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Life transitions of women workforce: a review

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ABSTRACT

Woman by virtue undergoes various life transitions in her entire life which has a direct bearing on her career and health. Ever changing patterns of working and competition have gradually increased pressure on woman's health and productivity at work. Women working in industries where more time is required like media, advertising, entertainment, and fashion is obliquely pushing them towards a synthetic lifestyle which will ultimately pose question on their identity at large. This report can be further extended towards the workplace domains on working women who are constantly under one or other life transitions in the context of their productivity at work and resultant stress.

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Introduction

It is very ironical to articulate that the woman who is life creator and modeled as a super manager strives to manage everything for her family and children, faces number of problems during her own career management. She experiences many related difficulties at the time of all major transition stages during her career. Major life transitions in women's working life could be an interesting area of research especially in the context of working productivity and the emergent stress. With the dawn of urbanization and work pressures Indian working women endeavor many activities during their daily regimes which results in stress, depression, anxiety and psychological disorders. Our Indian economy has undergone a drastic metamorphosis since the country's independence in 1947. We are sailing in the information era where we are continuously experiencing the new-age syndrome of globalization, free trade, loosening of Govt. restrictions and so on. The new age reforms should bring social and economic equality in the nation but unfortunately it has not been witnessed by us so far in the case of living standard of Indian women. Woman in India constitutes that victim group which is still skirmishing its existence in terms of recognition as a valid contributor in economy.

Working Women Status in India

Evidences from various researches done on the status of working women in India highlights many important issues like their health, increasing child mortality rates (Basu and Basu, 1991), negligence on child nutrition (Khan, 1990) and status in family and society (Ahmad, 1979) which are derivatives of one or the other life transition which working women undergoes and calls for urgent attention. According to eminent economist Amartya Sen (Sen, Amartya, 1990: "More than 100 million women are missing", New York Review of Books, pp.61-66), women who work regularly, earn income and contribute a substantial portion of family income are more likely to be empowered. Lack of autonomy coupled with the life transitions which every woman undergoes plays major role in deflation of Women status in working domain. Study done by Clark and Sekher (Clark and Sekher, 2007: pp285-319) discusses the earning female members influence on family settings and

household decisions. The study reveals the real picture about financial controls which is the key ingredient of empowerment is lacking in most cases. Working on some paid jobs does not provide the corresponding autonomy and related freedom to Indian working women.

Women who are earning decent amount are having good influence over financial matters and autonomy. The influence of these women at their workplace needs consideration as well. Same degree of influence should be exerted by these women at their workplaces. At workplace, these women does not hold the "empowered employee" title because of various reasons like Gender inequality, Co-workers perception about an ambitious and successful women, family-work imbalances and the allied stressors at work. Collectively they play a havoc on women productivity at work and her mental health.

Women are more affected than men by the intrusion of work into their home-life through e-mails, phone calls, and the texts and report higher levels of psychological distress (Glavin.P, 2011). Study released by ASSOCHAM (ASSOCHAM, 2010: *Report on Preventive Health Care: Impact on Corporate Sector*) said 68 percent of working women surveyed in the age bracket of 21-52 years were found to be afflicted with lifestyle ailments such as obesity, depression, chronic backache, diabetes and hypertension. The Report of the committee on the status of women in India (ICSSR, 1975: *A synopsis of the Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women (1971-74), India*) revealed that in spite of the quantitative change in the education of Indian Women along with more job opportunities, the status of Women is still the same. The stressors mentioned above limits the women productivity at workplace to a great extent, which can be eliminated through the judicious use of psychological measures for their motivation at work linked with marital or family life. Any measure which is inclusive of family elements will drift these ambitious women towards success and better productivity at work. We need to understand and explore more of psychological variables that influence workplace and also to include and analyze male employees perceptions and judgments regarding working women during their life transitions.

Women Career Tribulations

(Sterret, E.A., 1999) has suggested that men's career have often followed a linear trajectory. Men establish themselves in a particular field and, with time, progress upward within that field in a hierarchical, step by step fashion to increased responsibility and compensation: thus men attain career success. In case of women, the same pattern is invariably not followed. Their career pattern varies substantially. (McGowen K.R and Hart L.E, 1992: pp.723-737). The very idea of working is different for women revealing that they emphasize job satisfaction more than salary.

