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GENDER INEQUALITY AT THE WORKPLACE: HRM INTERVENTIONS IN ADDRESSING DISCRIMINATION AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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Abstract

The problem of gender inequality in the workplace is still very widespread, and women and gender minorities continue to face a disadvantage in terms of recruitment, remuneration, and promotion, despite the legal progress and diversity promises. Sexual harassment as an outright expression of gendered power imbalance contributes to structural inequalities and poor individual health and organisational performance. Through its control of the practices in the personnel, policy-making, and organisational culture, Human Resource Management (HRM) plays a key role in either challenging or supporting these inequalities. The gender inequality and sexual harassment in the organisational setting is discussed in the paper and the HRM interventions that can be used to alleviate them are critically appraised. Based on the systematic literature review concerning the areas of organisational behaviour, feminist theory, HRM and sociology, the study outlines the circumstances in which the HRM response can be successful or unsuccessful. The results reveal that the effectiveness of HRM interventions depends on structural accountability, which can be shown through the commitment of leaders, the psychological safety provided in the reporting systems, and an intersectionally informed point of view. HRM practitioners, organisational leaders and policymakers are provided with evidence-based recommendations.

Keywords: gender inequality, workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, HRM interventions, organisational justice, diversity and inclusion.

Introduction

Work place has never been a neutral social space. It is a place organized around power, history and culture and has in the past been reflective of the gender hierarchies of the larger societies that organisations are incorporated in. The twentieth century saw significant formal gains, such

as the growth of anti-discriminatory law, unprecedented access to paid labor by women, and the expression of corporate diversity promises, the twenty-first century has inherited a work environment where gender inequality continues to be so resilient and flexible. Women still earn less than men doing the same job, are still underrepresented in the top tiers of leadership, have double the rates of precarious jobs, are also overrepresented in the lower occupational sectors. These trends are systemic, interrelated and integrated into the frameworks within which organisations are organised (Acker, 1990; Reskin, 2000). Given that gender inequality remains a fact, despite notions of equality being formally promised, further explanations of the issue must go beyond individualistic explanations, where women are said to be disadvantaged due to inadequate qualifications, ambition or simply due to personal choice, but instead structural and organisational explanations, which situate the problem within the architecture of organisations in general. The original idea of the gendered organisation by Joan Acker (1990) claims that seemingly neutral organisational structures, such as job descriptions, hierarchies, performance relationships, etc. are designed through an unofficial image of the ideal worker, who has no caregiving role, who is fully accessible and available to organisational needs, and who has the ability of complete geographical and temporal mobility. This is a male construction that is implicitly structured in a way that it disadvantages those (mostly women) who live a different life. The framework posited by Acker is still applicable to the current day context because at the time when it was initially stated it was precisely because the gendered assumptions embedded in the organisational language have not been broken by its procedural neutrality.

Sexual harassment is one of the most direct, damaging and organisationally important manifestations of gender inequality at the workplace. It is both an effect of the gendered power relations and a process by which these relations are maintained and reproduced. The international movement of the hashtag MeToo, that had managed to achieve unprecedented momentum beginning at the end of 2017 and reached its peak, attracted sustained popular and academic interest into the prevalence of sexual harassment in all industries, types of organisations, and nations, and exposed the scope to which organisations had been systematically unable to prevent, respond to or take seriously the situations of the targets of sexual harassment (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019). The cost to organisations of harassment: high turnover rates, low productivity, damaged reputations, litigation, etc. has been well publicized but organisational responses have often been more focused on managing the liabilities rather than actual cultural change (McDonald, 2012).

Human Resource Management is paradoxical and consequential as far as these challenges are concerned. Officially, HRM is the organisational department that is most typically involved in ensuring fair employment practices, anti-discrimination strategies, grievance, and personnel training and development programmes through which organisational norms are propagated and strengthened. Theoretically, HRM should be the main organisational tool of gender equity. In reality, HRM workers work within organisations in which their cultures and power structures they can hardly pose a fundamental challenge to, and HRM role may even be used to justify and obscure structural disadvantage when HRM roles are developed without a critical look at gender (Calas & Smircich, 1996). The presence of an equality policy does not imply fair results; interaction between the official HRM policy and the organisational practice is one of the focal points of tension that are the focus of this article. The topicality of this question goes well beyond the scholarly discourse. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (2023)¹ at the present growth rates, the World Economic Forum approximates that females would have to wait more than 169 years to fully engage in economic participation and opportunity. The labour-force participation of women in South Asia in particular, such as in India, where the most prominent piece of legislation is the POSH Act² (Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal)) Act, 2013, is on a deathbed in comparison with that of men, and the presence of workplace harassment is grossly under-reported by cultural stigma, institutional incompetence, and structural susceptibility (ILO, 2022)³. These are not just associated figures that are abstractions of statistics but the limitations of the professional lives of millions of women whose potential contribution to their organisations and their societies is systematically prevented through structural injustices. The contribution of the article to the HRM literature is the combination of structural, cultural, and intersectional outlook on gender inequality with critical and evidence-based assessment of HRM interventions. It contends that responses to gender inequality cannot be well realized only through the incorporation of formal measures but the realization of organisational cultures and power arrangements, a more challenging and more significant task than any compliance-driven strategy can possibly execute.

