

Gender at the Workplace: A Study in Inclusion

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Abstract

The working class population in Indian society has been largely centred on the male members of the group. Being dominantly patriarchal in nature, Indian social systems promote the ascendancy of the male over the female in all spheres of personal and professional life and the working class environment has traditionally been no exception to this rule. Women, both married and unmarried, have been confined to homes while men have gone to factories and institutions to earn a means of sustenance for the entire family. As a result, the structures in the workplace have also remained constant with men dealing with men in most factories. This paper examines the manner in which a certain alteration in the gender ratio of an organisation can bring about positive change in terms of productivity, behaviours, attitudes and efficiency on the shop floor. This paper studies one manufacturing organisation in the Malwa region in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India to highlight these changes through the manner in which the organisation implements this change.

Key Words: Female workers, Gender in Workplace, Gender ratios, MSMEs, Working Class

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Introduction

The working class environment in India has been predominantly male-centric, with a majority of the workers being men. Medium scale manufacturing enterprises (MSMEs), even today, prefer to employ men due to a long-held belief that men are better to work with than women and also work harder than women. Faith in the physical prowess and abilities of men makes them more apt for heavy work that is carried out in factories. Historically, it has been noticed that the number of women employed in the working class environment is significantly lower than men. Gender discrimination is rampant with not only reduced employment but also lower wages being paid for the same work to women employees. While there are clear injunctions and laws provided by the government of India that state that equal wages must be paid for equal work, this is rarely followed. Discussing the institution of these laws, Vimla Randive in her article "Working Class Women" points out that in connection with the UN and International Labour Organization's (ILO) dedication of the year 1975 to the "cause of women when their specific demands should be popularized and democratic opinion created," the Government of India also "promulgated an ordinance on equal wage for equal work" (146). She further adds that, "although the directive principles of the constitution recognize equal

status for men and women, and prohibit discrimination on grounds of sex ... it is everybody's knowledge that women in all fields of life are treated as inferior partners" (Randive 146-147).

This inferiority continues in the current workforce scenario as well. The report on *Global Employment Trends 2013* of the ILO states that the labour force participation rate for women employees in the Indian labour force was 29 per cent in the year 2009-10. This has seen a substantial decrease from the 37.3 per cent recorded in 2004-5. This data becomes particularly stark when one looks at the staggering 51-point difference from the male labour force participation rate. This decline is consistent across sectors as well as areas. Sunita Sanghi, A Srija and Shirke Shrinivas Vijay note in "Decline in Rural Female Labour Force Participation in India: A Relook into the Causes" that while the urban female labour force participation in India has declined from 246/1000 in the year 2004-5 to 205/1000 in 2011-12, the rural participation has also reduced from 497/1000 in 2004-5 to 358/1000 in 2011-12 of workers in the 15-plus age group (256). In *Women in the Boardroom: A global perspective* by Deloitte, it becomes evident that these numbers decrease further as one climbs up the corporate ladder with women holding only 7.7 per cent of board seats across organisations and an abysmal 2.7 per cent of board chairs (11). Since the focus of this study is the blue-collar workers in the manufacturing sector, it is useful to look at data in this context as well which demonstrates the same dismal trends as far as women's employment is concerned. The female labour participation rate continues to be low and in fact is much lower than the national average. On an average, about 20 per cent of females have participated in the organised manufacturing sector from 2000-01 to 2009-

10 (Chaudhari, Panigrahi 111). This clearly demonstrates that the male worker dominates the manufacturing sector in India with 80 percent participation. Even though there have been many changes in relation to female literacy, employment and women's empowerment (through various schemes introduced by the government), these factors have not brought about a significant change when it comes to the proportion of female participation in this sector. Even the welfare policies instituted for the safety and protection of female workers are unable to boost the rates of female labour force participation in the manufacturing sector.

A part from the low female participation in the labour force at large and in manufacturing in particular, studies have also noted that there is a great wage disparity between male and female workers. Chaudhari and Panigrahi note, "Industries with a comparatively higher proportion of female workers are paying them lower than average male-wages" (116). In certain industries, the wage differential is as low as 0.24 for the year 2009-10, which may be "one of the major reasons for less participation of female workers in the manufacturing sector" (Chaudhari, Panigrahi 116). All of this creates an atmosphere that does not promote female participation in the manufacturing sector.

