

# Gender Sensitivity in Workplace Stress: Challenges and New Directions

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## Abstract

Gender permeates every aspect of life, but it is especially salient to the work environment. Gender differences in the workplace typically stem from social factors, which influence the behaviours of men and women in the workplace, which may involve physical, emotional and psychological factors. Work stress usually conceptualized as work-role conflict, work-role, overload, and work-role ambiguity. Stress in the workplace is a major problem of occupational health and safety risk throughout the world. Gender inequality in the workplace is experienced across many organizations and manifests itself in a multitude of different ways. The perceived differences in physical, psychological, and social conditions amongst men and women in the workplace can create various sources of occupational stress. This paper made an attempt to find out the causes of stress, its consequences and coping strategies adopted by female employees as compared to their male counterparts and offers new directions for future research with reference to gender-sensitivity in workplace stress.

**Keywords: Gender-sensitivity, Stress, Consequence, Coping strategies.**

## Introduction

Gender inequality in the workplace is a complex phenomenon that can be seen in organisation's policies, structures, processes and practices. Gender differences in the workplace typically stem from social factors, which influence the behaviours of men and women in the workplace, which may involve physical, emotional and psychological factors such as an employee's capability to perform job duties. Differences may also stem from gender stereotypes related to men and women. Both genders exposed to different workplace environments and different types of demands and stressors may experience varying levels of stress even when they are employed by the same sector. Men and women are not the same and the job they do, their working conditions and as they are treated by society are not same either. Across all cultures, to various degrees, there are differences in the stressful situations to which men and women are exposed. Work stress is linked to a variety of health problems, although the effects sometimes vary by sex (male and

female). The perceived differences among and between men and women in the workplace can create different sources of occupational stress for them. It is generally felt that women experience more stress than men because of the type of work they do, their position in the hierarchy of an organization, discrimination, sexual harassment, their situation outside work, and also the associated strains and the coping strategies tend to vary between men and women.

### **Objective**

To find out the causes of stress, its consequences and coping strategies adopted by female employees as compared to their male counterparts and offers new directions for future research with reference to gender-sensitivity in workplace stress.

### **Methodology**

The present research paper has made an attempt to gather information from reviewing published books, articles in various journals, periodicals, and collecting relevant data from published dissertations.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

Originally, the word of *stress* was a term used in physics, primarily to describe enough tension or force placed on an object to bend or break. The concept of stress was first introduced in the life sciences by Selye Hans (one of the early pioneers of modern stress theory) in 1936. The word “*stress*” derives from the Latin word ‘*stringere*’, which means the experience of hardship, injury, constrains, starvation, molest or affliction. The term “stress” associations tend to be in terms of response-based meanings that take the form of strain, tension or pressure. The origins of response-based definitions of stress are found in medicine and are usually viewed from a physiological perspective. The stimulus-based psychological model of stress has its roots in physics and engineering, the analogy being that stress can be defined as a force exerted that results in demand or load reaction that causes distortion.

### **Stress**

According to Stephen Robbins (1999), *stress* has been stated as “a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he/she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important”. Meanwhile, Sager (1991), defined *Job stress* as a psychological state perceived by individuals when faced with demands, constraints, and opportunities that have an important but uncertain outcome.

## Eustress and distress

Stress can be both positive - eustress and negative - distress aspects. The notion of eustress and distress is developed by Hans Selye (1980), supposed that *eustress* occurs when an individual views a situation as slightly pushed but does not get overwhelmed by it. The goal is slightly more than one can handle, but not unachievable. This turns the goal challenging, an accomplishment of which leads to increased satisfaction and confidence. Eustress turns into distress if an individual cannot cope with the amount of pressure or trauma he/she is under. *Distress* refers to harmful unpleasant demands on the individual. It is a negative emotional reaction to the output of stress. There are two kinds of distress: acute stress and chronic stress. *Acute stress* is intense in nature, but short in duration. *chronic stress* is that not as intense as acute stress, but that lingers for a prolonged period of time. Job burnout, substance abuse, violence, depression and anxiety are measures of 'distress' and hope, meaningfulness and manageability are considered as measures of 'eustress'.

