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## Working Woman: Issues and Challenges

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### Abstract

Empowerment of women is indispensable for the development or progress of a nation. Without the support of women, men alone cannot bring the desired changes in the growth and economy of a nation. Since times immemorial, women have been economically dependent on men. They were not allowed to participate in the decision-making process, they have been accorded a subordinate status to men. Now, with the efforts of various feminists and activists, the times are changing and women are gradually becoming economically self-dependent. But, the other side of these economically self-dependent women is that they have almost become a multi tasking machine for the reason that they are still not absolved of their traditional identity as a homemaker. They have to face different kinds of problems and difficulties both at their workplace as well as home. The irony is that women find themselves unable to keep people happy and satisfied both at workplace and at her home. Indeed, there is a need to redefine the status of women in true sense and also the need of gender sensitization to help women to attain their actual emancipation.

**Key Words:** working woman, security, violence, gender, hurdle, stress.

In the present scenario, women have become the main driver behind a nation's economy. Today, in the global world, there are so many discussions everywhere about the equality of men and women. But the fact that could not be denied is that working women have to face many challenges and difficulties just by virtue of their gender. It is relevant to mention here that by working women, we are referring to those who are in paid employment. There are homemakers as well whose work go unnoticed, unrewarded and unpaid though they too work round the clock. Women have to fight long battles to get their identity. There have been various feminist movements for the betterment and upliftment of women in society. Various feminists have been active participants in the movements that focused on women's rights and awareness. Some of the prominent literary activists or feminists who have commendably contributed in the betterment and upliftment of women are Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Engels, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and so on.

The social attitude towards the role of women has a different approach where it considers certain jobs fit for women and considers certain jobs unfit for women. The so-called fit jobs for women are specially those where she can find time to manage her house and can perform her household duties simultaneously while working. Thus, women easily find employments such as nurses, teachers, doctors, clerks, secretaries, etc. While certain jobs such as that of an engineer, pilot, police, etc. are not considered for women and if they apply in these sectors, males with same qualifications are given preference. Thus, it becomes evident how gender bias acts as a hurdle for females in the recruitment process. Pregnant women or mothers of young

children are also at their disadvantage as they are sidelined and are not preferred over male employees in the recruitment process. Thus, even the recruitment process is not fair and is gender biased. Moreover, when it comes to their remuneration or salary, in most of the sectors, women are paid less than their male colleagues. Though the law proclaims equality, but unfortunately, it is hardly followed everywhere.

Since times immemorial, the society has been male dominated and it could be perceived in all walks of life where women are considered equal. First of all, if a woman wants to work and earn her living, she has to take permission from the male head of the family. Obviously, to find a suitable job in this male dominated society, she has to work very hard right from her school life. Once, she succeeds in finding a job for herself, she has to face other challenges at her workplace. To maintain their jobs intact, women employees have to give better performance than their male colleagues. They have to put in their extra bits and efforts to prove themselves. When they are at the top position, then their male colleagues and subordinates expect much greater expertise and efficiency than the males at top position. Another situation that could be often witnessed at the workplace is that even the female boss or colleagues do not lend their support to the female employees. For a female, working in such condition inevitably puts lot of stress and pressure on her as compared to male employees. As a result of this stress and pressure, a woman becomes less interested to opt such kind of demanding jobs and she turns towards less demanding jobs. Also, with such pressures she finds it difficult to cope and often thinks of quitting her job.

Another factor that acts as a hurdle in the career growth of a woman is of course, unequal salary for equal work. It is often found that in unorganized and corporate sectors, women are provided with less remuneration as compared to man. A woman with greater talent or qualification than a man, when not paid on equal basis sometimes forces her to slip into depression. In such cases, only a few women are able to fight for themselves and with their depression, rest fall prey to it. These vulnerable women often do not find any support either at their office or even at their home. If we talk about an unorganized sector, for example, in some construction site, it could be witnessed that women labourers are sidelined and given less important work, so that they get less pay than the males. Though in most cases, these women have to sometimes bring their kids when there is no one to look after them, even then they work hard and try to maintain balance between their duty as mothers and as labours. And often for carrying bricks and other materials, male labourers are preferred. Thus, more work pressure and less remuneration cause lot of mental stress for a working woman.