In this environment of very little scope for female empowerment and intervention, this paper attempts to offer an insight into the manner in which an alteration in the gender ratios of the blue-collar workforce can bring about a positive change in the organisation in question. It focuses on one organisation in the Malwa region as an illustrative case to demonstrate the means in which this change is realised.

Research Methodology

This is an on-going qualitative study that uses in-depth interviews with workers, middle management and top management and/ or MD/ CEO of multiple organisations to understand the manner in which culture is driven and functions in an organisation. It looks at family-owned MSMEs from different sectors except industries that are engaged in agricultural, food and animal products. During the course of the study, it was observed that one organisation had a distinct employee pattern as compared to the others. More often than not, female employees were conspicuous by their absence in most of the manufacturing units visited except for this one organisation. Once this anomaly was noticed, the researchers focused on the manner in which gender functions in an organisation.

For the purposes of shortlisting the respondents, a random sampling method was used. The workers were usually on the shop floor and the researchers approached them without the presence of a person from the management as introducers. A semi-structured interview was used for the female workers with questions that ranged from the work environment for

the women, the manner in which the management treated the women, the redressal of complaint system, how safe the women felt working in this organisation and the perceived benefits of working in this particular organisation. The researchers moved from workers to middle management to top management in collection of data. For the middle management, questions regarding the manner in which this culture of promoting women employment is driven were at the centre of the enquiry. Since middle management is usually responsible for driving the culture of an organisation, it was important to understand the initiatives and techniques that the middle management employed in order to be able to drive this. Senior management was required to comment on the responsibility of the management towards its employees. Further, the conversation with the MD was structured in order to gauge the benefits that a large female workforce brings to the organisation. Through these investigations the researchers have tried to study the following:

1. Is a more balanced gender ratio an asset to an organisation?
2. Are there greater benefits if organisations invest in equalising the disparity of gender ratio?
3. What are the various kinds of benefits that female workers bring to the organisation, both tangible and intangible, in terms of behavioural as well as production level impact?

The qualitative nature of the study provides a clearer understanding of the manner in which gender influences the systems of an organisation at large as well as of its employees. In-depth interviews were able to provide an insight into parameters such as feelings of safety, security, and faith in the organisation. It is well documented that numbers are incomplete in reflecting the entire picture when it comes to research questions regarding human value systems and cultural systems. At the same time, the intangible benefits that the MD discussed may not have surfaced in a strictly quantitative study. The following section will briefly discuss the common findings of some organisation while contrasting it with the illustrative organisation in order to highlight the differences.

Observations and Findings

In the course of the in-depth study that has been conducted across seven organisations as of now, the researchers observed similar patterns of employment. The employee landscape in MSMEs in India is characterised by the floating nature of the workforce and this was observed repeatedly on the field. Majority of the organisations studied had a mix of permanent, temporary and contractual labour that they employ to complete the various tasks. The first two categories of workers were directly on company rolls and the last one was sourced through a contractor. This situation was observed only in the worker class and was usually not

replicated in the staff at most organisations. The staff population, on the other hand, was less uncertain and was likely to work at the organisations for longer durations. This is one of the major distinctions in the manner in which the blue collar and white-collar workforces function in the sector. In the workers, the permanent employees were seen as performing more skilled tasks due to their prolonged exposure to the procedures at hand and contractual labour attended to less demanding tasks.

This discussion will focus only on the worker population. In most of the organisations studied, it was observed that the number of female employees was much lower than the male such that there were some organisations that had a single female employee in the whole organisation who was usually a member of the staff and not of the shop floor. On the shop floor, women were conspicuous by their absence. When asked to comment on this absence, the CEOs/ MDs of these organisations said that employing women creates problems on the shop floor. These problems ranged from extra responsibility that the management needs to shoulder in order to ensure the safety of the female employees; inability to allocate night shifts to female employees, which results in conflict as men question the inevitable bias in the favour of the women; and the manner in which anything can be interpreted as a misdemeanour which in turn may lead to legal issues and other greater concerns for the organisation. Largely, the employers were convinced that employing women was less likely to bring benefits to them.

