EMPOWERMENT – REALITY OR MYTH?

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Abstract

Women have acquired knowledge and skills to strengthen the human capital to enter the professional world. However, the labour market is still partially open to them. In the patriarchal society, there is evidence to suggest discrimination and suspicion about women and their career potential. Information collected through interviews, surveys and workshops fills the data gaps and offers insights into the process of gender character at the workplace. While opportunities exist for women, outlook of organisations, society and individuals remains a major concern. Open-ended questions that remain unanswered since ages, at various levels need to be radically addressed to bring the desired change.

Key words*: Empowerment, Economic actors, Change agents, Collectivism*

Introduction

Ancient man was a nomad for a long time until he began to practice the idea of permanence by practicing settled agriculture and domesticating animals. This led to their growing interest in production and reproduction, accompanied by an enlarged role for women in every department. Although there was sexual division of labour, balance prevailed between men and women. Both men and women acted as protectors; while men focused on hunting, women were reproducing and nurturing - children and crops.

With the coming of capitalism (when everything came to be viewed as a commodity with value), women's contribution to the market was questioned. This triggered women to start working outside the four walls of their homes to earn wages and contribute to the market. With globalisation in 1991, the Indian economy changed, consumption patterns increased and women needed to be part of the workforce. However, interestingly, even when women started going out to work, the majority of women are forced and take on the household burden. Small matters go a long way in accepting gender equality, like mother taking leave when the child is

unwell, jokes at workplace about women coming late but going early. This brings to think the notion of gender equality in the 21st century, as UNFPA (United Nations Fund for Population Activities) report, State of World Population 1992 says, there can be no sustainable development without development of women.

Even today, work done by women of the house is not considered worth in terms of money as well as emotions. Data from 64 countries[1] representing two thirds of the world's working age population show that 16.4 billion hours per day are spent in unpaid care work - the equivalent to 2 billion people working eight hours per day with no remuneration. Valuing such services on the basis of an hourly minimum wage, they would amount to 9 per cent of global GDP or US$11 trillion (purchasing power parity in 2011).

According to the 2017 ILO-Gallup report, globally, women perform 76.2 per cent of total hours of unpaid care work, more than three times as much as men. In Asia and the Pacific, this is 80 per cent. This becomes a barrier for women from entering and progressing in the labour force. In 2018, 606 million working age women as against 41 million men suffered on account of unpaid care work.

Despite the average literacy rate of females aged between 15 and 49 years being on rise, 84.8% in 2016, 85.3% in 2017 and 87% in 2018)[2], and gross enrolment ratio of girls in secondary education level increasing to 80.29 per cent in 2016-17 against 80.10 per cent in 2015-16[3] , female labour force participation is one of the lowest in the world (International Labour Organization). It is also not rare to find that women do not make it to the top of the management in public and private sectors. India has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates among the emerging market economies and developing nations. As of 2014, it is Nepal (84%), Bangladesh (58%), Sri Lanka (35%), India (27%) and Pakistan (25%).[4]

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[1] https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_633284/lang--en/index.htm

[2] https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/jul/03/female-literacy-rate-goes-up-for-third-consecutive-year-in-india-
2164719.html#:~:text=For%20the%20third%20year%20in,2017%20and%2087%25%20in%202018.

[3] https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/gross-enrolment-ratio-of-girls-in-secondary-education-increased-to-80-29pc-in-2016-17-wcd-119070400968_1.html

[4] : https://globalwa.org/2019/11/how-men-and-masculinities-affects-womens-workforce-participation/

Thus, behind the beautiful walls of the country and rising indicators to reflect improved position of women, lies the lives of many women shackled into the whole notion of "Girling up" and "to act delicately". While times are evolving and there are cases of women being the "bread-winners" and men the "home-makers", women are still subtly pressured to make professional compromises for the family.

This takes our attention to the position of women in the economy. One of the most glaring and visible sights in the urban areas is the proliferation of white collared women workers. The rising cost of living, access to education and social change in urban areas have enabled women to enter new professions or occupations in the tertiary sector which were closed to them earlier. Developmental and welfare activities also made openings in highly demanding scientific, technical, medical and paramedical fields. However, many studies show there is overall inequality and discrimination due to social aspects in women's work participation. This article, using primary survey based on interviews, surveys, workshops and discussions aims to look at women empowerment and women and economy, at organisational, social and individual levels. The aim is to understand the gender-based challenges faced by women; a pre-requisite to advance their rights at all levels.

