

“Women-as-Employees” & the Reproduction of Regimes of Exclusion

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The objective of the study is to capture the lived experiences of women-as-employees in their own words, to interpret the subject's words for a deep insight into the latent world of the subject's lived gender experiences on the socio-occupational segregation front. This is not, therefore, a study of the organization as an objective entity which may have its own narrative of gender initiatives but of the subjective experiences of 'women-as-employees' on the gender front. Data was collected through interviews of 44 women respondents. Fusing together the insights from this exploratory attempt from a gender-based socio-occupational segregation study, the subjectively experienced reality by 'women-as-employees' can be characterized as latent, pervasive "regimes of exclusion".

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Introduction

Culturally informed constructions of 'women-as-employees' underlying occupational segregations constitute the most pervasive determinant of the gender dynamics of labor markets (Cross, 2002). Occupational segregations define and enforce role demarcations, which have significant impact on gender-based division of labor arrangements. Deep-rooted social structures utilize deeply entrenched socialization processes to condition and apportion occupational spaces as suitable and unsuitable depending on the gender of the individual. It is in this context that social classifications like traditional and non-traditional occupations get associated with what is culturally appropriate and consequentially of perfect fit depending on whether the subject in question is a man or a woman (Anker, 1998). Occupations are traditional when they have socially acceptable fit with a particular gender and are considered as a culturally sanctioned career option for them. Non-traditional occupations for a particular gender would be occupations which do not find convergence with

socially acceptable and culturally sanctioned occupational categories (Altendorf, 2018). This is the type of seemingly innocuous classifications that are at the root of untenable and insidious occupational segregations which leads to under-representation of a particular gender groupings in occupations which are culturally prohibited and discouraged. As a result, men dominate certain occupations and women are found in minority in such settings because of the setting up of social and cultural fences (Gale & Cartwright, 1995). For illustration, men mostly dominate managerial and administration roles, craft occupations, and plant and machine operations and women appear to be populating clerical and secretarial, service and sales, and nursing roles (Cross, 2002).

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Gender segregation is present in both horizontal and vertical levels in the labor market (Cross, 2002). Horizontal gender segregation restricts entry into culturally forbidden territory and vertical gender segregation pushes women to lower levels of organizational power hierarchies (Cross, 2002). Occupational segregation translates not only in to stagnation at lower levels of power hierarchies, but also manifests itself in terms of restricted entry, lower wages or salary, very little advancement, lower status and lesser authority

(MacDougall, 1997). Due to occupational segregation, women lose out in the power sweepstakes and it is mostly men who get to occupy most top management positions ironically not only even in occupational spaces which are culturally ‘earmarked’ for women. (Cross, 2002). As a result, most women practically have to struggle for their space even in occupations culturally relegated to them and find it difficult even to gain entry into the occupations (Mastracci & Arreola, 2016). Mastracci and Arreola (2016) also argued how entry-level interface with barriers deeply affects their future career directions.

The existing literature on the interface of gender and occupational segregation, on careful analysis, points towards two broad trends in interpreting the modalities of women’s occupational experiences at the point of role performance levels and in seeking advancement in their workplace fortunes (Miner et. al., 2018). The first and a traditional line of research emphasizes gender differences between men and women as constitutive of occupational segregation suggesting that differences in one or more factors like personality, attitude, behavior, education, training, and skills and also their career related decisions determine suitability or the lack of it (Fagenson, 1990). This viewpoint envelops organizational and managerial thinking and seeps into formal organizational structures, processes, policies, practices and relations. The second trajectory of research focus is on explicit cultural-patriarchal discrimination at both societal and organizational levels as plausible explanations for the limited representation of women in segregated occupational spaces (Ahuja, 2002; Acker,

2006). These broad interpretative orientations are the basis for an exploration into the lived experiences of women at work in order to conceptualize the interplay of factors when 'women-as-employees' confront socio-occupational segregation in workplace settings (Acker, 2006; Cross, 2002).

Data for this study has been carried out in a rail transport organization where the representation of women in culturally specified non-traditional roles has been minimal though some changes are discernible over the last two decades. The organization has a total employee strength of 13,33,966 and women employees constitute merely 6.84 percent of the total workforce (Committee on Empowerment of Women Report, 2015).