In this conventionally patriarchal landscape, where female workers are seen as more of a burden than an asset, the focus organisation has decided to change the picture. Engaged in producing small electrical equipment in the Malwa region of the state of Madhya Pradesh, the shop floor of this organisation is startlingly different with a visibly large number of female employees. The researchers observed that the women were involved in different stages of production on the shop floor. Chaudhari and Panigrahi provide a definition of the worker in the manufacturing sector, which fits in very well with this formulation where the individual is engaged in active production work. They state that “persons, directly involved in the production process, are considered as workers”, while “persons, not directly engaged in the production process, are not included in the workers” so that labour involved in “repair & maintenance, or production of fixed assets for own use of the factory, or employed for generating electricity, or producing coal, gas etc. are included” (Chaudhari, Panigrahi 110). If one was to consider this definition then the structure of the shop floor in the focus organisation is divided into permanent workers and full time employees (FTEs) on contract. The permanent workers produce the entire unit of the finished equipment from its first stage whereas the FTEs work in an assembly line with each employee

responsible for a certain part of the process. While the permanent employees work on a fixed salary, the FTEs work on a per piece basis where their emoluments are directly linked with the units produced. Further, since in an assembly line, the final product depends on the productivity of each and every individual, there is a certain pressure to perform better not only for self but also for others. Additionally, it was observed that there is a constant tension between the permanent workers and the FTEs since the latter tend to make more money and do not support the permanent workers in their demands to the management since any time spent away from the machine reduces their takeaway salary.

In the focus organisation, it was observed that the percentage of female employees was higher in the FTEs than in the permanent workers. The overall female participation in the labour force of the organisation would rest between 35-40 per cent of women, depending on the challenges of the floating population due to the employment of contractual labour. This is significantly higher than the national average of the manufacturing sector at large as well as the recorded average for this particular sector. This organisation befits the category of electrical equipment in which the national average for female participation in the labour force in the year 2010 was 8.47 per cent (Chaudhari, Panigrahi 119). Given the huge difference in the data, one can safely assume that the organisation has consciously invested in promoting the employment of women.

During the in-depth interviews the women workers pointed out that the organisation is extremely women friendly with the MD taking a keen interest in the question of safety of women. They felt safe in the organisation and also were aware that it was difficult for untoward incidents to happen or go unpunished. In terms of a redressal system, the women are encouraged to directly approach the MD to register their complaints. Women are widely respected and there is a great insistence on their safety. The organisation is pro-women and action is taken immediately if female employees raise any complaints. The researchers learnt of one case of misbehaviour in which a female employee had lodged a complaint against a fellow male worker. She added that he was promptly called and asked to leave the organisation with immediate effect. It is only when the female employee, who had lodged the complaint, decided to give the fellow worker a chance is when he was allowed to stay. The company has a strict no tolerance policy as far as the decorum towards members of the female gender is concerned and does not brook any delay in taking decisions. The women also said that there are hardly any instances of this kind and that they are able to do their work in peace. The no tolerance policy, constantly reinforced by the MD, reassures the female workers that their concerns will be addressed speedily and will not be dismissed, which in turn brings more women to the organisation. The

women workers further added that this releases any tension that they might have felt on this score and makes it more conducive to work in the focus organisation. It was also observed that the owners have started another unit, which is staffed only with female workers. This was an unusual phenomenon and was not observed in any of the industries visited during the course of this study, as most organisations were conspicuous by the absence of female workforce on the shop floor rather than abundance of it. The stark contrast provided by this phenomenon was further investigated and the findings have been detailed in the next section.

MD Speak: Reasons for Employing Women and Inferences

During the interactions with the various levels of employees, it became very evident that the building of a woman friendly organisation is an agenda directly driven by the MD of the organisation. Members of the middle management had very clear mandates to drive this agenda as well as weed out problems that would tarnish this image of the organisation. They even added that over the years they have observed that women are better workers in terms of commitment and diligence. Women perform their duties with utmost sincerity and do not gossip as much as the men. They work honestly and all day long while boys wander around and chit chat, extending their breaks.

