

Problems and Challenges Faced by Urban Working Women in India with reference to Bihar

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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 Bihar, 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. The study was based on primary data collected from Patna city to find out the possible solutions for working women which could help them to overcome the problems that they face in the workplace.. 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.

Index Terms - Working woman, urban area, workplace, white collared job, society.

I. 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.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURES

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).

III. 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. Working women are essential for the development of the society, so empowerment of women is important to the process of upliftment of economic, 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 wellbeing, 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 routine 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.

IV. 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 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.

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.

V. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study attempts to address the following key research objectives:

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

VI. 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

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

VII. 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:

1. The study area was confined to one small township. Thus the results of the study are applicable only to similar kind of situation analysis.
2. 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.

3. 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.

VIII. METHODOLOGY USED

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 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.

Data collection process

Data were collected using the personal contact approach. Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 100 working women located in Patna 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.

IX. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

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 tabular representation of each of the items is given below:

1. How long did it take for you to get promoted in comparison to male colleagues of the same position?

Table 4.1:

Time Taken for Women to get promoted as compared to their male colleagues (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Equal time	49	65
Longer	13	18
Earlier	13	17

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 65% of female employees were promoted at the same time irrespective of their gender, 17% women were promoted earlier than their male colleagues and 18% took longer than their male peers. The above data reflects that gender bias related to promotions do not prevail much in the working atmosphere.

2. Did you get your promotion on merit basis or you were offered a promotion based on favoritism or any other indecent proposal?

Table 2:

Basis for Women getting promotion on merit (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	17	23
No	46	61
Can't say	12	16

Source: primary data

Inference: According to the above information 61% felt that their promotion was based on merit and not on the basis of favoritism or any other indecent proposal, 16% were not sure about their answers and 23% agreed that favoritism prevails in workplaces.

3. Do you work as much as your male colleagues or are you required to work less than male?

Table 3:

Time spent on women (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	34	46
No	28	37
Can't say	13	17

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 46% women agreed they were working as much as male colleagues, 17% women were not sure about their answers and 37% women agreed they were not working as much as their male colleagues because sometimes post or position also matter in work process. Accordingly duration of work hour factor also differs for men and women.

4. How is the attitude of your boss towards you?

Table 4:

Attitude of boss towards female colleagues as perceived by the women Employees (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Co-operative	31	42
Neutral	40	53
Abusive	4	5

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 53% female agreed that their boss attitude towards them were neutral, 42% women said that their boss was co-operative with them and 5% women said their boss attitude towards them were abusive.

5. Do you sometime feel hesitant to work with male colleagues because they may sexually harass or underestimate you on the basis of gender?

Table 5:

Perception of prevalence of sexual harassment or underestimation on the basis of gender (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	40	47
No	35	53

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 53% of females agreed that sometimes they felt hesitant to work with male colleagues and 47% said that they were not comfortable with male colleagues. The reason for such high percentage of women not feeling comfortable working with their male colleagues could be their lack of self-confidence, or the inherent distrust for men in our society, reinforced down the years by negative experiences and general awareness.

6. Do you think people draw conclusions about your character, reputation and attitude the way they like?

Table 6:

Regarding people drawing conclusions about working women's character without any reasons (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	50	67
No	10	13
Can't say	15	20

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 67% women agreed people draw conclusions about character, reputation and attitude the way they like, 13% women said they were not bother not have a time to think about others and 20% said don't have any idea what people said about them.

7. Have you ever faced sexual abuse of any kind in your workplace?

Table 7:

Experience of sexual abuse at workplace (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	12	16
No	63	84

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 84% women said that they had not faced any kind of sexual abuse at their workplace, but a good 16% women agreed to have faced sexual abuse at workplace.

8. If yes, did the office authorities take any strict measures against the accused persons?

Table 8

Response of the higher authority towards sexual harassment (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	8	11
No	22	29
Can't say	45	60

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 60% of the females are not aware whether their organization took any action against the accused, signifying lack of transparency or even lack of sensitivity to women's problems in workplaces. Almost 30% women are of the opinion that no strict actions were taken, while only a small 11% felt that sufficient actions were taken.

9. If No, do you think the office authorities will act in a fair manner if you face sexual harassment?

Table 9:

Perception of office authority's willingness to act against sexual abuse (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	26	34
No	20	27
Can't say	29	39

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 27% of the females are sure that their organization will not act against sexual abuse as compared to 34% feeling that their organization will take adequate action against the accused. But a good 39% of women said 'can't say' that suggests that they did not have faith on their organization on the issue of sexual harassment.

10. Do you suffer from any health complications like mood swings, depression, concentration problems due to problems at workplace?

Table 10:

Women suffering from health related issues due to problems in the workplace (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	60	80
No	15	20
Can't say	0	0

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 80% women suffer from health complications, 20% women have not faced any kind of health complications like headache, depression, concentration problems etc.