Another major problem faced by working woman in their work place is lack of proper sanitation and washroom facilities. In many areas, specially if women are working in rural areas, they have to frequently face such problems. At times they have to stay for more than seven to eight hours without using a washroom as either it is not provided in workplaces for females or are not in hygienic condition. To avoid this situation, a woman drinks less water and is reluctant to take snacks nor meals during this period. This often proves hazardous to the health of a working woman that might lead her to suffer from various fatal diseases as well. So, a working woman has to make compromises not only in terms of her qualifications and remuneration but also at the level of her health.

Another very important factor that prevents a working woman to opt outside work is her safety and security issue at her workplace. Violence and crime against woman are something very common and could be seen everywhere. Women have been victims of violence since ages, in all societies, cultures, regions or in religious communities throughout the world. On a broader perspective, exploitation and violence against women is there because a woman is perceived as the weaker sex, dependent on man, so he can exploit her. In fact, it is a human tendency to take out one's frustrations on anyone who is too weak to resist. Unfortunately, the violence continues unabated due to lack of any social action. Moreover, those very persons in charge of protecting a woman assault her and humiliate her. Legislation or law exists but is seldom implemented willingly or carefully. Also, in most cases, women are at times reluctant to take legal help or assistance due to its long and troublesome process. Exploitation of woman at work place in the name of promotion is the fact

that is found everywhere. A working woman is at times bullied by her male colleagues or boss if she does not yield to their demands. She is often threatened and intimidated to be fired or demoted to a lower post and salary or for some other reason. It is not just physical violence, even the threat of it is an enough cause for her mental agony or pain, and this too is a form of violence. The state has enacted many women specific legislations to protect them against violence, atrocities, and discriminations. Before Vishakha Guidelines in 1997, the person facing sexual harassment at workplace had to lodge a complaint under Section 354 of the Indian Penal Code 1860 that deals with the 'criminal assault of women to outrage women's modesty and Section 509 that punishes individual or individuals for using a 'word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman. There are many laws including POSH, Vishakha Guidelines, issued by the Supreme Court of India regarding sexual harassment of women at their workplace to safeguard the honour and dignity of a woman even at her workplace, but still lot more needs to be done in this area for the protection of women. The irony is that even female colleagues do not lend their support or stand for their female counterpart in distress. Further, if a woman is praised or appreciated for her work or if she gets a promotion owing to her capability and efficiency, her colleagues do not hesitate to attribute it to sexual favours given by her to the boss. The psychological pressure of all this makes a woman feel depressed and broken at times and she finds it difficult to perform her work efficiently.

Many a times, a working woman while travelling from her house to office and vice versa has to face various kinds of safety issues and challenges. Public transport systems are overcrowded and unsocial elements take maximum advantage of the circumstances to physically harass and molest the woman. Many cases are being reported on a daily basis that women after leaving their workplace are either molested or raped and humiliated. Thus, public transport as well as office cabs could not be considered as completely safe for women. The government has provided so many helpline numbers to ensure that immediate help reaches the aggrieved woman but still the rise in graph of crime against women remains unaffected. Thus, lack of safe transportation is another challenge and a safety issue for a working woman as it affects her physical and mental health.

Now, if we look at the plight of a working woman at her home, she has to shoulder her household responsibilities that almost always go unrewarded, unnoticed, unacknowledged and of course, unpaid. Her work is not just confined to her paid employment, but at her home, where specially in Indian scenario having the concept of a joint family, she has to prove herself a good daughter, sister, wife, mother, daughter in law and so on. Consequently, she has to put her extra efforts to meet the expectations of the family members. The routine works performed by women at home such as cleaning, cooking, washing, rearing children, taking care of the elders and ill persons, etc. do not find any social recognition. Even if it is noticed at times, it is taken for granted and considered as the duty of the female. She does not even get the due respect from her family members for her hard work which she indeed deserves. It could be often witnessed in almost all homes where both the couple is working, while the man after coming back home from a taxing day at his office, relax with a cup of tea and the newspaper or television, a woman on the other hand, has to immediately switch over to her work at home after performing her duties at her office. It should be considered that a working woman, earning money is also a human being who gets tired after her hectic schedule at her office and so she also needs some rest. Moreover, the irony is that in most houses, the working woman does not have a control over her own salary. In most families, her salary is controlled by her father, husband or in laws. Therefore, in case of many working women, the basic motive for being economically independent is not manifested.

