



A Study on Problems and Challenges Faced by Urban Working Women in India

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the study was to understand the problems and issues faced by urban working women in India. The objectives also included identifying the key socio-economic attributes contributing to women's status, safety and security, and to study women's involvement in various activities/organizations for improving of family, community and society. The study was confined to the urban working women in white collared jobs in the city of Rourkela, India. A mixed methods approach involving face to face interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaire technique including both close-ended and open-ended questions was chosen for effective elicitation of data from the respondents. Methods triangulation was adapted for establishing validity and reliability of the study. The study was based on primary data collected from Rourkela city to find out the possible solutions for working women which could help them to overcome the problems that they face in the workplace.

The results of the study showed that different age group of working women have different kinds of problems and challenges and different categories as married, single, divorcee, single parent, separated, have different issues at stake in the workplace. Some problems are definitely common, like mental and physical stress, lack of proper balance between employment and family care, unfair treatment in the workplace, stressful life and work place discrimination etc. But some challenges are age or category specific, like prejudiced and stereotyped thinking, safety and security issues, ego hassles with colleagues, and problem of glass ceiling etc. Some probable solutions for problems plaguing urban working women that could help them to overcome the problems that they face in the workplace are proper safety and security measures by the parent organizations, sensitive and supporting partners at home, effective child care policies and appropriate grievance redressal mechanisms for women in place at the workplace.

KEYWORDS :

Introduction

In the history of human development, women have been as vital in the history making as men have been. In fact higher status for women vis-à-vis employment and work performed by them in a society is a significant indicator of a nation's overall progress. Undoubtedly, without the active participation of women in national activities, the social, economic or political progress of a country will deteriorate and become stagnant. But ironically and tragically, women employees in general, are not taken very seriously by their superiors, colleagues, or society at large. Having a career poses challenges for women due to their family responsibilities. Traditionally Indian women had been home makers but in the recent decades, proper education and better awareness, in addition to the ever increasing cost of living has made them to go out and choose careers. In a patriarchal society like India it is still believed that a man is the primary bread winner of his family. Although Indian women have started working outside their homes but still they have a long way to go both culturally, socially and economically, to bring in positive attitudinal changes in the mind-set of people.

It is generally perceived that gender bias against working women starts right from the stage of recruitment. Most of the Indian men are not ready to accept that women are capable enough to work side by side with men in all the sectors, other than in a few limited ones like teaching, nursing and in clerical sectors. Their capabilities are generally underestimated as a result of which Indian women have a tendency to opt for less demanding jobs even if they are highly qualified. Women have the responsibilities to effectively manage their multiple roles in domestic as well as professional lives. Men generally do not offer any help in the households work. This makes the life of working women extremely stressful.

1.1 Background Information

While a majority of the women still face discrimination and gender bias, in the last few decades, the number of women successful in politics, technology and business etc. is definitely on the rise. Society has started seeing women in a different perspective. They work as lawyers, nurses, doctors, social workers, teachers, secretaries, managers and officers etc. There is no profession today where women are not employed. However, it is true that working women have to face problems by virtue of their sex. For centuries women have been subjected to exploitation and torture, physically, sexually and mentally. There are innumerable challenge and problems faced by them both at home and workplace. What we generally see today, in addition to

various media and journal reports is that in the workplace women generally face mental stress, sexual harassment, discriminatory practices, safety and security issues etc (Martin, 1989). India's patriarchal society thinks of women only as homemakers and sexual objects and is generally subjected to exploitation and torture (Dube, 2001).

Women in the Workplace:

Women in the workforce earning wages or a salary are part of a modern phenomenon, one that developed at the same time as the growth of paid employment for men; yet women have been challenged by inequality in the workforce (N. Andal 2002). A woman is a social animal. To keep her in captivity, without access to work or finance or interaction with the outside world, is less than fair (Eisenhower, 2002). Economic, social and political empowerment of women is essential for the development of any society.

social, political status of women. Traditionally women have been the under-privileged ones in the society, not enjoying the same rights or standards of living as the other half of the population. According to Robin (2002) "Sexism is the root oppression, the one which, until and unless we uproot it, will continue to put forth the branches of racism, class, hatred, ageism, competition, ecological disaster and economic exploitation. No other human differentiations can be similarly powerful in reproducing oppressions, and so, women are the real left."