¹ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2023. India ranked 127th out of 146 countries, with the 169-year projection specific to the economic participation sub-index.

² The POSH Act — formally the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 — is India's principal legislative instrument addressing workplace sexual harassment.

³ The International Labour Organization (ILO), a UN specialised agency founded in 1919, sets international labour standards and publishes authoritative research on global employment and decent work; see ILO (2019, 2022) in the reference list.

It is not that centring HRM in this discussion overstates its power. HRM does not stand upon organisations and its ability to provide gender equity is inherently preconditioned by the organisational environment, in which it has to work. HRM interventions are enhanced where senior leaders lead by example and ensure that others are accountable. In organisations where discrimination is the norm and powerful harassers are well-guarded by organisational culture, even the well-thought HRM policies have been rendered as a mere performance. Such a dialectical interaction of HRM design and organisational context is another theme in this article that recurs throughout the article and offers the analysis framework on the recommendations.

Literature Review

Theoretical Underpinnings: Insight into Gender Inequality in Organizations.

Feminist theory, organizational sociology, and management studies come together in the academic literature covering gender inequality in organizations. The strongest theoretical framework affecting this area is the concept of the gendered organization developed by Joan Acker (1990) that asserts that organizations are not an impartial bureaucratic system but are infused by presumptions, symbols, and contacts that systematically benefit men and hurt females. According to Acker, there are five interacting processes in which organizations get gendered, namely the production of gender division in jobs, pay, and power, the production of gendered symbols and images, enacting gender through interpersonal interactions, the internal mental processes of the individual in managing gendered identities, and applying gender logic to organizational structures. The theoretical importance of this framework is that it proposes to change the analytical focus of the gender inequality in the workplace toward the individual qualities and behaviors to the structural and process-based analyses, which both create and sustain gender inequality in the long term.

A complementary psychological explanation is the social role theory which was first developed by Eagly (1987) and subsequently expanded in the role congruity theory of prejudice against female leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002). According to social role theory, society assigns different and sometimes conflicting roles to men and women: men are supposed to be agentic, i.e. assertive, competent, ambitious, and women are supposed to be communal i.e. warm, cooperative, and deferential. Such prescriptive expectations are transferred to organizational settings, whereby they create what Eagly and Karau (2002) describe as role incongruity among women in leadership roles: women who exhibit the agentic behavioral tendencies of female leadership are punished through the violation of gender norms, whereas women that comply with societal related expectations are seen as not assertive enough to become female leaders.

This two- way traffic has been widely reported in the literature on performance appraisal, promotion, and leadership judgments and serves as one reason why gender gaps in management have been so stubborn even in those organizations that have made official commitments of equality (Rudman and Glick, 2001).

A third theory of particular importance to assessing the interventions of HRM is the organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987; Colquitt, 2001). According to Colquitt (2001), four aspects of organizational justice are identified such as distributive justice (fairness in results), procedural justice (fairness in operations), interpersonal justice (respectful treatment in the execution of operations) and informational justice (sufficient explanation of decisions). Gender inequality is a systematic breach of all the four dimensions at the same time women are accorded unequal results in wages and promotions, they are treated by unfair methods in the recruitment and appraisal processes, they face disrespectful interpersonal treatment such as harassment, and they often get poor explanations behind decisions that concern their careers. This concept has a direct implication on the design of the HRM interventions: in order to ensure gender equity, there is no need to simply adopt a formal policy or to track aggregate outcome data, but to ensure fairness across various dimensions at the same time.

Workplace Discrimination of Women Mechanisms.