Mode & Method of Research Engagement

This is a study of how gender plays out in an organization not in the objective sense of what organization do on this front but as subjectively experienced and as articulated by women employees. The organization as an objective entity or even as a projected objective entity may have its own narrative of gender initiatives through its policy and perspectives. That is not the focus of this study.

The objective of the study is to capture the lived experiences of 'women-as-employees' in their own words, to interpret the subject's words for a deep insight into the latent world of the subject's lived gender experiences, to conceptualize subjective experiences to understand the subjective world of work as it appears to

'women-as-employees', to try and fuse the sensitizing concepts together into an interpretative pattern and a conception of the organization from a 'women-as-employees' lens. The focus of this study is on gender undercurrents subjectively experienced by women-as-employees.

Data was collected by interviewing 44 women respondents – 50% were below 40 years and 50% were above 40 years; 89% were graduates and 11% post-graduates; 61% married, 25% single, 14% widowed/divorced/remarried; 61% have 2-4 family members and 39% have 5-7; 41% have 10 years work experience and below, 20% have 10-20 years' experience and 39% have above 20 years' experience.

These interviews were conversational with an indicative interview schedule used as suggested by Mihas (2019). To maintain anonymity, the identity of respondents has been kept confidential (Patton, 2005). All human subjects' protocols have been followed – clearly explaining the purpose of the study, assurance of anonymity and confidentiality and the researcher secured explicit consent from the respondents to be interviewed with the option of opting out at any time for the respondent. After data collection, content analysis approach was used to examine whether any pattern in relation to the research questions was discernible from the transcripts (Corbin et. al., 2015). The totality of transcripts of the interviews and its multiple readings not only helped in crafting a strategy for analysis but also gave a holistic sense of the context in which 'women-as-employees' were verbalizing their experiences. The holistic sense of the con-

text again helped in a grounded interpretation of the textual accounts and in developing an interpretative conceptualization of the experiences of ‘women-as-employees’.

Excerpts from the transcripts of the interviews with 44 ‘women-as-employees’ were subjected to analysis and interpretation sensitive to the contextual sense as perceptible from the totality of transcripts. An attempt was also made to conceptualize the interpreted experiences of ‘women-as-employees’ with a view to relating this process to the research objectives of the study. The outcomes of the analysis, interpretation and findings emerging from the subjective experiential data are presented here.

Socio-occupational Segregation

One of the respondents who aspired to become a constable in the Railway Protection Force which is vested with the responsibility of protecting the organization’s passengers, goods, rolling stocks, assets and properties had this to say: “Society doesn’t look towards women carrying a rifle in a positive manner. They [society] discourage us [women] from joining the railway police department” (R25).

Somehow, society seems to think that a woman with a rifle in hand is an incongruous picture even though the woman in question is a uniformed security personnel with the mandate to provide security to passengers and goods, and her being in possession of arms is legitimized by her assigned role and attendant au-

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thority. The perception of incongruity between the gender factor and the rifle in hand lends credence to the view that in the minds of members of society there is evidence of socio-occupational segregation based on social sanctions regimes as to what profession is culturally acceptable for women. By the same breath there is also the implicit view that certain occupations are the preserves of men only. Social approval and disapproval in a sense pervades career choices of women and the approval-disapproval regimes in a sense reproduce socio-occupational segregations. This phenomenon first acts as a barrier to women in choosing what they want and if they break the barrier social disapproval follows with all the attendant consequences.

Socio-occupational Polarization

“We [women] are expected to pay more attention to our children and family. Child-rearing is a difficult task. It requires a lot of efforts but still people perceive that women who work in the engineering workshops are very bold and tough to handle” (R35). There are three socio-occupational segregation elements in this extract – that women even if employed, should give priority to children and family; the respondent on the other hand claims that child rearing is in itself and by itself a challenging proposition and if

women are capable of carrying out that responsibility, they are quite capable of meeting any workplace challenge; and the suggestion that while women in engineering roles are being disparaged on grounds of having misplaced priorities, those managing the engineering workshop add insult to injury by casting aspersions on women not only as difficult persons but also as difficult to manage employees. If these three elements are drawn together into a meaningful inference the conclusion is that while there is gender-based socio-occupational segregation, this is further reinforced with segregation centric polarization of the genders. The script, which runs like a ticker tape in the latent world of the engineering workshop, is that women are misfits in the engineering role and they are better off as spouses and child rearers. And the ‘woman-as-employee’ retort is that if they are good enough for the challenge of child rearing, they are more than good enough for the engineering challenge. Heilman, Manzi and Braun (2015) got it right when he speaks of ‘lack of fit framework’ as the basis of gender discrimination. The data here suggests that the “lack of fit” argument is doing even more – it not only segregates occupations on the basis of gender but also polarizes the genders with the dominant gender grouping disparaging the vulnerable gender grouping.