## Stress and Strain relationship

Stress is the emotional and physical strain caused by an individual's response to pressure from the outside world. Hans Selye referred to **stress** as an upset in the body's balance due to physical, mental or emotional stimuli. Stimuli or situations that can result in the experience of stress are termed as '**stressors**', and the **strain** is longer-term reaction to chronic stress. A consequence of stress is an interaction between individual responses to the environment; distress experienced by an individual has a negative consequence for them. The symptoms can surface as a physiological, psychological, cognitive, and behavioral outcome. Literally, **stressor is a predictor of stress, and strain is a consequence of stress**. Stress has been linked to all leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis, and suicide.

### Causes / Stressors of stress

The stress caused by a situation, circumstance or any stimulus that is perceived to be a threat is known as a *stressor*. Workplace stressors refer to aversive physical working conditions which include noise, dirt, heat, vibrations, chemical or toxic substances. They also include poor ergonomic conditions (unsafe conditions or unsafe human acts) at the workplace causing accidents, Gender differences may exist in respect of sources of stress in the workplace. Women tend to experience more stress in the sort of both work and health stressors than their male counterparts. For women, stressor may include total workload, the glass-ceiling, the maternal wall, tokenism, and political networking. Poor work condition, discrimination, sexual harassment, job instability, and lack of mobility are a potential source of work stress experienced by women in the workplace.

## Consequences of stress

The distress experienced by individuals has negative consequences for them, their families, and for the organizations they serve. The impact of distress on individuals has subjective, cognitive, physiological, behavioural and health facets to it. The Consequences of workplace stress include employee's job dissatisfaction, withdrawal, high turnover, absenteeism, high accident rates, poor organisational climate, low morale, and low productivity. Symptoms of stress may include: psychological, behavioural, cognitive, and emotional in nature. *Behavioural symptoms* include sleeping disorders, procrastinating or neglecting responsibility, and nervous habits and so on. Memory problem, inability to concentrate, poor judgement and constant worrying are the examples of *cognitive symptoms*, and *emotional symptoms* consist of moodiness, irritability or short-temper, agitation and an inability to relax, *psychological behaviour* characterised by tiredness, anxiety and lack of motivation. As a part of gender difference in stress, women tend to experience higher levels of stress as a consequence of their experience in and out of the work environment compared to their male counterparts. According to Whilst Jick and Mitz (1985), women experience psychological stress in the form of depression, emotional discomfort and minor illness more frequently than men, and that men experience severe physiological stress in the form of coronary heart disease more frequently than women. (Pp. 408-420)

## Coping with stress

Managing stress is all about taking change of one's (his/her) thoughts, emotions schedules, environment and the way they deal with stressful situations. Better management of stress can help to reduce stress-induced thoughts, feelings and behaviours, as-well-as improving one's overall health and sense of well-being. Coping refers to how an individual deals with stressful situations, which differs from person to person and from situation to situation. There are two major ways of coping: *changing oneself* or *changing one's environment*. Coping is done with a desire to maintain a sense of personal integrity and to achieve greater personal control over the environment.

There are gender differences in stressors they experience and in the ways they choose to cope with stress. Men tend to engage in more 'problem-focused' coping, planning, and rationalizing their actions, self-adaptation and personal growth, whereas women use more 'emotion-focused' coping strategies such as expression of emotions and seeking social support to deal with stress. Perceptions of stress and strain on the one hand and the use of coping strategies, techniques and processes on the other may have cross-cultural and cross-national implications. Hence, cross-national research may be carried out to throw light on cross-national stress research as a significant departure from the current nation-specific or organization-specific research on stress, stressors strains and coping strategies.

## Gender differences in occupational stress

The perceived differences among and between men and women in the workplace can create different sources of occupational stress for them. According to 'gender role theory', women's roles are more distress-inducing. Hence, women experience higher levels of distress than men. Women's gender roles tend to be more nurturing, thus, women typically are in social roles that require them to offer more support to others, to be more considerate, and to widen their concern to a broader range of people in ways that increase stressors, which ultimately lead to distress, whereas men's roles are more instrumental. The theory also emphasizes that differing social locations of men and women, their differing lifestyle behaviours and the differing number, levels of chronic stressors and life events experienced by them contribute to the gender-based health inequalities. Chronic stressors and psychological resources play an important role in determining health, but their effects are generally stronger for women than men. (Denton, Prus, & Walters, 2004).

