A Five-Year Qualitative Study to Understand the Psychosocial Factors behind Low Representation of Women in Workforce in South Asia

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Abstract--- Gender stratification at the work place is a serious issue. This study is aimed to explore the psychosocial factors behind low representation of women in workforce in South Asia. Between August 2012 and July 2017, we conducted a qualitative study among 100 in-depth interviewees and 50 key informant interviewees. The study revealed that gender stereotyping was the main reason behind low participation of women in workforce. This paper discusses the study and concludes that increasing the participation of women in the workforce cannot be achieved through education alone. The solution lies in changing the collective cognition of entire society as a whole.

Keywords--- Qualitative Research, Women in Workforce, South Asia, Gender Stereotyping, Gender Gap.

Introduction

Gender stratification at the work place is a serious issue. The number of women in workforce is very less compared to men. Even in developed countries, there are jobs that are masculinized. In spite of technological and collective cognitive development of the society, there still remains a huge gap in the number of women in workforce. The gap is even wider in developing countries like India. Literature search revealed that there is an absolute lacuna in the knowledge from developing countries like India on why this gender gap exists. This study is aimed to explore the psychosocial factors behind low representation of women in workforce in South Asia.

Methods

Between August 2012 and July 2017, we conducted 100 in-depth interviews with girls from colleges of India, and another 50 key informant interviews with women in well established professions earning greater than 6 lakhs INR per annum between the age of 35 to 40 years, to understand the psychosocial factors behind the low representation of women in workforce in South Asia. Maximum variation sampling was done for the qualitative study based on age, residence, religion, social strata, education, work experience, marital status, number of children and who best represented their social strata or religion or caste or culture. Audio recorded interviews were transcribed as extended notes and were initially explored using focused coding and constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Few emergent codes and categories were identified from the text and added to
the existing codes gained from observational studies. Axial coding was done to
develop connections between categories derived from all data. Themes were
identified by looking for similarities, differences and relationships between categories
(Gibson & Brown, 2009).

Results

The 100 participants in the in-depth interviews were in the age group of 18-21
years, and 12 of them were married. They came from the following religions;
Hindus=50, Muslims=17, Christians=22, Jains=6, Buddhists=3 and others=2. Table 1
shows the distribution of interviewees based on the stream that they come from and
the urban-rural participation. Table 2 shows the distribution of interviewees on the
grounds of socio-economic status, which is based on the modified Kuppusamy socio-
economic status scale.

Key Informant Interviews

The 50 participants in the key informant interviews were in the age group of 35-40
years, and two of them were unmarried. Their mean annual income was 8.96 lakhs
INR. Table 1 shows distribution of the interviewees based on their profession.

Table 1: Distribution of Interviewees based on the Stream, Profession and Urban-rural
Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stream</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Science</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Architects</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Engineers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Bureaucrats</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Services preparing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>HR professionals</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film Institute</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Distribution of the In-Depth Interviewees based on Socio-economic Status
(Modified Kuppusamy Classification)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-economic status</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper lower</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower middle</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper middle</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

The broad themes identified were gender stereotyping, work-life balance issues
and moral and social responsibilities.

Gender Stereotyping

Gender stereotyping was mentioned as the major reason by all respondents.
Gender stereotyping was found at various levels of the social structure and during
different phases of life.

DOI: 10.9756/BP2018.1012/13
At Different Social Structures During Different Phases of Life

Home (Early Childhood)

“My parents used to tell me how I should not try to be like my brother. My brother was free to go to a reputed school while I was put in a school that barely had any reputation. After my schooling, I wanted to pursue medicine; my brother went abroad to study while my parents forced me to take up a course in a college that is near our home.” (Arts and Science Student, Rural)

Home (After graduation)

“When I first decided to come into politics, my dad was against all this. He did his best to discourage me from taking up a post in a political party as a youth wing leader. He used to say that politics are not for women, and I should go for something like teaching.” (Politician, Leader of Youth Wing of a National Political Party)

School (Adolescence)

“I had a tough time in school when I told them I wanted to be an entrepreneur and start a chain of restaurants. My teachers used to tell me that hotel business is not for women. You need to work like a man and will have to face a lot of issues. This stopped me from pursuing my dream of having a restaurant for more than ten years, but later on I decided to give it a try.” (Entrepreneur, running a chain of small-scale restaurants)

College (Graduation)

“My teachers used to be very encouraging till I told them about my dreams to start a company. Once I told them that I am planning a tech startup, my teachers said that it would be difficult for me to start, find investors, handle team and so on. They were professors from creamy layer of the society. I was shocked because the same professor helped one of my colleagues to find seed funding for his start-up.” (Engineering student, Urban)

“Colleges are pretty good compared to my school when it came to women participation. But our professor is against women participating in the inter-college competition and cultural activities. She permits boys to engage in any activity while girls can participate only if it is academic. We protested, but she is firm stating that women are not designed for all these.” (Architecture Student, Urban)

“My college helped me get out of the fixed mindset thinking. We had a sports teacher who encouraged us to take part in activities like boxing and martial arts which were traditionally a man’s sport. It helped me to gain lot of confidence. It was her motivation that I decided to pursue civil services.” (Bureaucrat, India)