Socio-occupational Rejection

This extract suggests that if internally there is segregation and polarization of the genders, their external interface with customers in their official roles also is

experienced as gender-based skepticism bordering on rejection. Customers so used to seeing male travelling ticket examiners seem uncomfortable when a woman TTE asks for their tickets and identification cards. As narrated by one respondent: “Some passengers do not accept us [women] as a travel ticket examiner...they [passengers] tease us...see, I put ‘bindi’ [a small colored mark or jewel worn by Hindu women to signify their marital status] and ‘mangalsutra’ [a necklace worn by a Hindu women to show that they are married] just to look married” (R8).

Women employees have to take shelter by wearing *bindis* and *mangalsutras* in order to avoid unwanted and unwelcome situations drawing attention to lurking dangers.

The social milieu in which the ‘women-as-employees’ experience gender-based segregation is the same as the customer’s social setting. This also indicates that gender-based socio-occupational segregation is an all-pervasive social construction informing the entire organizational chain from which there is no escape. And in addition, the respondent suggests that women employees have to take shelter by wearing *bindis* and *mangalsutras* in order to avoid unwanted and unwelcome situations drawing attention to lurking dangers which are occupational hazards peculiar only to their gender status in spite of just fulfilling official roles and responsibilities.

Occupation Segregation Socialization

This extract has a clear message – socio-occupational segregation is drilled into impressionable minds right from early days and gets so internalized that it becomes a way of life and holds its biased sway at every stage in the lives of both men and women. This extract is explicit and self-explanatory. “Since childhood, occupations are segregated based on gender. During my schooling, men were shown as engineers, policemen, etc. while women were shown as teachers, nurses, etc. in the school textbooks. I think, if gender differences in the work distribution were not being taught to kids then more women would become engineers” (R34). This insight from the extract finds a parallel in Acker’s (2006) study on gender, class, and race-based inequalities in the organizations.

Socio-occupational Segregation by Biased Portrayal

This extract is about organizational communication and how they emanate from a socio-occupational segregation oriented mindset embedded in the organization through a biased portrayal as perceived by women aspirants. The communication itself, as it were, puts up an entry barrier for women aspirants in the recruitment stage itself through a “this-is-not-for-you” impact. “...Although, women are employed in all departments of railways but looking at job advertisements, it seems that these occupations are meant only for

men.” (R38). This narrative discusses how the portrayal of the occupational image in the job advertisement stage itself acts as a dampener for otherwise qualified women to even so much as apply for such jobs. Billing (2011) study on women employed in the information technology, finance, banking system, and medical industry too confirms this finding.

Occupational Segregation & Aspirational Asphyxiation

The best way to perpetuate socio-occupational segregation is to deny valid and reliable information on various occupations and careers. This is the view as recounted by a respondent: “When I joined, there were very few women working as an assistant station master. I had very little information about women employed here [operations department]... It was difficult to get information about them [women station managers] but whenever I read anything about them in the newspaper, I got motivated to join IR” (R14). If information is provided it is in a form, which reinforces gender-occupational prejudices. Exposure of women in the early years in various jobs and contexts could help in choosing careers and also to break segregation barriers in the bargain.

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Socio-occupational Segregation Transcendence

Role models in the immediate kin networks appear to be a motivating factor in breaking segregation barriers. “My father’s uncle is an Assistant Sub-Inspector in Punjab Police. I used to watch him since childhood and got motivated to join the security department. I am the first woman employed in IR as a Sub-Inspector from my village” (R25). The findings by Ahuja (2002) too confirm the influence of role models on the career choice and segregation transcending behavior in pursuing careers.

Socio-occupational Segregation by Dissatisfiers

This extract points towards the evidence of socio-occupational segregation related to how organizations and managers handle hours of work, health hazards and physical work environments.

