Research Article

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY CONSTRUCTION WORKING WOMEN IN CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the study was to understand the problems and issues faced by urban working women in Tamilnadu. 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 construction of Chennai, Tamilnadu. 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 Chennai 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 stereo typed 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 carepolicies and appropriate grievance redressal mechanisms for women in place at the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of human development, women play a vital role in the history making asmen have been. In a society women has a greater fact of visa – versa in employment and in work is a significant indicator of a nation's overall progress. Absolutely, without the full active participation of women in national activities, the social, economic or political progress of a country will get worse and become stagnant. But tragically, and generally women are not taken very seriously by their superiors, colleagues, or society atlarge. Due to their family responsibility they have a career poses challenge. In a patriarchal society like Tamilnadu it is still believed that a man is the primary bread earner of his family. Although Tamilnadu women have started working outside their homes but still they have a long way to go both culturally, socially and economically, to bring inpositive attitudinal changes in the mind-set of people.

It is generally perceived that gender preference against working women starts right from thestage of recruitment. Most of the Tamilnadu 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 aresult of which Tamilnadu women have a tendency to opt for less demanding jobs even if they arehighly qualified. Women have the responsibilities to effectively manage their multiple roles indomestic as well as professional lives. Men generally do not offer any help in the households work. The life of working women extremely stressful.

Background Information

While a majority of the women still face discrimination and gender prejudice, in the last few decades, the number of

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women successful in politics, technology and business etc. is definitelyon 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 noprofession today where women are not employed. However, it is true that working women haveto 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). Tamilnadu patriarchal society thinks of women only as homemakers and sexual objects and is generally subjected to exploitation and torture (Dube, 2001).

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 thegender differences in ownership, control and access to land trough inheritance, marriage or informal networks (Arun, 1994). Women's economic status in the household, depends on threelevels 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 workin 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.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Educated urban women are presumed to be more aware of the chances 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 inspiration 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.

Historically, women have suffered oppression and domination by the patriarchal society in Tamilnadu 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 theywere bound to follow including their 'initiation rites.' They are taught to be respectful wives andsisters and also to respect their elders; manners are taught to them, like how to walk, talk, sit, andwork at home and many others. They are neither considered as individuals with a personality oftheir 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 Tamilnadu 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.

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 peravailable research, a large number of women workers complain of frequent headaches, backpain, circulatory disorders, fatigue, and emotional and mental disorders resulting from performing various activities at the workplace.

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). Eventhough 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 beoffered 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 salaried employment and family care. Work related stress problems faced by working women. Sufferers 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:

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 can 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

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 income 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.

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 prejudiceness, but surely the broad similarities specific to a particular gender, will provide some insight to the study.

Review of Literature

The literature review shows that more focus is on married working women than on unmarried working women Singhal (1995) is of the opinion that, "Participation of women in workforce is essential for economic development and population planning." 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 programmers and women were discriminated against in career development opportunities. The study recommended that organizations should strive to ensure that career development programmers 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." Skinner and Pocock (2008) investigated the relationship between work overload, work schedule control, work hours and their fit with preferences and work-life conflict among full-time employees (N=887). It was found that the "strongest association with work-life conflict was demonstrated by work overload, followed by work schedule control, work hours and work hours fit. Time-based work life policies, procedures and interventions were found necessary, but not sufficient, for addressing work-life conflict. They called for effective management of work overload to support a healthy work-life relationship." Ahmad and Aminah (2007) examined the work-family conflict experienced by 239 married female production operators in dual-career families, the social support they received and the coping strategies used to manage the conflict. "The women experienced more work interference with family than family interference with work. The intensity of work interference with family was significantly higher in the earlier life-cycle stage than in the later stage. About two thirds of the women indicated that they intended to leave their job upon having another child, mainly due to the rising cost of child-care services. They received the least social support from their supervisors compared to other sources, and tended to cope with conflict using reactive role behavior and personal role redefinition strategies." According to the study, "the three main consequences of work-life imbalance were stress and burnout, ill-health and poor work performance. The respondents also experienced guilt of not being able to spend time with family, anxiety about poor performance, displacement of negative emotions on family members and on co-workers." Ming (2007) "examined the relationship of self-efficacy, work family conflict, social support, gender role attitude, role model and career aspiration to top management among women in middle management at the manufacturing line. This study intended to determine the contribution of each factor to career aspiration. Data were collected from 109 married women in middle management at eight private manufacturing companies located in Bangi and Nilai. This study found that self-efficacy, social support, gender role attitude and role model were significantly related to career aspiration ($p<0.05$). Specifically, self-efficacy and gender role attitude were the most significant antecedents of career aspiration among women in middle management in manufacturing line." Long hour work includes working in the banking sector of every economy. After even thelong hour daily for five days, Saturdays are now included. Women can either act as so-called superwomen in order to cope with these competing demands or find other ways of handling the overload at work or at home (Gordon and Whelan-Berry, 2005). Women, who felt overburdened by all of the pressures they must shoulder, run the risk of burnout and a possible end to their corporate aspirations (Gallagher and Goland, 2000, cited by Easton, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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 Chennai city.Chennai city is a metrocity; 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 three month period from July to September 2017.

