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Bridging the gender gap in leisure travel: A feminist netnography

Introduction

We generally recognize that leisure is a fundamental human need (Sivan & Veal, 2021), with the United Nations going so far as to declare it a universal human right 75 years ago (UN General Assembly, 1948). Yet, we also know that women suffer an incredible gap when it comes to leisure (Freysinger et al., 2013; Henderson, 2015; Jackson & Henderson, 1995), particularly mothers (Craig & Mullan, 2013). This gap was substantially widened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with women seeing an alarming increase in unpaid work time (İlkkaracan & Memiş, 2021). This coincided with a reduction in leisure travel to near zero for at least several months. Women, especially mothers, were immediately thrust into the competing roles of caretakers, educators, teachers, cooks, housekeepers, and emotional support systems, often while trying to maintain full-time work from home. They also lacked critical social structures that have historically infused women's lives with pleasure, fulfillment, and satisfaction that can occur within the constraints of domestic work (Henderson & Rannells, 1988). Fathers also had to balance some of this, but the research overwhelmingly shows that mothers took on the bulk of extra labor (O'Reilly, 2020; İlkkaracan & Memiş, 2021). While leisure travel is rebounding, the scarce research that exists suggests that women are not reaping the majority of benefits. If we want to make the world a more equitable place for women and mothers, it is essential to unpack how longstanding patriarchal structures constrain our right to leisure and holiday travel. This paper interrogates the process of family travel and seeks to understand whether women take on unbalanced labor even within the context of leisure travel. This paper looks primarily at 2-parent heterosexual relationships to understand how labor is divided when planning, enjoying, and returning from family vacations.

Literature Review

Henderson (2015) explains that, "Feminism is an ideology and a social political movement" (p. 26). One goal of feminist theory is to problematize the view of women as partial helpmates to men (Beasley, 1999), where they are defined in terms of men's needs (e.g., regarding pleasure, provisioning services, bearing children). Feminists have long questioned the oppressive nature of the institution of heterosexual marriage (Jeffreys, 2005). During the second-wave of feminism in the 1970s, feminist theorists criticized marriage as an inherently patriarchal and political structure, designed to keep women under the control of men (Millet, 1970). Yet, Jeffreys (2005) suggested that women, including self-proclaimed feminists, have either rejected or forgotten these criticisms in the preceding decades.

Henderson (1989) defines leisure time as that where individuals are free to do whatever they wish beyond daily work and maintenance activities. Hochschild and Machung (1989) identified a leisure gap, where working women were subject to a second-shift of unpaid labor at home after returning from paid labor outside the home. The COVID-19 pandemic extended the first and second shifts described by to virtually round-the-clock work, with no chance for rest and rejuvenation. Some research suggests that country characteristics can moderate women's ability to use free time to relax and recover (Yerkes, et al., 2020), yet, time use surveys across countries show that available time for leisure dramatically decreased for women during COVID lockdowns (Giurge et al., 2021).

In Turkey, İlkaracan and Memiş (2021) found that women's unpaid labor increased from 2.85 to 4.49 hours/day, while men's increased from 0.27 to 1.13 hours per day. In Germany, significant differences in leisure sport activity were not found between men and women in general, but working mothers experienced approximately a 54 minute per week greater reduction in leisure sport activities than working fathers. COVID put mothers, especially working mothers, in an incredible triple-bind, where they were forced suffer at both parenting and working, with virtually no opportunity for leisure time to recover. What is more concerning is that the limited research we have suggests that some gender changes in time allocation have not immediately returned to pre-COVID levels (Luong et al., 2023; Reisch et al., 2021), yet much more research is needed.

Industry statistics suggest that female travelers make up an important sector, serving as key travel decision makers, traveling more often, and spending more money than men. (Condor Ferries, 2023). Yet, 86% of women prefer to travel alone to escape routine and responsibilities. Given the constraints to leisure travel outlined above, an assumption can be made that mothers would find it difficult to achieve this goal. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the constraints to leisure women face while planning, enjoying, and returning from family vacations.

Methodology

This study uses a netnographical approach (Kozinets & Gambetti, 2021), which seeks to understand social relationships as they exist in online communities. While the internet has been an important part of society's social fabric for three decades, its role in our social exchange became pivotal during the pandemic, particularly during lockdown. Within our technoculture, it has been shown that women tend to have more tightly knit online networks than men (Reisch et al., 2021). Therefore, this study uses online communities that center women's and mother's perspectives. Specifically, this study explores the tension between labor and leisure in family travel and seeks to understand how heterosexual couples negotiate the mental, domestic, and childcare labor involved in family vacations. It does this through the researcher's participant-observation in several different Facebook groups that are concerned with parenting, gender, and/or travel. Data are extracted from member posts with which the researcher does not interact, posts with which the researcher does interact, posts authored by the researcher, as well as polls designed by the researcher.

