world.

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