Workplace

“My super boss does not believe that women can do many things like managing the organization, leading a team or handling clients. He will make us do only jobs where there is not much scope to exhibit leadership qualities or management abilities.” (Human Resource Manager, Bangalore, South India)

“I was initially hesitant to go to places like brothels to collect stories for the news, but my boss encouraged me to go. It was his guidance that helped me breakthrough the closed brothel community in North India. I was able to interview women for two months and finally presented the news on prime time which became a huge success. It was the turning point in my career. I always wonder what would have happened to my
career if my Editor did not give me this confidence; I would have remained a normal journalist throughout my life.” (Journalist, National TV, English)

Social strata

“When I first joined a film institute, my parents took the heat from our neighbors. They kept on pestering them why they allowed me to go to a film institute.” (Film Institute Student, Pune)

“I come from a middle class where women are given specific roles, but I got married to a man of the upper society where they were pretty cool about me working as a model.” (Model, Mumbai)

Culture and Traditions

“I believe it (culture and traditions) has been the single most factor for all my decisions in my life. Right from schooling, work, college, marriage, etc., everything has to be decided by the elders of our family. They got me married when I was 18; I was hardly aware of the world. By the time I was 25 and mature enough to decide my life, I already had three kids. So, I had to leave all my dreams and go on with my usual role of being a mother, though later on, I chose to do distance education.” (Arts and Science student, North-East India)

Caste

“I come from a caste where girls are married soon...I fought with my parents to continue my studies... they insisted that I get married... finally I got married and pursued studies to become a teacher... but I always wanted to become a MBA graduate working in corporate...” (Teacher training student, Rural)

“In our caste, women are not supposed to go to work, so I could not pursue my dream as a filmmaker. Rather after marriage, I got a chance to work as a makeup artist with a senior actress; it was through her support that I got into Media working with YouTube channel, and then started my own channel on social media. Today I have close to 10,000 followers, but I cannot expand my business because our caste does not permit it.” (YouTube Artist, Bangalore)

Moral and Social Responsibility

Another reason stated by women in this study is the moral and social responsibilities handed down to them by various personal, interpersonal and social factors.

Taking care of in-laws and kids

“I was working in a corporate hospital as a physician, and I had to stay late at work when there was an emergency. My in-laws were quite old who required assistance to do their daily chores and my kids had to be helped with their homework, so I quit the job and set up a clinic right next to my house to take care of them.” (Doctor, India)

Giving up on dreams if necessary

“I got offers to go abroad and work with reputed firms, but I could not because I had my family in India. Going away from home will be a great issue for my kids, parents, husband and in-laws, so I decided to give up on my dreams of working abroad.” (Architect, India)
Work-Life Balance

All of them invariably stated that work-life balance as the major problem.

"Even if all the factors fall into place, managing both work and family is a huge task which I am still struggling with. Though I have maids to take care of work at home, spending quality time with my kids is an unresolved issue till date." (Gynaecologist, India)

"My husband’s health suffered a lot when I was working full time in a company in night shift. I hardly had time to talk to him; we never had a vacation for three years, so I quit my job as a software professional and started taking up projects at home." (Software Engineer, India)

Discussion

The study revealed that gender stereotyping was mentioned as the major reason by all the respondents. Gender stereotyping was found at various levels of the social structure and during different phases of life. Another reason stated by women in this study is the moral and social responsibilities handed down to them by various personal, interpersonal and social factors like taking care of kids, family, parents and in-laws. All of them invariably pointed work-life balance as the major problem. Though work-life balance is something that is personal to every individual, gender stereotyping seems to be the major reason why women tend to participate less in the workforce.

Various levels of stereotyping had a profound impact on the family. The family’s stereotyping was influenced by their residence, caste, social status, culture, etc., which in turn led to deciding the gender role for women (Figure 1) - this was purely involuntary. However, this model was slightly altered when they were in their middle ages where these roles were voluntarily taken based on the perceived role by peers, social circles and pre-existing gender stereotyping from childhood (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Stereotype Fixing for a Girl Child by Family

DOI: 10.9756/BP2018.1012/13
Finally, a woman sets up a framework of reference for her role based on all these inputs from family, society, peers, caste, religion, cultures, residence, etc., to decide what she can do and what she cannot. When she acts by this framework, she has no conflict, gets approved by her immediate social circle, and she repeats the action. On the other hand, when she does against these established roles, she is disapproved of and gets selectively punished through isolation, backbiting, etc. (Figure 3).

Increasing the participation of women in the workforce cannot be achieved through education alone. The solution lies in changing the collective cognition of entire society as a whole. Awareness programs to help girl children choose their careers should be done. Parents should be encouraged to help their girl children choose their career, profession and work. Finally, a good supportive family is what is most important for any woman to excel in career or work. Men should particularly be educated about the changing roles of women when it comes to working and that they are no longer housewives with buried dreams.

Figure 2: Stereotype Fixing by the Woman Herself
Figure 3: Decision Making Related to Work Based on Stereotyping

References