Data collection included both covert and overt participant-observation, with the researcher being present in the groups for some time (in some cases, years) as a participant, but revealing her researcher status when asking direct questions or creating polls. This research project is still in progress, with preliminary data collected from a group that explicitly works to dismantle entrenched gender gaps. Additional data collection is ongoing, which will include mainstream groups as well as those that consider feminist ideals as part of their ethos.

Results

Preliminary data suggest that women in heterosexual relationships where children are present are frequently subject to a variety of labor and leisure gaps while at home and that these gaps perpetuate into vacation time (Table 1).

Table 1. Facebook poll regarding gender labor gaps while on holiday/vacation

# of votes	% of votes	Poll item
38	18%	I experience gaps while at home, but things seem more balanced on holiday/vacation.
22	11%	I feel like things are pretty balanced both at home and on holiday/vacation.
122	57%	I feel like there are similar gaps while at home and on holiday/vacation.
6	2%	I feel like things are pretty balanced at home, but there are more gaps when we holiday/vacation.
25	11%	I experience gaps at home but gaps are larger on vacation – he is vacating while I’m just parenting in a different place. [Item added by group member]
4	1%	Can’t afford holidays. [Item added by group member]

Given the importance of leisure for well-being, this has serious implications for mothers. Data suggest that as children age, women are able to carve out more time for relaxation while on family holidays, but for those with small children, traveling with children and a husband does not leave much time for relaxation. There are exceptions, particularly when women shoulder a lot of the work at home due to a husband’s extensive travel for work (rather than ingrained belief about gender roles), but things are more balanced while on vacation. One respondent from the UK who has been married for 22 years and has 7 year old twins explained,

We have big gaps at home because of his work (70+ hrs a week, lots of travelling/working on site etc), so I do 98% of *everything*. On holiday, because he is present, it's a lot more balanced. He takes on a lot more of the mental load of planning/research/execution when we're away/going away. It would be good if he did the boring bits during the week on a regular basis, but since he's not actually here most of the time, it's impossible.

However, for most women, they feel like labor is unbalanced at home and while attempting to enjoy leisure. One mother of 5 from the UK sardonically wrote, “He’s not much help at home, on holiday, at the park, at the supermarket, on the school run or going to the moon. It all falls on me.” Another wrote, “Family of three. Myself, my husband, and our toddler son. I do everything. Like...everything. And we also live overseas, so travel a lot.”

Some women were hopeful. One mother wrote,

Family of 4. Pre kids he did all the planning for quite complicated holidays. Lots moving around to different destinations, etc. Post kids I've taken on the vast majority, but our kids are both still preschool and holidays look very different. We do a lot of going to the same places and staying in one place. I have strong feeling about having a family holiday, but my minimum standard is lower than his, so I'm happy just doing the same thing each year. I think when our kids are older and can engage in more/ we've got more headspace I think he'll go back to doing the holiday planning.

Another woman explained,

Family of four in Australia. I do the research, booking, organising, packing, de-packing, re-packing, big chunk of the driving, meal planning, activity management, etc. We share the childminding and the cooking. I'm currently on a weekend away with my kids and a (female) friend + her daughter. It is so much easier: I'm not the only one keeping an eye on the clock, planning and thinking ahead. It feels so much more relaxing!

This preliminary research suggests that women are struggling to enjoy leisure travel in the heterosexual family context. Yet, there is hope that by bolstering social support, particularly through combined travel with other mothers, women can access the type of leisure they need and deserve.

Conclusion and Discussion

It has been clear since Hoschchild published double-shift (1989) that working mothers, especially, carry a significant extra labor at home burden than working fathers. When we learn that mothers are not even finding relief in the time they have carved out for leisure (i.e., through travel), we should be very concerned. This study supports previous literature that suggests that even women who identify as feminists find leisure travel constraints in a patriarchal world (Benjamin & Schwab, 2023). Research suggests that women who spend more time on household chores and caretaking and less time on leisure have lower subjective well-being (Giurge et al., 2021). Previous literature points to the key role mothers play in society (Crittenden, 2001). We also know that women are experiencing stress and burnout at alarming rates (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019). Theories hold that in modern society, we can get trapped in the stress response cycle, failing to release ourselves from the fight or flight response (Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019; Van der Kolk, 2015). This can be further complicated for individuals suffering from previous traumas (Van der Kolk, 2015). Yet, travel is unique in its ability to remove women from their entrenched societal gender roles to enjoy leisure. This paper helps understand some of the ways prevailing gender roles and existing divisions of labor limit mothers' ability to access leisure when traveling as part of a heterosexual family. However, preliminary results suggest that social support from other mothers might ease some of these constraints. Given that there are societal and economic implications (Jokubauskaitė et al., 2021) if women enjoy leisure and travel less, more research is needed. As a field, tourism researchers must consider this imbalance and seek ways to support mothers in pursuing the leisure they are entitled to as a universal human right.

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