In modern gender discrimination in the formally neutral organizations, open, explicit exclusion is hardly in place. Most jurisdictions have been limiting the most blatant forms of direct discrimination under the restrictions of law. What remains and is, in most ways, even more sinister, is what Sturm (2001) called second generation discrimination⁴, the subtle, structural, and unconscious discrimination ingrained in the daily activities of organizational systems. This includes, affinity bias in the recruitment process where hiring managers prefer candidates who resemble them, leading to the creation of existing demographic homogeneity, attribution bias in performance appraisals where the same level of performance is rated positively when attributed to a male employee, and informal networks that direct sponsorship and career-shaping opportunity more towards men (Ibarra et al., 2010).

The gender pay gap has been cited as one of the most empirically sound measures of gender inequality in the workplace across the world. In a review of the evidence in the United States, Blau and Kahn (2017) reported a persistent gender pay gap despite the use of controls including

⁴ Sturm (2001) uses 'second generation discrimination' to describe subtle, structural biases embedded in organisational processes rather than overt discriminatory intent, making them largely resistant to traditional legal remedies.

industry, occupation, education and number of hours worked and explained the gap that remained by the bias in pay-setting processes and systematic underpayment of work that is mostly done by women. Research by ILO (2019) in India revealed high gender wage disparities in both formal and informal sectors, both exacerbated by occupational segregation and high levels of concentration of women in low-wage, precarious jobs.

Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest the substitution of the glass ceiling metaphor which is an opaque barrier that is concentrated at the top of organizational structures with that of a labyrinth, because the hindrances women experience are spread across the career and accumulate at each level of development through the entry level to the top leadership positions. This re-conceptualization has significant practical implications: in the case in which the issue is a maze of disseminated and multiplied impediments and not a decisive ceiling, then the HRM interventions should be targeted at a number of career phases and a number of organizational processes working in parallel and not a single top leadership pipeline. Sexual Harassment: Prevalence, Mechanisms, and Consequences Sexual harassment in the workplace has been defined in legal and scholarly literature through two primary categories: *quid pro quo* harassment⁵, in which submission to unwanted sexual conduct is made a condition of employment benefits or decisions, and hostile work environment harassment, in which pervasive and severe sexual conduct creates an intimidating or offensive working environment (EEOC, 1980; Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Research consistently demonstrates that hostile work environment harassment is far more prevalent and that its effects on targets are severe, encompassing anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, reduced job satisfaction, diminished organizational commitment, and significant career disruption (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Bergman et al., 2002). McLaughlin et al. (2012) demonstrated that harassment is particularly prevalent where workplace authority is concentrated and gender power imbalances are pronounced, finding that women in supervisory roles — who represent a demographic challenge to male workplace dominance — experience harassment at higher rates than women in subordinate positions. This disrupts individualistic explanations of harassment and underscores its function as a mechanism for enforcing gender hierarchy within organizational settings.

⁵ *Quid pro quo* (Latin: 'something for something'): harassment in which employment benefits are conditioned on acceptance of unwanted sexual conduct.

The global #MeToo movement⁶, which gained momentum from 2017 onward, brought unprecedented public and scholarly attention to the organizational toleration of sexual harassment and the systematic suppression of reporting. McDonald (2012), reviewing three decades of research, identified underreporting as among the most consistent findings in the harassment literature, driven by targets' well-founded concerns about disbelief, retaliation, victim-blaming, and organizational complicity with perpetrators. Post-#MeToo scholarship confirmed these concerns were structurally grounded: organizations had routinely managed harassment as a reputational and legal liability rather than as a failure of organizational justice, and high-status perpetrators had been systematically shielded by their positional power (Bourdeau et al., 2021).

Evidence and Critical Evaluation of HRM Interventions.

The available literature on HRM intervention to promote gender equality is far-reaching, even though empirical evidence on effectiveness is highly varied and depends a lot on the variables of the context. Among the most comprehensive empirical evaluations of the intervention of diversity and equality, the article by Dobbin and Kalev (2016), who reviewed longitudinal data representing hundreds of organizations in the United States is available. Their findings contradicted current HRM orthodoxy: compulsory diversity training, the intervention that is arguably the most popular, had only partial impacts on the proportion of women in managerial roles with time, and in some instances, produced some backlash, which strengthened opposition to diversity goals. The most successful interventions were structural ones: appointing special diversity managers, creating cross-departmental diversity task forces, which had the real leadership responsibility, and mentoring programmes that were designed to expand the access of women to informal organizational networks. These structural processes worked through the creation of internal accountability, that is, by giving specific organizational actors a role of diversity outcomes, as opposed to the attitudinal transformation through training. A similar conclusion was reached by Kalev et al. (2006), who noted that affirmative action plans and diversity committees led to the largest changes in women representation in management and more so with visible top level management concern. Legislative momentum Pay-equity audits have been increasing since the introduction of mandated reporting on gender pay gaps in 2017 in the United Kingdom; however, empirical studies have shown that aggregate pay gaps have not significantly changed with the introduction of compliance reporting, and thus do not

⁶ The #MeToo hashtag was coined by activist Tarana Burke (2006) and went viral globally in October 2017 following allegations against Harvey Weinstein, prompting widespread institutional scrutiny.

provide a significant structural remedy (Chadwick and Bell, 2020).