Incessant attention at workplace by women generates home-work interaction problems for many women. Sacrifices which women have to make to attain the career trajectory if not made, results in low-growth career, less challenging and monotonous work environment. On the flip side, (Hardesty S. and Jacobs. N,1986: *Success and Betrayal: The Crisis of Women in Corporate America*) study discovered that many successful women feel betrayed and disillusioned with the career success they attained from linear movement of career trajectory.

As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has stated, "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance." Professional Inequality as per Amartya Sen (Sen,2001: *The Many Faces of Gender Inequality*) clearly indicates that in terms of employment as well as promotion in work and occupation, women often face more difficulties than men. A country like Japan may be quite egalitarian in matters of demography or basic facilities, and even, to a great extent, in higher education, and yet progress to elevated levels of employment and occupation seems to be much more problematic for women than for men. Professional Inequality could also be cropped by the perceptions and strong convictions in the people's mind relating to invulnerable life transitions through which women undergoes. The workplace can be a setting where gender inequalities are both manifested and sustained, with consequent impacts on health. At the beginning of women career right after college or graduate school, they earn about as much as their male counterparts. From ages 25 to 29 women earn 90 percent of what their male counterparts earn. But the statistics changes when her first life transition of motherhood occurs, and by the time they're in the age bracket of 27-35 years old, their earning capacity gets down to 71 percent of what their male counterparts earn.

The prime years for having children are also prime years for establishing a career. If both entities are equally important for women then all sorts of efforts needs to be done for overall efficiency from women as well as from workplace domain so that an aura of trust, professional equality, and support can be established. Unfortunately large number of Indian workplaces contributes indirectly towards decreased women productivity at work and for the stress experienced by women workforce.

As a group women suffer more from growing competitive pressures, which can be linked with lack of security, limited possibilities for training and career advancement, and inadequate social security coverage in terms of old -age pensions, sickness insurance and maternity protection. Also, India has the distinction of being the lowest ranked on gender parity, which includes pay parity, among the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) economies. This was revealed in the Global Gender Gap Report of 2010 (Hausman R.*et al.*, 2010, Tab.1.1). Women are also less likely to be unionized. Women begin their

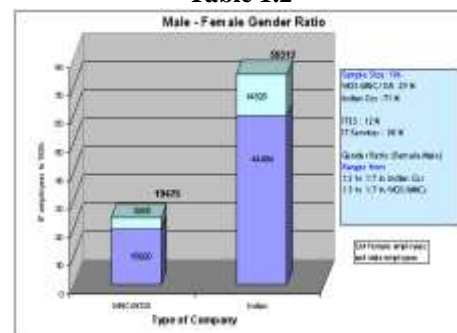
first job with enthusiasm and not only climb the corporate ladder confidently but also, handle the dual task of being a home maker. The average annual income of a woman is \$1,185, less than a third of a man's \$3,698 in corporate India. If that's not enough they deal with additional threats on the job such as discrimination, sexual harassment, physical abuse and pregnancy exams as a condition of work.

Women's fertility drops after the age of 35 and when they have babies they feel trapped in careers that do not accommodate a flexible schedule, the impact of maternity leaves on promotion opportunities, and a realignment of ambitions after experiencing parenthood in traditionally "male" industries becomes difficult for them. There could be numerous changes which they experience during major life transitions which can cause stress and results in lower productivity at work. But there are certainly other indicators present in the workplace which has direct bearing on decreased women working productivity and the resultant stress. It is becoming quite clear that to have a self containment and fulfilling achievement in career, not only women but the workplace also needs to equate both the work and life transition determinants in a way that can create a sustainable environment for women to prosper.