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 consisted of 20 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 Chennai 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 Chennai 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 toface 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:

1. To gain sufficient 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.

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The graphical representation of each of the items is given below:

Table 1 Time Taken for Women to get promoted as compared to their male colleagues (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Equal time	50	67
Longer	13	18
Earlier	12	16

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 67% of female employees were promoted at the same time irrespective of their gender, 17% women were promoted earlier than their male colleagues and 16% took longer than their male peers**.** The above data reflects that gender prejudicerelated to promotions do not prevail much in the working atmosphere.

Table 2 Attitude of boss towards female colleagues as perceived by the women Employees (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Co-operative	33	44
Neutral	40	53
Abusive	2	3

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 53% female agreed that their boss attitude towards them were neutral, 44% women said that their boss was co-operative with them and 3% women said their boss attitude towards them were abusive.

Table 3 Perception of prevalence of sexual harassment or underestimation on thebasis of gender (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	45	60
No	30	40

Source: Primary data

Inference: According to the above information 60% of females agreed that sometimes they felthesitant to work with male colleagues and 40% said that they were not comfortable with malecolleagues. 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 inour society, reinforced down the years by negative experiences and general awareness.

Table 4 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 nostrict actions were taken, while only a small 11% felt that sufficient actions were taken.

Table 5 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.

Table 6 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.

Table 7 Perception of women on being given easier jobs and being given respect at work as compared tomale candidates (in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	35	47
No	22	29
Can't say	18	24

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 and general feel that people respect them as compared to their male colleagues. They work as hard asanyone.

Table 8 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

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.

Table 9 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.

Table 10 Perception among women facing problems related to your family life, professional life and financial independence giving more respect in the society(in nos.)

	No. of respondent	Percentage (%)
Yes	47	63
No	28	37

Source: Primary Data

Inference: 56% females responded agreed they were not faced with any problems relating to family life, professional life and financial independence gives them more respect in the society. 44% females responded that they find it difficult to managefamily life, professional life and financial independence 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. 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

Table 11 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.

Interpretation of Qualitative Data (for items 15-17, face to face interviews and FGDs)

Most of the working women said that as working women you will definitely suffer from problems. Health related problems like physical and mental stress, general weakness, excessive work load because of work pressure, family pressure etc. are all very real issues. Sometimes the stress is so profound that they feel like leaving their jobs but then they realize that these are all a part of life that they have to fight and endure, which ultimately makes them stronger. Gender discrimination also happens, men think that women are not capable enough to work properly and unable to take decision in a better way.

One more interesting, but bitter fact that was revealed was that female colleagues also give mental stress, like indulging in jealous behavior, unnecessary gossip and rivalry. Several women also commented on injustice meted out to them by their female colleagues where they spread negative rumors about one's character and upbringing. They neither listen to, nor are they interested in listening to your side of the story, but simply continue with their comments, and any objection to that is met with arguments and unreasonable behavior. They try to harass by creating confusion and misunderstanding with superiors and complain about other females. Male members also try to extract sexual favors. If one is a single/divorcee/separated from husband, then other male members try to get close and if they do not a favourable response then they start talking spreading rumors casting aspersions on the woman's character and family. They resort to name-calling and ascribe certain derogatory names that influence others in the workplace. People become judgmental and become blind to one's good qualities, instead highlight only the bad ones. Not only male co-workers but also female co-workers resort to this kind of mental torture and harassment. If working women work and get a higher post then people usually think that the woman has got the higher post because of favouritism and draw conclusions on her character rather than accepting her capability of achieving this kind of a position.

Most of the women admitted to sexual harassment happening inside the workplace but in a city like Chennai there is less probability of sexual harassment than in metro cities, because people are more concerned about the scandal it might create in a small place like Chennai, and also because of the fact that people know each other more closely, as compared to bigger cities which provides a kind of anonymity. In Chennai they face more mental pressure, health complications, depression, and criticism from male and female colleagues. But female colleagues are more personal in their criticism, they comment more on a colleague's character, standard of living, family matters, even dressing styles etc.

Sexual harassment is faced by women not only in the workplace but also outside the workplace.

Women have a fear of their own safety and security not only from strangers but also from their own relatives or neighbours try to sexually harass and abuse them. They have a fear of sexual abuse (touching, staring, lewd comments etc.). Commuting in public transports to their office s brings in these kinds of sexual abuses but they lack the financial resources to give themselves a better deal.

Financial independence gives women more respect in the society. For a woman, being financially independent is very essential. It enhances one's reputation and begets more freedom and independence in the society. Women feel self-empowered and better and it helps them in their economic and social status also.

Suggestion

It was observed that different women have different perception of their needs, fears, obstructions 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. 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. So the question a rises as to why only women have to balance both lives, and why women have all these burdens thrust on them.

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.)
- Financial independence gives women more respect in the society as perceived by the working women.
- Not much aware about Acts and Policies favouring women in the workplace.
- Life as a single parent very challenging for working women. Working women are forced to leave their small children at home because of their work

CONCLUSION

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

- 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.
- Women face problems leaving kids at home and going to work early in the morning.
- Child rearing problems are always faced by 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 take care of children.
- Governments should make it mandatory for companies to install Global Positioning
- Providing self-defence training to women; installing safety devices and CCTVs at thework place; undertaking police verification of cab drivers, security guards etc.
- In a patriarchal society like Tamilnadu a particular boundary exists only for women, and if they try tocross that boundary then people start criticising 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. Tamilnadu 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 areable to handle any adverse situations.

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