Women are more distressed over events in the family and men are more affected by work events. Two alternative theories assert that since women simply express themselves differently than men, it creates a false impression that they are experiencing greater distress. According to the response-bias perspective, women express all emotions more freely than men and when questioned about depression and anxiety the women report it more frequently. Similarly, the gender-response theory states that women respond to stress with somewhat different emotions than men, while, men and women may experience similar levels of frustration, but **men tend to get angry at others and women tend to get upset with themselves.**

There are some stressors, however, that are especially salient for working women such as workplace discrimination, organisational politics, barriers to achievement, and social sexual behaviour. Workplace discrimination contributes to women's lower socio-economic status. Such discrimination against women largely can be attributed to human resources (HR) policies and HR-related decision-making. Both the objective disadvantages of lower pay status, and opportunities at work, and the subjective experiences of being stigmatised, affect psychological and physical stress. Further, Women experience gender-specific stressors such as gender violence and sexist discrimination, which are associated with physical and psychiatric events. When women are denied access to information and resources because of politics, they become more vulnerable to stress in the work setting.

## Working women Vs. Working men

Employment is important to both men and women as a source of income. Nevertheless, men and women who devote extensive time to their work and family roles might be expected to experience higher levels of stress, because they feel overwhelmed, fatigued, irritable, and anxious. Working women face major problems and stress because of child care needs and family responsibilities more than men. Working women

and men are differing on a number of characteristics and qualities. Unlike men, women (1) have low self-esteem and high self-criticism; (2) voluntarily accept a subordinate role; (3) avoid risk; (4) have to prove constantly that they can do their job; (5) and suffer from a conflict between their professional life and personal lives. Women experience several obstacles to achievement in the workplace, such as the “glass-ceiling,” an invisible barrier that keeps women from rising to top positions in organizations. Women may perceive unique forms of occupational stressors and respond to them differently than do men. While on the one hand, Work stressors faced by women may include workload, role overload, the glass-ceiling, tokenism, and sexual harassment and work/family conflict. On the other hand, men experience higher job demand, higher effort, higher commitment and lower social support at work and so on.

### **Major Challenges faced by working women in the workplace**

Globalisation and technological innovations have brought about new challenges to employees in the managerial cadre. The following are the major challenges pertaining to stress and strain faced by working women in the workplace:

- Balancing between paid employment and family care (work-life balance)
- 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
- Paying lip service to various women empowerment initiatives by the organization.

### **Review of literature**

**Gove, W.R.et. al. (1977)** examined the **effect of children and employment on the mental health of married men and women**, with the sample of 779 randomly selected males and females in Chicago. The study indicated that married men who work are in the best mental health, that married women who are unemployed are in the worst mental health, and that the mental health of employed housewives falls in between. Having children in the household generally contributes to poor mental health. Married women tend to be in poorer mental health than men, was because of the roles they typically occupy. Married women who are employed typically face much greater time and energy demands than their unemployed counterparts, and also reported feelings of excessive demands upon them, wanting to withdraw and be alone, and feeling lonely more often than married, employed men.

**Rosenfield, S. (1980)** in their research on **Sex Differences in Depression: Do Women Always Have Higher Rates?**, and found sex differences in psychiatric disorder in the sample of 28 males and 30

Females married couples drawn randomly from large random samples of 4500 New York City households. Females have consistently been found to have higher rates of depression and depressive symptomatology than males. In non-traditional relationships, males are found to have higher levels of depressive symptoms, such as psychometric symptoms, anxiety, immobilization and sadness than females. Findings have shown that working women are higher than working men on all depressive symptomatology, problems except immobilisation where there are no significant differences.