Status of women can be broadly defined as the degree of socio-economic equality and freedom enjoyed by women. Economic, social and cultural factors interplay for reinforcing the gender differences in ownership, control and access to land through inheritance, marriage or informal networks (Arun, 1994). Women's economic status in the household, depends on three levels of influence, viz., women's acquired economic and social power, the socio-economic status of their households and the level of support and opportunities in the community (Zhao, 1991). Women's economic well-being is usually enhanced by women acquiring independent sources of income that begets increased self-esteem and improved conditions of their households and the overall level of development in their communities. The gender gap in the ownership and control of property is the most significant contributor to the gender gap in the economic well-being, social status and empowerment of women (Andal, 2002)

Women have been playing vital roles in households since ages. Now women are also recognized for their value in the workplace and are engaged in wide range of activities of work in addition to their rou-

tine domestic work. Building a society where women can breathe freely without fear of oppression, exploitation, and discrimination is the need of the hour, to ensure a better future for the next generation.

1.2 Rationale and Significance of the Study

Educated urban women are presumed to be more aware of the opportunities and challenges of the workplace or educated urban women can better understand their roles and limitations in the workplaces and are perceived to be bold enough to develop their own personalities, with or without encouragement from their families. An assessment of the problems and issues plaguing urban working women is therefore a necessity for better understanding of workplace dynamics related to women.

During earlier days there were some man-made boundaries for women but now women play vital roles in different sectors. Women today are breaking that boundary and are playing the dual role of balancing domestic life as well as professional life, giving a boost to their societal status in the process. The major problems for working women arise out of the dual responsibilities of the working woman - domestic work as well as office work. Though more and more women are coming out in search of paid employment and their families also need their income, the attitude towards women and their role in the family has not undergone much change. Women continue to be perceived as weak, inferior, and second-class citizens. Even today, looking after the family and children is generally perceived to be the primary responsibility of the man.

It is possible to accept that as more and more women have entered the workforce, there is no longer a solid family-support at home (Schwartz, 1992). "Women have increased their participation in paid employment considerably during the past 30 years, but men have not increased their participation in housework to the same extent" (Evertsson and Nermo, 2004). Women still perform majority of the care giving role and juggling of work in the family. Gender is seen as a significant determinant of negative job spill-over because employed women are expected to carry out the responsibility for family services and still be able to smoothly handle their work roles (Delgado and Canabal, 2006). Although husbands have taken on more domestic work than they did in earlier generations, this gain for women has been offset by "escalating pressures for intensive parenting and the increasing time demands of most high-level careers" (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Added to this is the phenomenon of guilt experienced by women containing a general feeling of responsibility especially towards their own children. It gives rise to a sense of failure of responsibility that arises when they lack control over the demands made on them from different spheres of life.

It is a fact that women have to face problems just by virtue of their being women. And if they are working the problems are multiplied manifold. Working women are those who are in paid employment. Social attitude to the role of women lags much behind the law. This attitude which considers women fit for certain jobs and not for other jobs influences those who are involved in the recruitment of female employees.

Historically, women have suffered oppression and domination by the patriarchal society in India and have faced many problems and challenges. Women were taught to accept their position through the socialization process and also that all rules and regulation made only for women they were bound to follow including their 'initiation rites.' They are taught to be obedient wives and sisters and also to respect their elders; manners are taught to them, like how to walk, talk, sit, and work at home and many others. They are neither considered as individuals with a personality of their own, nor do they have any personal life. They are told that a man could marry more than one woman and they accept it silently, blaming it on their own fate. The inferior positions of women in the traditional Indian society have been reinforced by a number of traditional practices such as polygamy, early marriage, and illiteracy and by years of subjugation. Many of these practices are still found today in some places in the country.

Participation of women in prominent decision-making positions is limited by severe cultural and social constraints because men think that women are not capable enough to take a good decision. Women

face challenges all over the world and sometimes these challenges are context specific. The literature on the challenges and problems women face at the workplace is not only limited to women in the unorganized sectors, but also in formal organizations too, as women continue trying to contribute to their quality of life and that of their families and thereby to the economies of various countries through work.

Unemployment and temporary work are more common among women than among men. Most women workers do not have any social security or access to health care benefits. As a result, the work-related illnesses, like mental pressure and other health problems, remain hidden. As per available research, a large number of women workers complain of frequent headaches, back pain, circulatory disorders, fatigue, and emotional and mental disorders resulting from performing various activities at the workplace.

Women working in some industries, factories, banks, hospitals etc. complain that they do not get time to look after and give care to their babies. The efficiency of a working woman is always suspected and questioned by most people, especially their male counterparts. In the upper class cadres, it is generally seen that all qualifications remaining similar, men are usually preferred. Authorities are doubtful whether women would be able to handle male subordinates, take independent decisions, cope with crisis and manage their duties properly (Andal, 2002). Even though women prove they are efficient, authorities think twice before promoting them and even if women are given the chance, there is always a remark that they were given the position because they were women. Sexual harassment is another serious problem faced by working women. Whether in the organized or unorganized sector, whether illiterate, low paid workers or

highly educated and highly paid executives, a large number of working women face sexual harassment at the workplace at one time or another. This is mostly from other male employees or their superiors. Women tend to hold lower-level positions than men even when they have sufficient skills to perform higher-level jobs.

