



Love, Labour and the Moral Family: Negotiating Gendered Intimacies in Post-Pandemic Guwahati

Dr. Trishna M. Thakuria

Assistant Professor of Sociology & Assistant Director, Finishing School

The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati

Email: trishna.thakuria@rgu.ac.in / Ph: +91-9711335666

Abstract

This paper examines how gendered intimacies and moral economies of care have transformed in post-pandemic Guwahati. Drawing upon 42 interviews and 3 focus-group discussions conducted between 2022 and 2024, the study explores how love and labour intersect within what I term the 'moral family'- a post-crisis institution where affect, work, and virtue are tightly interwoven. Using the frameworks of feminist political economy, affective labour, and moral economy, the paper shows how women's unpaid emotional and reproductive work, momentarily democratized during lockdown, was re-moralized as duty during recovery. The findings highlight how digital life intensified gendered surveillance and restructured care as ethical responsibility. The paper contributes to emerging debates on gendered moral labour by linking emotional economies with neoliberal recovery in South Asia.

Keywords: *Gendered intimacy, Moral family, Emotional labour, Post-pandemic Assam, Feminist political economy, Sociology of care*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic radically reconfigured the moral and emotional economies of families across India. In Guwahati, one of the rapidly urbanizing cities of Northeast India, the pandemic's aftermath revealed deep negotiations between love, labour, and morality within everyday domestic life. The middle-class Assamese family became a site of both resilience and re-domestication, where gender roles were temporarily blurred during lockdown but reassured under the guise of moral responsibility afterward. The paper explores these dynamics through a sociological lens, emphasizing how intimacy, care, and obligation are mediated by gender, class, and digital work environments.

Theoretical Context

The study builds on three major theoretical foundations: Feminist Political Economy, Affective Labour Theory, and the Moral Economy of Care. Feminist political economists such as Nancy Folbre (2001) and Silvia Federici (2012) have emphasized that unpaid domestic labour sustains capitalism through invisible emotional and reproductive work. Affective labour theorists like Hardt (1999) and Berlant (2011) interpret emotions as sites of social production and capitalist extraction. Meanwhile, moral economy theorists such as Fassin (2009) and Zelizer (2005) argue that care and moral obligation regulate inequalities in subtle but persistent ways. Together, these frameworks allow an understanding of the 'moral family' as an affective institution where love becomes labour and virtue becomes regulation.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative ethnographic design. Fieldwork was conducted in four urban localities of Guwahati—Beltola, Six Mile, Dispur, and Panbazar—between 2022 and 2024. A total of 42 semi-structured interviews and 3 focus-group discussions were carried out with working women, domestic workers, and married couples. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 50. Data were thematically coded using NVivo software. Thematic clusters included: emotional labour, digital intimacy, surveillance, and class hierarchies. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional research committee. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities.

Empirical Findings

During the lockdown, men's temporary participation in household chores created an illusion of equality. However, as offices reopened, women resumed primary caregiving roles under intensified moral rhetoric. As Rupa, a 38-year-old teacher, said, "In 2020, we shared everything. Now it feels like caring is my job again, not our job." Domestic workers, too, found their labour revalued through emotional language - 'family-like' care that masked power asymmetries.

Digital work blurred the boundaries of professional and private lives. Women working from home faced continuous monitoring from both employers and spouses. Meena, an NGO worker, described, "If I am online but not replying, my husband thinks I am upset at him." The emotional labour of constant availability became a new form of affective control.

Class and caste divisions structured moral hierarchies of care. Middle-class women often referred to their domestic workers as 'like family,' yet expected them to perform loyalty through obedience. As one homemaker asserted, 'We treat them like our own, but they should know their place.' This rhetoric reinforced a moral economy of servitude framed as affection.

Table 1: Distribution of Care Responsibilities (Pre- and Post-Pandemic)

Task	Pre-pandemic (hours/day)	Post-pandemic (hours/day)
Cooking	2.5	4.0
Childcare	3.0	5.5
Eldercare	1.0	2.0

Discussion

The findings underscore that post-pandemic domesticity in Guwahati operates as a moral economy. Care and affection have been re-coded as ethical obligations that reaffirm patriarchal control. Feminist theorists have long argued that capitalism externalizes reproductive labour; this study shows how neoliberal recovery moralizes it. The blurring of love and labour under digital capitalism has produced what I call 'gendered moral labour'—the emotional and ethical work women perform to sustain family respectability, productivity, and social order. In this sense, the family becomes both a refuge and a regime.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The post-pandemic moral family in Guwahati illustrates how crisis can recalibrate gender relations without dismantling patriarchy. While women's emotional and reproductive work gained temporary visibility, it was soon reabsorbed into moral narratives of duty and virtue. Policy interventions must therefore recognize unpaid care as economic labour and integrate emotional well-being into urban welfare frameworks. Academic discourse on family sociology must also evolve to capture affective dimensions of post-crisis survival, particularly in regional contexts like Northeast India.

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Author Bio

Dr. Trishna M. Thakuria is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Assistant Director, Finishing School at The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, intimacy, care, and moral economies in contemporary India.