Research Evidences

Past research on the topic reveals that the indicators like gender differences, loyalty ,trust towards the employer, skewed perception of co-workers towards working women has significant evidences on women working life and career advancement. Some results suggest that men experience some greater task-related developmental challenges, but women experience greater developmental challenges curtailing from day to day obstacles that they face during their career. Interestingly some studies shows that the difference in employability for female vs. male technical graduates is not more than two percentage points in any IT/ITES sector which suggests that females and males are equivalently employable in the skilled industries. On the other side, the ratio of males to females in the technical studies is 2:1. With nepotism-free hiring and similar aspiration level amongst both genders, the same ratio should be maintained in the IT/ITes industry. But the data speaks of different story (Refer Table 1.2), female percentage is much lower in these industries and also the opportunities gets minimized when it comes to the career growth and development.

Table 1.2



(Source: Rajalaxmi, 2003)

Need of the hour

Gender sensitive issues have long been in debate when it comes to the women employment and the growth opportunities. It is high time to sensitize the overall working environment towards the working women problems and a gender friendly approach should be adopted so as to accommodate women's life transitions. Employee development training can be one such approach which includes gender sensitivity, communication skill

building and other such contents which will help the employees to behave in a more sensitive way within the organization. Men need to be aware of the difference in lifestyles between men and women, at the same time they need to learn how to treat the female co-workers same way as they treat other male co-workers. When this cultural shift happens men will be able value the women co-workers for their merit and will not have any resistance to have them as their boss. This kind of exercise can lead us towards a more gender friendly working environment in the organization and in the society eventually. We need to remember that women who are joining the work force have to play a very pro-active role in this process.

According to the Corporate Gender Gap report brought out by the World Economic Forum (WEF) the U.S. led the way with the highest percentage of female employees (52 percent), while India had the lowest (23 percent). To tackle the problem, the WEF urged companies to do more to educate and utilize female talent.

India is among the first few nations to provide women equal franchise and India has a highly credible record with regard to the enactment of laws to protect and promote the interests of women, but women continue to be denied economic, social and legal rights and privileges. Though they are considered to be equal partners in progress, yet they remain subjected to repression, marginalization and exploitation. There has been no respite from the Government as Govt. of India to keep expenses low on social schemes like (ICDS¹ and NRHM²), it has resorted to the traditionalist view that care work by women is a service rendered by them and titled them as "Volunteers" so as to avoid paying salaries and social security benefits like pension and Health covers. It has been advocated by many researchers like Amartya Sen (Sen,1990) that independent earning opportunities reduce the economic dependence of woman on men and increase her bargaining power in the family. This bargaining power depends on the nature of work she is employed in. But the income earning activities increase the workload of a woman unless the man accepts and realizes an increased share in domestic work. Throughout the economy, women tend to hold lower-level positions than men even when they have sufficient skills to perform higher-level jobs.

Ironically, despite the improvement in their status, they still find themselves dependent on men. It is because of the fact that man in patriarchal society has always wielded economic independence and power to take crucial decisions. Since the working woman earns an independent income in the same patriarchal set-up, where the basic infrastructure of society has hardly changed, though her own role within the same structure is passing through a transitional phase, it is but natural that she would remain vulnerable to exploitation even in her economically independent state.

Gender sensitive national policies for health at work and development of policy tools should be developed and strengthened. Special concerns should be devoted to gender assessment of existing legislation and policies including threshold limit values, physical workloads, and risks within female-dominated occupations.

¹ICDS- Integrated Child Development Services Scheme launched in 1975 with objective to improve the nutritional and health status of children (0- 6yrs) in India and to reduce the incidence of mortality, morbidity and malnutrition amongst children.

²NRHM- National Rural Health Mission (2005-2012) aims to improve the availability of and access to quality health care by people, especially for those residing in rural areas, the poor, women and children of India.

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Table.1.1

TOP 10	Rank	BOTTOM 10	Rank
Country		Country	
Lesotho	1	Iran	125
Mongolia	2	Jordan	126
Norway	3	Morocco	127
Bahamas	4	India	128
Mozambique	5	Oman	129
United States	6	Syria	130
Barbados	7	Turkey	131
Canada	8	Saudi Arabia	132
New Zealand	9	Pakistan	133
Moldova	10	Yemen	134
<i>(Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2010 by World Economic Forum)</i>			
Countries ranked by Economic Participation and Opportunity for Women			