The present study therefore aims at finding out if women face challenges in the workplaces which pose problems for them, and what are those particular challenges that women face working in the various sectors and what credible solutions and coping mechanisms can be offered to help them lessen such problems, so that women can understand their own value and ability to face problems in different ways. The study also aims at finding the problems of different age group working women and different categories of women like single, married, separate/divorcee, widow etc. Understanding the problems in a clear way would assist us in finding adequate answers in reducing the problems.

Research Problems

The study evinces the following research problems for the study at hand related to problems and challenges faced by working women in the workplace:

- Balancing between paid employment and family care.
- Work related stress problems faced by working women.
- Victims of physical harassment and unfair treatment in the workplace.
- Tolerance of abuse, violence, harassment and discrimination.
- Sexual harassment, mental pressure and safety problems.
- Prejudiced and stereotyped thinking faced by working women.

Objectives of the Study

The study attempts to address the following key research objectives:

- To gain knowledge about the problems and challenges faced by urban working women in the workplace.
- To identify the key socio-economic pointers contributing to women's status, safety and security.
- To study women's involvement in various activities/ organizations for upliftment of family, community and society that can lead to their overall development.
- To find out possible solutions that could help them to overcome the problems that they face in the workplace.

Implication of the Study

The study would help us in understanding the present status of women in our society what kind of problems they are going through

- To find out possible solutions for problems and issues faced by working women.
- To find out the gaps between the problems faced and probable solutions to the problems faced by working women.
- The study can yield results that can help us in better understanding the problems and challenges faced by working women.
- Some solutions can be offered for betterment of working women in the work place.
- To create awareness among the society about the equal importance of men and women.
- To improve the existing status and security of the women.

Limitations of the Study

All scientific inquiries are subjected to few limitations, although these may differ with respect to the magnitude of limitations. The findings of the present study are subject to the following limitations:

- The study area was confined to one small township. Thus the results of the study are applicable only to similar kind of situation analysis.
- The study pertains to a certain time period. The result may not be valid for over a longer period of time due to fast changing socio-economic and socio-cultural setting in this study area.

Because of limitation of time and other resources involved in research, the present study was restricted to a limited number of samples. The result drawn from this study, therefore may have limited application i.e., it cannot be assumed to provide information, capable of generalization over other regions and could have regional biasness, but surely the broad similarities specific to a particular gender, will provide some insight to the study.

1.7. Review of Literature

The literature review shows that more focus is on married working women than on unmarried working women (Karl, 2009). It is also seen that focus is more on organized sector rather than unorganized sector of working women (Shalz, 2011). Eggins (1997) advocates for more facilities to women in the workplace, suggesting that "...it is an important part of developmental strategy as well as an act of social justice" The World Bank (1991) estimates that Indian Women make up one-third of the labor force. Singhal (1995) is of the opinion that, "Participation of women in workforce is essential for economic development and population planning Ronald J. Burke, Mustafa Koyuncu and Lisa Fiksenbaum (2010) examined the relationship of the perceived presence of organizational practices designed to support women's career advancement and their work attitudes and satisfaction and their psychological well-being. Data were collected from 286 women in managerial and professional jobs working in a large Turkish bank, a 72 percent response rate. Five organizational experiences were considered: negative attitudes towards women, equal treatment, support, career barriers and male standards. Women reporting more supportive organizational experiences and practices were more engaged in their work, more job and career satisfied, and indicated greater levels of psychological well-being."

Wentling (2003) showed that the twin roles of women cause tension and conflict due to her social structure which is still more dominant. In her study on working women in Delhi, she has shown that "traditional authoritarian set up of Hindu social structure continues to be the same basically and hence women face problem of role conflict change in attitudes of men and women according to the situation can help to overcome their problem."

Sophia J. Ali (2011) "investigated the challenges facing women in career development. She found that most of the women employees were dissatisfied with career development programmes and women were discriminated against in career development opportunities. The study recommended that organizations should strive to ensure that career development programmes were set to enhance career development amongst women employees. Top management should also be committed to the career development of women, and organizations should also introduce affirmative action to urgently address

career development of women.

1.8. Research Methodology

1.8.1. Nature and Scope of the Study

The study is exploratory in nature and seeks to identify the problems and challenges faced by urban women in different professional sectors like public sector enterprises, banks, schools and colleges, hospitals, commercial organizations etc. Further the study also aims also at finding out the organizational supports for women employees so that the women employees are able to give their best to their organization and are able to reach their full potential. The present study surveyed only urban women employees in white collared jobs who have been in their jobs for at least six months. The study was conducted within Rourkela city. Rourkela city is a steel plant city; multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural. This diversity makes it more attractive for this research study. The places covered for the study were the local schools, colleges, banks, hospitals, Public Sector enterprises, Engineering services, Commercial organizations etc. Primary data was collected from 100 working women of the organized sector using a mixed-methods approach that included face to face interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and questionnaire. Seventy-five responses were found to be complete and valid. The data collection period ranged a one month period from December 2014 to January 2015.