The study is divided into 6 sections including the current one. Literature Review is discussed in section 2, followed by data and methodology, results and discussion in subsequent sections. Section 5 discusses recommendations.

2. Literature Review

Empowerment is studied in various studies such as Kishor and Gupta (2004) that reveal average women in India to be disempowered relative to men, with little change in her empowerment over time. Karat (2005) discuss the issues of violence against women, their survival, political participation and emancipation. Desai and Thakkar (2007) discuss women's political participation, legal rights and education as tools for their empowerment.

Shariff (2009) suggest a specific measure for gender empowerment keeping in view culture specific conditions prevalent in the country and identify six dimensions to define empowerment. (Budhwar et al., 2005) study that women are expected to leave their jobs after marriage, pregnancy, or childbirth to carry out their domestic duties; and may never be encouraged to return to their jobs. Allen et al. (2007) study employee-perceived organizational performance as a subjective outcome indicator to test its relationship with perceptions of diversity.

There are several studies that focus on women and management. Bhatnagar, D. (1987) in her research, investigates attitudes towards women managers in banks and reports widespread lukewarm attitude towards women managers. Cox (1993), explains the importance of managing diversity in the workplace and defines "diversity climate" as collective influence of individual, group and organizational factors to support diversity in an organization. The Woods and Sciarini, (1995), identify that employers who successfully manage diversity, are better at attracting and retaining skills and talent. Pawan S. Budhwar, Debi S. Saini & Jyotsna Bhatnagar (2005), highlight that women in India venture out in search of work both for reasons of economic necessity and to fulfil ambitions, those in the former category from the middle and lower socio-economic strata of society, those in the latter category from the upper middle class with higher education and a greater desire for independence, eagerness to undertake managerial roles and desire to rise rapidly up the organization ladder. Choi and Rainey (2010) address the effects of diversity and diversity management on employee perceptions of organizational performance in U.S. federal agencies and find that higher levels of gender diversity tend to increase organizational performance.

3. Data and Methodology

We conducted a survey, held discussions, attended workshops, floated a Google form and conducted online interviews for content collection. The sample size was 150 to 200 for various platforms of interaction. The interaction was conducted with respondents with their consent and they were fully explained the goal of the study. The participants were young women (married/unmarried) in varied age groups. Open ended interaction included asking them their stories and experience regarding the work culture, and how it affected their family life and career graph. Interaction with a number of NGOs working in development agencies, social services and transformational programmes, facilitated understanding the problem at grass root level, management as well as strategy level. Findings are based purely on their experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

The participants were similar to the general population in that sector. Interaction represented discrimination at various fronts hindering their economic empowerment.

Should women work? – Women constitute nearly half of India's population. When they are part of the workforce, an emancipated and enlightened society is created. Even today a large number of women are forced to confine their lives within the four walls of their homes.

In our discussion, we realized that contemporary society has begun to doubt gender biases and considers empowerment as their right and not something that comes as a policy or social mind-set. When we asked the women across age groups, they voiced that according to them, economic independence means freedom to speak, freedom to do what they want and give importance to their perspective in every field.

They felt that an empowered woman has the freedom to make choices and take decisions in matters relating to her life as well as society at large, is not a victim of violence either in her family or any other social institutional setting, can live a life of respect and dignity, has equal access to opportunities in all spheres of activities, is in a position to balance her home and work and is in a position to make use of the laws for safeguarding her dignity and rights.

It is ideal to focus on conversation between two women.

One – "People at home think that we women cannot handle money matters."

Two – "My family members thought the same way. But I didn't stop taking decisions and now my decisions matter."

Financial independence - The concept of making money on one's own worth is increasing amongst women and they want their career to financially support them. Jobs and rising to higher positions is the aim of most of the women.

The interview substantiated the fact that career is important and they would all like to work and have a rising career graph. They are not willing to opt out of their career, at any cost and feel that society should be sensitized to create a conducive environment, both within and outside the workplace for them to realize their full potential.

According to many women interviewed, they feel economic independence leads to promoting their growth, confidence and a sense of self-worth. For them, job and career are more important and at any cost they will not sacrifice it. It is a struggle to achieve and maintain economic status viz the family responsibilities.

Many feel that their mothers had to struggle hard to maintain their economic independence, or even forego it. Thus, it is important that parents and the society are sensitive towards women's work, in a patriarchal society like ours.