Ibarra and others (2010) have defined a very important practical difference between mentoring where advice is provided and emotional support, and sponsorship where senior members of an organization actively sponsor the junior employees by utilizing their own political capital in supporting the upward mobility of the junior employees. They found that men were much more likely than women at similar levels of career to have sponsors, and they found that this difference in sponsorship was a substantive source of gender-based differences in promotion. Although the importance of flexible working arrangements and family-friendly policies is recognized as a facilitator of women in the workforce, they have a limited level of equalization impact since the so-called flexibility stigma the career penalties linked with the use of flexibility disproportionately affect women, thanks to the fact that the uptake of flexibility policies among men remains very low.

Leadership, Organization Culture and the confines of Formal Policy.

The most persistent observation in the literature is perhaps the fact that formal HRM policies, irrespective of the level of sophistication in their design, are simply necessary but not sufficient preconditions of gender equity. Organizational culture, which is the perceived values, norms, assumptions and ways of behavior, which define organizational life, actually determines whether formal commitments are translated into equitable experiences or not (Schein, 1992). Even technically advanced systems of policy are degraded by cultures that condone gender-based humor, reward aggressively masculine leadership, and send the message that complaints about harassment will be handled as a PR move and not as a merit. In a meta-analysis that cut across three paradigms of study in leadership, Koenig et al. (2011) reported the degree to which leadership is culturally coded in masculine terms, thus creating systemic disadvantage to women who desire authority in an organization despite the qualifications and performance.

The behavior of the top organizational executives is one of the strongest predictors of whether the HRM gender-equity interventions achieve the intended outcomes. By the top managers openly supporting the cause of women, punishing the subordinates engaged in discriminatory practices, and making it clear that they are themselves prepared and eager to follow the anti-harassment rules, the HRM programmes are really magnified. On the contrary, in cases where leadership behaviour contradicts formal policy promises, especially where those in high status are insulated against taking responsibility, HRM programmes transform into a form of

performance that breeds cynicism among employees, instead of creating a culture change (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016). The bridging of this say-do gap is the main organisational challenge of gender equity, and the challenge that HRM cannot overcome simply by designing policies.

Research Question

- What are the best methods of Human Resource Management (HRM) interventions to cope with gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace.
- What organizational circumstances lead to meaningful and sustained impacts on gender equity by organizational interventions

Research Objective -

Objective 1: To critically review theoretical, empirical, and organizational foundations of gender inequality and sexual harassment in the workplace, i.e. the structural, psychological, and cultural understandings of the same as well as to evaluate the scope of HRM interventions (anti-discriminatory policies, diversity training, pay audits, mentoring, flexible work arrangements and grievance mechanisms) in terms of their effectiveness in disparate organizational environments, with special consideration given to post-Me Too institutional responses.

Objective 2: To explore the organizational circumstances such as leadership commitment, psychological safety, accountability structure, and intersectional awareness that either predetermine the realization of meaningful gender equity outcomes of HRM intervention, and to convert those results into brief, evidence-based guidelines of HRM practitioners, organizational leaders, and policymakers, with a specific focus on the South Asian and Indian context.

Research Methodology-

The research design used in the study is a qualitative and interpretive research design based on systematic literature review research design supplemented by thematic analysis of the secondary data collected and analyzed out of organizational case studies and policy reviews. This method is reasonable considering the main objective of the study to synthesize and critically evaluate existing knowledge on the HRM interventions with respect to gender equality, instead of creating new empirical data (Bryman, 2016; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

The research exists in a critical realist epistemology cum cognizant of gender inequality that is both observable, in terms of pay differences, promotions and harassment, and structural, in terms of theory that cannot be directly observed but must be theoretically put across (Bhaskar, 1975). The theoretical position is also clearly feminist organisational in the sense that it views the gender inequality as structural and systemic instead of being based on personal incompetencies (Harding, 1987). The systematic literature review is conducted in accordance with the criteria presented by Tranfield et al. (2003) and Petticrew and Roberts (2006), which consists of four consecutive steps: (1) specification of the research question and inclusion criteria; (2) structured database search; (3) filtering of sources with the help of the established criteria; (4) thematic synthesis of results based on the six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). The methodology reduces the bias of selection and also makes counterintuitive results, such as evidence of ineffectiveness of interventions, to be included and reflected in the analysis instead of being selectively not considered.