It could not be ignored that most working women are mothers as well. They have to take care of their children. Besides her regular household work, she has to take the complete responsibility of raising her children. In case of a woman who is the mother of an infant, it is far more difficult for her to cope with the situations. Inadequate maternity leave, and the hostile environment at her workplace makes her feel being in doldrums. She cannot take proper care of her infant and so somewhere she feels the guilt of not being an ideal mother. Though she wants to spend time with her newborn and live the most beautiful moments with her child

but her commitment to her work does not allow her to do so. And if ever she tries to pour her heart out in front of someone just to make her feel lighter, she gets comments like, money is what matters to you or, just to earn money, you ignore your child. Her responsibility of being a mother is therefore another important factor that somewhere hampers the growth of a working woman as she makes compromises for the sake of her children. Apart from this, due to her busy and tight schedule, she cannot afford to socialize with friends and relatives. A working woman hardly gets time from her work and family to attend social functions and other important engagements of her friends and relatives, and this in turn weakens her relationship with relatives and friends. As we all know that man is a social animal and cannot live in an isolation, therefore these gatherings and meetings are very important to retain the happiness and sanity of a person.

Some working women who have to stay away from their family for their jobs specially in big cities, also face problems in finding safe and suitable accommodations. Most of the house owners feel reluctant in renting out their houses to such women directly. And in some cases, the house owners finding the woman alone and away from her family, casts an evil eye on her. Working women's hostels are rarely available at all places. Even if she finds an accommodation, then also she has to herself ensure her safety and security and manage all other required things all alone without the support of her family. On one hand, she finds it difficult to stay away from her family on emotional grounds and on the other hand, she finds herself vulnerable being exposed in an unsafe environment. These problems restrict a woman to opt a transferrable job or job away from her home and so she prefers a non-transferrable job.

Most of the problems of a working woman are rooted in the social perspective of the position of women. Traditionally, men are expected to be the bread winners while women are seen as the home makers, child bearers and child rearers. This type of stereotype woman role model continues to put an obstacle before the working woman. Also, she feels that nobody is happy with her as in the office, her boss or male colleagues continuously taunt at her by saying that women employees always want to rush to their homes and do not want to give extra time to work at office. On the other hand, the family, especially the husband is never satisfied as he feels that the wife is always busy with her office work and does not keep her house in an organized way. And the relatives of these women often complain of being unsocial. In fact, a fundamental change is required in the attitudes of the policy makers, employers, family members and the public at large. The family members must understand the plight of such women and try to share her indoor work if she is working outside. A working woman not only tries to maintain a balance between her household work and office work, but she also tries to maintain balance between her physical strength and emotional needs. The people must respect and regard the working women as the significant contributors to the wellbeing and betterment of society. Without the support of her family, the working woman will not be able to hold her identity as such in the society for a longer period of time. Gender sensitization is required in our society to develop the feeling of empathy towards the weaker sex. In fact, gender sensitization should be taught at a very young age. The most effective way to realize it would be to sensitize the school children so that they become aware of their roles in the society as future generations. It is pertinent for us to understand that gender is not something biological but it is a social construct. Simone de Beauvoir has rightly said in her book, *The Second Sex*, that one is not born rather made a woman. The education of women should be promoted and a healthy environment needs to be created where a woman can get an awareness regarding her rights and responsibilities. Indeed, it is time for a few determined steps to be taken to reconstruct the social structures so that they can address the modern needs of society as a whole.

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