Family perception – Socialization in the family reinforce " Gender roles" where girls are encouraged to aspire for a limited range of occupations which are believed to be " feminine"

and compatible with the demands of their primary gender roles of housewives and mothers. One of the reasons is concerns about safety at public spaces.

Majority of women interviewed informed that "there is hardly a day when one is travelling in a public transport and is not harassed in some manner. Our parents do not encourage us to take up jobs that require late travel with remarks like "don't get too adventurous." We fear travelling in public transport especially in odd hours.

Gender stereotyping - Multiple roles, lack of career progress, discrimination and stereotyping are more common for women than men, leaving a negative impact on their economic growth. Without effective support at various levels, leaving the job is the only alternative that super imposes home responsibilities over official commitments.

Despite their investment in education, some recruiters were doubtful about women's commitment to their careers, assuming they would be responsible for childcare tasks. They believed their commitment to jobs would be less than their male counterparts. While these prejudicial attitudes were a source of frustration for the women employees, they knew they would not be employed if they challenged the interviewer on his assumptions. To prove their worth, the respondents emphasized on commitment to their careers, down playing desires for having a family.

An ideal situation reflects in this conversation between two women.
One – "How can I go to meet my mother when I have so many things to look after at home? I don't even have any time for myself."
Two – "Even I used to think that way. But then, I realized that this home belongs to both of us and so are the responsibilities. So I made myself loud and clear."

Abiding the Law – There are ongoing efforts on the part of the State to provide an environment of economic growth to women through laws and regulations. These include Maternity Benefits Act 2017, The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and non-discriminatory regulations.

However, these laws are not implemented in the right spirit, forcing women to leave jobs in many cases.

- *Motherhood penalty* – Though large companies obey the law, most of the small companies impose a penalty on women for having a family. Denial of maternity leave is a serious blow to their economic empowerment. While paternity leave exists, it is given for only a few days. Even with that, too few fathers take this leave.

> *An engineer employee recalled the interviewer asking all sorts of questions like "what happens when you leave children to come to work?". He had reservations about women employees as his experience shows 'most of the women leave the job once they have children.*
>
> *Another employee shared being cross questioned about marriage, having children, and coming back to work but not in a positive way.*

- *Safety* – Safety at workplace is the prime responsibility of the employer, which unfortunately is not always provided. Despite the Act, the reporting is negligible.

> *Many women complained that lewd comments, gestures, body postures, sexual teasing restricts their freedom of choice of jobs.*

- *Disparities at workplace* – Many organizations have workplace disparities in terms of pay parity, transparency, recruitment and retention policies, promotion policies, which takes a toll on physical and mental health of women and a financial and job penalty that undermines their talent at the cost of gender. Empirical evidence shows gender wage gap even with women with higher levels of education, reported at 20 per cent from 2016 to 2017.[5]

> *Our interaction with women employees gives prominence to the fact that 'equal opportunities policies' have not eliminated discriminatory practices. We were told in our interaction that women's dedication towards work is questioned, at beginning of their career they are not given target-based projects, with the assumption that after*

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[5] https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/gender-wage-gap-highest-in-india-women-are-paid-30-less-than-men-ilo-118112701048_1.html

> *marriage if they get pregnant they will pay less attention to their job. These days, with young people shifting their jobs and looking for better prospects, there is an overall understanding that married women might always give more importance to their husbands' career while it may not always be true.*

Mere provision of opportunities is not enough – Section 149(1) of Companies Act, 2013 requires that every listed company shall appoint at least one woman director within one year from the commencement, which is definitely a step towards achieving gender equality but it is not rare to find corporate mind set of having restricted access to the seat where corporate leaders may appoint their own female relatives to the Board, which defeats the purpose of the perspective. Thus, provisions are there for economic growth of women but they are not followed in the right spirit.

> *Interaction with women of different age groups in various sectors shows that women and even managers feel they are more committed to jobs. However, the employers exploit them by giving more responsibilities and timelines to complete the assignments. Women, seen as primary household caretakers, overtime and off- office hours are difficult for women and they either resign or forego promotions.*

5. Recommendations

The interaction indicates that things need to change and are changing. In a society where gender discrimination exists on many fronts, the way forward involves radical change in the mind-set of individuals and society and a commitment on the part of organisations to promote a gender-inclusive environment. Women have to pay a price for womanhood. Such situations make women choose between personal and professional lives, either in terms of compromise with marriage, having a family or divorce, which is already on an increase. In the long-run, this is certainly not the right choice.