**Cleary, P.D.*et.al.* (1983)**, in their article on **Sex Differences in Psychological Distress among Married People**, and examined the influence of various factors, including role responsibilities and satisfaction, on depressive mood, in a representative sample of 457 men and 560 women are living in central Wisconsin a Midwestern community. It was found that women reported more distress than men, the largest difference among married people was between employed married men and housewives, but the effect on working wives was more dramatic. Employed-married women experienced slightly less distress than housewives, but having minor children in the household was especially stressful for these women and counteracted the advantage of employment. The effects of children in the household on distress were strongest among working women with lower family incomes. Furthermore, having children was not necessarily more stressful for women than for men; only among employed women were having minors at home significantly related to distress, and the combination of being a parent and working contributes to depression for women and that the combination of roles is not as stressful for men.

**Barling, J.*et.al.* (1984)**, in their research on **“Work stressors, gender differences and psychosomatic health problems”** and focused on the association between health problems and role conflict for the participants (91 men and 56 women) in Africa, who had full time employment and had at least one dependent child. The study assessed the extent to which job involvement, job satisfaction and role conflict/strain can predict individual health of men and women differently and found that there was a significant difference for men and women in their experience of the role conflict/health relationship while the job dissatisfaction/health relationship did not differ significantly. Women reported considerably more psychosomatic health symptoms and complaints than men. However, women had more job satisfaction than men and men were involved more with their work than women.

**Etzion, D. (1988)**, conduct a study on **the experience of burnout and work/non-work success in male and female engineers: A matched-pairs comparison** and explored the experience of burnout and success in the professional and private lives of people in technical careers. Participants in the study were 51 male and 51 female engineers, who were matched as pairs on a variety of personal and job-related variables. Gender differences were revealed in the interrelationship between work and private life and its effect on measures of well-being such as feelings of burnout, satisfaction, enjoyment, and perceived success. Results indicated that male engineers are better able to integrate work success with private life than their female

counterparts. For men, work and non-work success are compatible, while for women they seem to conflict. As a consequence, many women develop low self-esteem, perfectionistic attitudes, and a compulsive desire to prove their self-worth by striving to achieve impossible goals both in their careers and private lives they also showed that women's burnout is associated with attaching high importance to success in either career or private life.

Gender sensitivity in the workplace is an issue which should be considered when negotiating policies and procedures in many organisations across the world. (Masike, R., *et.al.* 2014, p-157). Based on the extensive review of literature in this domain the following interventions made to tailor to the needs of an individual (he/she):

- (1) Increase the workers' control of the working arrangements
- (2) Provide a mechanism for the worker to participate in decision making on the organisation of his/her work
- (3) Help the workers to view his/ her specific task in relation to the total product
- (4) Avoid quantitative work overload and under load
- (5) Facilitate communication and support among workers. (Haynes,S.G., 1991, P-166).

The work sphere is a primary source of stress for both men and women. Job stressors such as dull, monotonous work or having to work under time pressures and conflicting demands are equally for men & women in the workplace. Workplaces with a gender inequality research needs to be directed towards understanding the attitudes of males in the organizations towards women and issues related to integrating women into the male groups.

### Directions for future research

Women's experience of work stress is to be able to develop specific interventions tailored to the needs of women.

- Flexible work schedules, alternative work arrangements like telecommuting, and an organisation assistance with childcare and elder care can help women deal with overload and work/home issues.
- Efforts build in social support at work, such as in mentoring programmes, can be of special benefit to working women.
- Organisations can reduce gender discrimination by focusing on (a) HR policies (i.e. diversity initiatives and family-friendly policies) and closely related organizational structure, processes, and practices; (b) HR-related decision-making and enactment. These HR policies can be engineered suitably for intervention with an aim to integrate women employed into mainstream of organisations.

## Conclusion

Gender inequality in the workplace is experienced across many organisations and manifests itself in a variety of ways. The perceived differences about physical, psychological, and social conditions amongst men and women in the workplace can create various sources of occupational stress for them. The link between stressors and distress, or more broadly, between work and health, does differ between men and women. Future research may also focus on the relationship between various categories of stressors and the degree of stress experienced by men and women, their relative impact on different types of strains and the specific types of coping strategies and processes adopted by men and women in order to generate conclusive evidences in support of existing stress-related theories or even challenging them. In view of gender-specific research on stress carried out in the past, future research may focus on investigating the causes, consequences and coping strategies adopted differently by working men and women to draw meaningful implications for stress management policies and practices in multicultural, diverse, inclusive and gender-sensitive organisations.

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