When asked about his motivation for employing women and for promoting the image of a pro-women organisation, the MD had many concrete reasons to provide. He said that women's employment has provided him with manifold benefits, which have grown over the years. The most tangible benefit of their employment is that women help in controlling the behaviour of the men on the shop floor. For example, men are unable to indulge in untoward behaviours such as use of abusive language, taking off their shirts during summer, spitting *gutkha* in places. The women keep the smoking in check as they complain if a fellow worker has smoked and then come to the workstation. They also check the manner in which men interact with one another on the shop floor as well as the time that they dedicate to their work rather than to gossip. Commenting on the behavioural checks that the women exercise on the men, the MD added that it becomes a huge advantage because it improves the environment of the shop floor, reduces down time and boosts production and efficiency.

Another major benefit of large-scale women employment, according to him, is that women do not engage in forming unions or even supporting the causes of the same. When probed he said that most women workers in his organisation have family constraints which require them to be at home immediately after their shifts get over. Unmarried women are asked by their parents to return at a stipulated time and married

women have responsibilities of the home, hearth and children to take care of. As a result, they mostly do not have the time to stay back post their shift for involvement in union activities that prove detrimental for the organisation. Given the conflict between the union and the management in this organisation, with the unionised workers negotiating constantly on less work and more pay, this is a massive advantage for the organisation. Since the female FTEs have more engagements outside the factory and also have needs of their families to attend to, they mostly keep to themselves, which in turn benefits the organisation. Women employees result in a floating population as most young women work from the age of 20-24 years, get married by 24 and, more often than not, subsequently leave. This reduces the average age of the organisation, keeping it young, and also checks the formation of cliques and communities, which might have proved detrimental to the organisation at a later stage. Their presence promotes cultural vibrancy and dynamism creating a more balanced and stable environment on the shop floor.

While the MD of the focus organisation may have been motivated to employ more women when he observed the changing work environment of other organisations that employed women, his organisation is committed to the cause of creating a women friendly organisation. He feels that it is the responsibility of every individual to do something, however small, for the community in which they live and his vision of a plant that is manned by a 100 per cent female workforce will go a long way in promoting greater employment of women in the area. He further believes that an increase in the female labour force participation not only benefits the economy but also ameliorates the living conditions and standards of any community.

The many advantages of large-scale female employment in any organisation show that a more balanced gender ratio in an organisation is beneficial. The presence of women and men in the same sphere checks the behaviour of both groups and promotes production and efficiency. The presence of the women, as observed by the middle management and the MD of the focus organisation, provides tangible and intangible benefits to the organisation. They stabilise the work environment, check unruly behaviour and are seen to be more dedicated to their work, which in turn motivates the other employees to perform better. The employment of women benefits not only the organisation but also the social community and promotes steady grassroots growth. For the organisation, having the image and culture of a female friendly organisation results in appreciation of the steps being taken towards greater diversity and inclusion. The case of the focus organisation provides ample evidence for an increase in the female labour force participation in the manufacturing sector. Just as the MD of this organisation was motivated by the positive outcomes of

employing women in other organisations, this organisation can be an example to be followed in order to increase and promote the inclusion of the women into the labour force of this country. Since the position of women and their status in any society is usually considered to be an index of its civilisation, the betterment of the womenfolk of the country may be one way to achieve growth of the community and the nation at large.

Limitations and Scope for Further Research

The main limitation of this study is that it is an on-going project and the findings cannot be conclusive at this stage. This paper presents preliminary findings, which the researchers hope to fortify and enhance as the study progresses. The qualitative nature of the study precludes any concrete and quantitative mapping, which may demonstrate the direct relations between the variables considered. The study considers a very specific segment of the manufacturing sector and many other sectors may be covered to understand the dynamics of gender as they function. This would then allow for a cross-sectoral comparison, thereby contributing to the richness of the data and the strength of the inferences.

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