A gender -equal society is also a gender -just society, where men and women get respect and equal access to opportunities from the time they are born and get opportunities because of their competence and not gender. In the ultimate analysis, gender equality is achieved when women live with dignity and exercise freedom of choice to control their lives both within and outside the household. It is important to place special emphasis on eliminating gender disparity,

if the constitutional guarantee of equal opportunities and prohibition of discrimination has to become a reality.

This shift needs to be critically examined from the point of view of various stakeholders. Change is not easy but it is possible if social dynamics change at the level of the organizations, society and women themselves.

Organisational Changes

The term "work" should be redefined with the concept of equality forming the bedrock on which organizations are created. Informal cultural norms need to be constantly re-examined, helping India move towards its goal of being an equal, holistic workplace for members of all genders.

Programmes to support and nurture high-potential women, and creating a positive working culture (equal opportunities for all, flexible hours, up skill training, diversity training programmes, supportive practices) can open up a significant new source of skills, energy and commitment for future.

Transformational leadership (incorporate gender empowerment concepts into the strategic management practices, have women representation on committees as chair and vice-chair) helps to promote women in the workforce. However, it will require a major culture shift. This is a low paced change and may require years for management and women themselves to reach that level.

Societal Changes

There has to be a radical change in the outlook (culture, individual mind-set, socioeconomic groups, social support, personality variables, family roles and responsibilities) towards women, allowing them the freedom to decide their fate in marriage, education and career. Interaction with women leaders at various platforms can change the spirit. Collectivism, than individualism allows negotiations and strengthens the decision-making abilities.

There is need to focus on implementation of policies and feedback reports at various levels. Gender sensitisation programmes should be part of the education and training curriculum. From home to schools to higher education to workplaces, men and women need to be sensitised towards gender issues.

Individual Changes

Leadership begins at home. Women should feel empowered on their own rather than wanting others to give them this power. Claude Ake (2000, p.70) emphasized that "democracy is never given; it is always taken" (as cited in Lindberg, 2004, p.28). Women need to assert

expectations of empowerment as their right and not any mercy on them.[6] They need to break the patriarchal barriers and gender norms, projecting themselves as role models and change agents in promoting public advocacy through workshops, lectures, and community (parents, friends and peer groups). Intervention of NGOs in gender sensitisation programmes that identify the location, align with local context, adopt a participatory approach and have a strong system of monitoring, evaluation and learning outcomes and creation of coalition groups can be part of the desired change. Women should be treated as economic actors to create an enabling eco-system to exercise their rights. While men are seen as employment-oriented responsible employees, women should equally be considered so. Overtime, off hours duties should be seen as their professional growth than hindrance to their household responsibilities. Men, in particular can be seen as agents of change for better results. Grooming right from childhood to jointly hold family responsibilities can make a big change.

In all, there is need to build an evaluation culture to drive programme effectiveness at all levels. Principles and strategies in programmes need to be integrated to recognise and challenge discrimination.

Conclusion

Gender diversity is a multi-dimensional concept and cannot be handled by individuals, organisations or policies alone. There has to be a complete change in perception, attitude, prejudices, and the traditional stereotypes with an inclusive environment where women feel included.

A change is observed in the outlook of younger generation to the extent that some of the young couples do not even want to have children for the sake of their career. Certainly not seen as a desirable option, there is need for cultural shift where women are not as an object but equal partners in all walks of life. Childhood grooming with no specific gender roles can help the society move in the desired direction.

The society has a major role to play in empowering women to ensure that family responsibilities do not come in the way of their career graph. Women need to be talked about all round the year and not just on 8ᵗʰ March…..

Strategic direction and support, programme development at local and national level, sectoral research, implementation, monitoring, impact assessment and partnership building

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[6] Empowerment and Gender Equality: The Retention and Promotion of Women in the Workforce
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have been and will continue to be the back bone of contributing to the cause. Empowerment should be used as a matter of right and not benefaction.

Certain open-ended questions need to be addressed for women to realise their economic potential:

Should women not travel alone especially after dark or work in night shifts?

Is it a blow to a man's ego to run the household on his wife's earnings?

Should a man earn more than his wife?

Should a woman give up her career for the sake of the husband?

Are women not as professional as men?

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