1.8.2. Data collection process

Both qualitative and quantitative aspects have been taken into consideration for the study. The methodology followed was a questionnaire-based survey among the urban working women of the selected localities, in addition to face to face interviews and FGDs. The questionnaire (Appendix -1) consisted of 17 items on various aspects of the study in addition to the demographic details of the respondents. A pilot study among 30 of different working women of Rourkela town was initially conducted to test the validity of the questionnaire. Subsequently certain items were dropped and certain others were modified for better elicitation of results.

Data were collected using the personal contact approach. Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 100 working women located in Rourkela city, out of which 75 valid and complete responses were returned. Each of these 75 women was interacted with and interviewed face to face. Some related questions were asked of them and the comments noted down. In addition to face to face interviews, two focus group discussions were conducted with eight women in each group. These discussions also elicited information and data that have been discussed in the next chapter. Different methods were used for collecting data on the working women.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 close ended and 4 open ended questions to meet the objectives of the study. The items in the questionnaire included urban working women issues related key parameters like sexual and mental harassment, promotion issues, family care issues, discrimination based on gender, workplace discrimination and prejudices, safety and security issues etc. The statements/items for the questionnaire were formed after consulting relevant literature and some preliminary study conducted in the area. Besides the attitude scale, the survey questionnaire also included a section to capture the general profile of respondents. They were asked about their demographic background including age, education level, marital status, occupation, years of experience, nature of organization etc.

Results and Discussions

The study addresses the following key research objectives:

- To gain sufficient knowledge about the problems and challenges faced by urban working women in the workplace.
- To identify the key socio-economic pointers contributing to women's status, safety and security.
- To study women's involvement in various activities/ organizations for upliftment of family, community and society that can lead to their overall development.
- To find out possible solutions that could help them to overcome the problems that they face in the workplace.

Key Findings

- Sexual harassment by male colleagues is a reality. Mental harassment by female colleagues is also a reality.
- Working women face problems because of their female colleagues (jealousy, rivalry, competition etc.)
- Colleagues, both men/women draw conclusions about women's character, sometimes without any basis.
- Financial independence gives women more respect in the society as perceived by the working women.
- Working women feel they are facing more mental pressure and depression than non-working women.
- Not much aware about Acts and Policies favouring women in the workplace.
- Health issues are also an important problem for working women.
- Working women are forced to leave their small children at home because of their work. Lack of proper support system.
- Life as a single parent very challenging for working women.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions related to the challenges and problems faced by working women drawn from the analysis of responses:

- Professional women feel isolated and burdened by the simultaneous demands of their new aspirations on one side and the traditional way of life on the other.
 - Women are discriminated against in all walks of life.
- Women are subjugated, dominated and exploited both at work places and home.
- Women are generally unable to give proper and quality time to households, kids and family.
 - Working women generally face workplace sexual harassment, mental pressure, and safety issues.
 - Females are also highly judgmental about other female colleagues and try to put one at any given opportunity.
 - Women face problems leaving kids at home and going to office early in the morning.
 - Child rearing problems are always faced by working women.
 - People make particular perception or draw conclusion about characters of working women.
 - The social system cannot accept the new roles of women who end up feeling misunderstood and distressed.

Some Recommended Solutions

- Partners can be more sensitive to women's needs, and counter tradition by helping their wives perform daily tasks and take care of children.
- Organisations should have an internal code to ensure security of women employees and take measures to ensure that they discharge their job in a secure atmosphere.
- Governments should make it mandatory for companies to install Global Positioning System (GPS) in vehicles carrying women, in all industries which engage women in night shifts.
- Providing self-defence training to women; installing safety devices and CCTVs at the work place; undertaking police verification of cab drivers, security guards etc.
- Child care facilities and Child care leave for working women should be provided by every organisation.
- Flexible timing and Possibility to work from home are required for working women.

In a patriarchal society like India a particular boundary exists only for women, and if they try to cross that boundary then people start maligning them. The general perception is that if some women are doing things differently, beyond people's limited imagination, and out of sync with traditional thinking, like going out for jobs, wearing different type of fashionable clothes, talking freely with male members etc., immediately they are branded as loose women. India probably has still a long way to go to make our workplaces free from any prejudices, abuses and harassments. Even then we can still try at solving some of the related issues and problems with some possible solutions that have been mentioned above so that women become stronger and are able to handle any adverse situations.

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