11. What in your opinion is more convenient when faced with the situation of harassment based on gender discrimination?

Table 11:

Perception of women to behave when faced with the situation of harassment based on gender discrimination in the workplace (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Suffer in silence	0	0
Quit job	39	52
Fight against injustice	33	44
Can't say	3	4

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information there is an equal division of opinion among working women for either quitting their jobs, or to fight it out, if they face any harassment based on gender discrimination.

12. Are you given easier jobs at work as compared to male candidates?

Table 12:

Perception of women on being given easier jobs at work as compared to male candidates (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	19	25
No	40	54
Can't say	16	21

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information majority of the women are of the opinion that they are not given any easier jobs as compared to their male colleagues. They work as hard as anyone.

13. Do your seniors/colleagues/male members/other members respect you?

Table 13:
Perception of women on being given respect at their workplace(in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	50	67
No	4	5
Can't say	21	28

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information women in general feel that people respect them in the workplace.

14. Which problems do you think is the most important problem faced by working women in the work place?

Table 14:
According to the above information women in general feel that people respect them in the workplace.

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Depression	0	0
Mental Pressure	25	33
Gender discrimination	0	0
Sexual Harassment	0	0
Others	50	67

Source data: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information the most important problems faced by working women are due to mental stress that includes jealousy, rivalry, gossip, character assassination etc. and other workplace problems like physical stress, lack of child-care support, rigid workplace timings, and insufficient salary as per qualifications etc.

15. Support for balance between work and non-work activities given by.

Table 15:
Support for balance between work and non-work activities (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Spouse/partner	17	23
Friends	10	13
Other family members	12	16
Encouragement to use paid and unpaid leave	0	0
Others	36	48

Source: Primary data

Inference: As per the given data support for balance between work and non-work activities is evenly divided among various support groups mentioned above. The 'other' category includes paid assistance, crèches, sympathetic colleagues etc.

16. Are you involved in any kind of activities in the workplace, community and society?

Table 16:
Kind of activities involved in society, community etc. (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	32	43
No	43	57

Source: Primary data

Inference: As per the given data more number of working women is involved in activities at the community and societal level, as compared to those who are not involved. The activities that they are involved in relate to social club memberships, community religious activities, children activities etc.

17. Do you think you have been treated differently by your colleagues/seniors/boss/other members because you are a woman?

Table 17
Perception among women on being treated differently by their colleagues/seniors/ boss/other members (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	35	47
No	40	53

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 53% female responded said that were not treated differently while 47% female responded said they were treated differently. People enjoy working with friends, which often inadvertently turns into favoritism. It can start as something as simple as being included on a lunch outing where business is discussed and may lead to something much more substantial, like getting salary and promotional benefits. Wanting to work with people you like is fine, as long as it is fair to other employees.

18. Are you facing problems related to your family life and professional life?

Table 18

Perception among women facing problems related to your family life and professional life (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	33	44
No	42	56

Source: Primary Data

Inference: 56% females responded agreed they were not faced with any problems relating to family life and professional life. 44% females responded that they find it difficult to manage family life and professional life because they have to go home to the family and attend to the household chores and take care of their families. They wished for some definite coping strategies to aid them to carry all the work-load and still be able to take care of their private issues.

19. Do you feel financial independence gives you more respect in the society?

Table 4.19

Perception among women on financial independence giving more respect in the society (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	60	80
No	15	20

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 80% of the women responded said that financial independence gives them more respect in the society where as only 20% of the women responded did not agree to this. They felt that a perception of a sound character is also required to get respect. During the survey it was found that if you are a woman, being financially independent is very essential. It gives a woman a superior reputation and independence in the society

20. Do you have any additional comments about your fears, frustration, wants, needs, career, boss, team, workplace and workplace environment etc.?

Table 4.20:

Women having additional comments about their fears, frustration, wants, needs, career, boss, team, workplace and workplace environment etc.(in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	61	81
No	10	14
Can't say	4	5

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above data 81% working women were interested to give their feedback, 14% women were not interested and 5% working women did not give proper feedback or additional comments.

X. KEY FINDINGS

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

XI. OWN OBSERVATIONS

It was observed that different women have different perception of their needs, fears, frustrations etc. Some are happy with their jobs; some are frustrated because of harassment, both mental and physical; some women have a good job environment; some are highly depressed because of issues with their colleagues, both male and female. One interesting fact that was revealed was that those women who are more beautiful or have enough good personality and can carry themselves in a good way; people instantly draw a particular conclusion about their character that is highly negative. They think about her in a wrong way and assume that those women having a friendly kind of nature inside workplace male member generally think that kind of objects for them they can do anything with her.

Some male members who are highly qualified and holding a high position, but are highly frustrated because of job stress or for some other personal reasons for their own, sometimes they behave appropriately with junior women employees in front of others but covertly harass these women for satisfying their own anger and frustration. One type of stereotyped thinking that still persists is whether women, who are crossing the four walls of their homes for jobs, are capable enough to compete with others, and at the

same time appropriately balance between family and professional life. So the question arises as to why only women have to balance both lives, and why women have all these burdens thrust on them.

XII. 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.

XIII. 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.

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