Data Collection

This research study used secondary sources as the primary data collection method, which were located due to the systematic literature search that was presented in Section 5. There was no primary information gathered on organisational informants, survey, or interviewee. The sources were obtained through subscribing to institutional databases, open-access repositories, and publically available official publications. The types of peer-reviewed empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) that are used as the source of secondary data include theoretical works conducted by scholars, systematic reviews, reports on statistics by international organisations, and policy documents. Such a methodological design of a systematic literature review is justified by this unique use of secondary data, which is justified by the scope and nature of the research question, which does not presuppose the creation of new primary evidence but synthesis and critical assessment of existing knowledge. Citations of all references are given in the reference list.

Data Analysis and Findings

7.1 Gender Inequality Structural Mechanisms.

A system of structural processes all dependent on each other mediates gender inequality in the organizational setting. Horizontal and vertical occupational segregation is a hallmark of the world, which directs women to lower-paid jobs and limits their possibilities in senior jobs (Anker, 1998; ILO, 2022). The labyrinth framework of Eagly and Carli (2007) best describes

it: it does not happen as a result of one decisive obstacle but as a result of barriers developing in career paths through negative performance appraisals, fewer promotional chances, and not being included in informal networks.

7.2 HRM Intervention Effectiveness of the intervention by HRM.

There is a sharp dislocation between the most commonly used interventions and the interventions that have strong evidence of effectiveness. The most common human-resource management reaction, which is mandatory diversity training, has been shown to have a low behavioural effect and can actually have a backlash (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016). On the other hand, when based on organisational commitment the effects of such structural processes as appointment of diversity officers, creation of task forces, and implementation of mentoring programmes produce significantly greater results. Companies that solely use training as a means of compliance take the risk of inculcating the illusion of proactive effort but not a substantive change.

7.3 Sexual harassment: Being Reactive to Proactive.

Organisations tend to respond to harassment as it comes along by taking complaints as relatively isolated legal issues. The more effective responses would involve multi-channel reporting, which is confidential, proactive cultural assessment, bystander intervention training, and accountability measures, which are based not on seniority (Bourdeau et al., 2021). Another critical antecedent is psychological safety: employees have to actually believe that reporting is safe and that it has a consequence (Edmondson, 1999).

7.4 The Culture-Policy Gap

The gap between official human- resource management policy and actual organisational reality is the most enduring finding throughout the literature. Organizational culture, which is created through the leadership behaviour, informal norms and signals of accountability, is what ultimately dictates the translation of commitments to equity into anything measurable. This rift cannot be closed just through policy design (Schein, 1992; Dobbin and Kalev, 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This paper has discussed gender inequality in the work place with a particular attention to the role of HRM in solving discrimination and sexual harassment. The evidence confirms the fact that gender inequality is structural, institutionalized, and not amenable to bits and pieces intervention. It works by job design, career structure, pay systems, informal networks as well as cultural norms along with interpersonal processes of prejudice, harassment, and exclusion.

The HRM interventions have a genuine possibility of destabilizing these dynamics, yet, they must be structured at a high level, and the leadership must be fully devoted to it, with high accountability and strict outcomes measurement. The only way to fill the gap between the official policy and organizational reality is the courage to put influential people to account and the discipline to make the difference between real cultural change and the performance of commitment.

Recommendations

To HRM Practitioners: Diversity training itself is not the best solution to accountable structures: diversity roles, equity taskforces, transparent reporting are all valuable options. Reorganize recruitment and appraisal to minimize prejudice. Carry out remedial pay equity audits. Establish anti-harassment structures which are based on psychological safety and bystander intervention. Use intersectional analysis to find out compounded disadvantage.

To Organizational Leaders: It is time to realise that the leadership behaviour is the most influential factor of organisational culture. The required premise to effective change is visible responsibility of misconduct even of high-status persons. Implement gender equity outcomes in relation to leadership performance appraisal.

To the Policymakers: Enforcement of POSH Act in India especially within the unorganised sector should be strengthened. Make the first step of obligatory reporting of pay-equity and impose on the remediation requirements more than disclosure.

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