

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE

The Woman of the House

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I had a fairly decent childhood growing up with my parents and three sisters. I would say that we were a very fortunate middle-class family heading in the right direction; life was good, everything was working out well. My father, a businessman, traveled to Italy frequently to close on deals for his clothing shop, but little did I know that one of these flights would be a permanent one and I'd never get to see my dad again. My dad's departure, for legal and business troubles, meant that my mother would have to take matters into her own hands and become the "man of the house."

In 2017, my father settled in Africa since his relatives owned a hotel there. He would work with them, but his salary was unstable. We would even go months without any money being transferred. An unstable income was not enough to keep a roof above our heads, so my mother had to step up and take responsibility for my father's wrongdoings. Eventually, she opened an Instagram page which resells preowned clothing brands, taking a percentage as commission. Although business was slow at first and we couldn't figure out what would happen in the foreseeable future, her job managed to keep food on the table and gave us some breathing space for whatever came ahead.

My mother's Instagram job may seem straightforward at first, but in reality she had to juggle different forms of visible and invisible labor. My younger sister, who was only six years

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old back then, needed a lot of supervision, love, and care; it was difficult for just my mother to help her with her studies and give her the affection she needed. So, my older sister, Yasmina, would have to alternate babysitting to ensure my mother puts in the work needed for her page. Looking back at it now, I realize how much work these women put in, yet I took it for granted. This has been a big problem especially in the Middle East, where family members fail to notice the work put in by the women of the family, just because they are expected to do such work and are not considered the main providers of the family.

My mom's line of work was not just buying and selling clothing brands through the internet; she also had to perform the work of a saleswoman where she'd negotiate prices with customers while maintaining a smile the whole time. This may sound simple, but it's much harder than what you think! A couple of months ago, I opened a business similar to my mother's which dealt with reselling video games. What I learned most from this business is to treat every customer as a #1 customer, even in cases when they disrespect me or act in a rude manner. In this day and age, social media platforms are a major component of society, and it's possible for anyone with an anonymous profile to mistreat and anger people "just for fun", while I and other digital laborers have to sit and soak it up. The amount of emotional and affective labor I would have to put in the job just to keep that smile on my face or be patient is unbelievable. Most of the times, we are not aware of the hardships people face, that is until we experience those same situations ourselves. For that reason, I came to respect what my mother did for us as she used every bit of her energy to ensure that she is succeeding at her job and at being a mother.

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Around the end of 2018, we received disturbing news that would shape the future of our family; my mother was diagnosed with stage-two breast cancer. My biggest fears were my mother's life and health, but I was also worried about how she would provide and take care of us. On top of all the rent, food, tax, tuition, and other bills that we had to pay, we now had to worry about the medical fees that came with eliminating the cancer. It was evident that my mom would not be able to take care of us both physically and emotionally since the chemo and surgery would be taking a toll on her. So, it was our job, my siblings and I, to perform the same work she did but on ourselves and for each other. I had never imagined care work to be this difficult, especially while performing it on my baby sister, whom I would easily grow impatient with. Mothers may seem like experts at it, yet we turn a blind eye while they perform it every day.

Although my mom stayed in the hospital for countless nights, she was still operating her business through her mobile phone. No matter the circumstances, she felt that she was at fault and responsible for everything happening (including her cancer!). Besides my mother working on her business, Yasmina was taking up the role of the mom back at home. Although she is not my oldest sister, she was best at showing empathy towards her siblings. She always showed genuine interest in whatever we were talking to her about even when it was absolute nonsense. She is also the smartest (narrowly edging out me) among us making her the best when it came to tutoring my youngest sister. She performed all these actions carefully, knowing that it would have some impact on us in the future; she guided us as if she were in our mother's shoes by helping us make certain decisions and being emotionally available no matter the circumstances.

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Today, I am thankful that my mother is cancer-free and able to return to her old but demanding routine of alternating between care work and her digital job; being in her care turned these moments of uncertainty into happiness. I am also thankful to all the women who perform this labor of care and emotion, yet it goes unnoticed every day. Notice how I am thanking women only, as we live in a society where they are uncredited for the emotional and care labor they put into their families daily, just because they are expected to do so. If ignorant people were to think critically about the topic, there would be no assumption that a man must be a bread winner while a woman stays at home. Take my mother for example, a woman so strong that she singlehandedly pulled my family out of the darkness no matter how precarious our future was. I do not see the assumption being applied here, so why should it apply anywhere?