“There are no washrooms inside the train engines. Due to the difficult nature of work, twice I had major health issues. Regularly, I have to carry a bag which is more than 10kg as it contains detail book, time-table, torch, flags, keys, etc. consequently, I suffer from severe shoulder and neck pain” (R37). Herzberg (1968) has termed these as “hygiene” factors. These are basically “dissatisfiers” and some of these variables as is evident in this extract can be used to frustrate women employees even to the point of resigning or even drop out of pursuing a career.

Socio- occupational Segregation by Obstacles

“When you do engineering, you think about private jobs wherein you get a perfect package in terms of AC cabins, free Wi-Fi, good working conditions, etc. But here [engineering workshop], you don’t even get basic facilities. We get infection easily. Diseases such as diabetes, blood pressure, and tuberculosis are very common here” (R31). This narrative is from a respondent employed in the electrical engineering workshop. This extract suggests that women face several obstacles especially health related in spite of which they have to continue working even though the environment is insensitive to health hazards.

Socio- occupational Segregation by Stagnation

Socio-occupational segregation constrains the scope for women to move into higher echelons of the organization. According to two respondents: “Government creates job vacancies only for a few posts and majorly for Group-D post. The job vacancies are very limited for Group-C employees in which certain caste-based reservations in the form of ‘Scheduled Caste/Scheduled tribe Act’ and ‘Other Backward Caste Act’ further restricts our [women’s] selection probability in IR...Although there is reservation for women in the security department but I think if the management really wants to bring change then some seats should be reserved for women in all the male-dominated departments” (R15).

Stagnation stares at every employee given the paucity of promotional avenues and male dominated management structures. This extract also suggests that women resent such discrimination in vertical segregation based limited opportunities and are asking for affirmative action along prevailing lines which are in place for other segments of the organization.

Socio -occupational Segregation by Intimidation

This extract suggests that only mentally strong, attitudinally tough individuals can survive in the operations department of the organization. There is also a hint of a suggestion that roles and responsibilities in the operations department are projected as though it is very difficult with a view to intimidating women-as-employees. “The difficulty level of the entrance exam is very high. Many people fail in the psychology test. The psychology of a person is very important in working in the operating department in the IR... only mentally and physically strong people can do this kind of job” (R37). Such articulation tactics meant to overwhelm also reinforces socio-occupational segregation.

Socio-occupational Segregation by Profiling

This extract suggests that gender-based socio-occupational role profiling is an all pervasive phenomenon even in societal estimations of ‘women-as-employees’. This is borne out by what one respondent working in the railways en-

Public perception appears to flow out of a socio-occupational segregation mindset – that women are suitable only for non-engineering jobs.

gineering workshop has reported: “...People think that railways job comprises jobs like ticket checking staff, loco pilots, and station masters only. But this is not the reality. The common public has no awareness about the backend work in the railway’s workshop, signal and telecommunications and other departments... Whenever, I tell someone that I work in railways then, people ask, do you work in the commercial department?” (R31). The implication is that if you are a woman employee, even when the organization is a hard-core engineering firm, even public perception appears to flow out of a socio-occupational segregation mindset – that women are suitable only for non-engineering jobs and accordingly, that organizations also must be assigning only non-engineering roles to women.

Socio-occupational Segregation by Dependency Orientations

Family-friendly policies promote work-life balance and help employees fulfill both family and work obligations and the respondent’s organization being a central public sector organization offers preferential transfer policies, maternity and childcare leave facilities. In a central government job, you get posted anywhere in India, but especially for

married women, it's very difficult to leave their husband and live alone in a different state for a job. Since 5 years, I am living alone with my children and mother-in-law. My husband is posted in another city. Every weekend he comes to meet us...it's very difficult to manage without him" (R35).

The above extract displays a debilitating dependency syndrome on men on the social space front in spite of child friendly policies provided by the organization to an extent, at least in terms of generous leave facilities. The extract given below also reinforces the view that there is a tendency on the part of 'women-as-employees' to expect support of a kind that further reinforces the lack of fit and questionable suitability arguments of the socio-occupational segregation brigade. "I am posted in Mumbai central railway station but Mumbai is very expensive, I cannot afford to buy a home in a nearby location and due to unavailability to the required number of railway staff quarters, I do not think, I will get a home in the railway quarters in the next few years.... traveling daily for 4 hours in local trains [2 hours one way] is very challenging, as my mother is very old, I have to look after her... but what can I do?...since it's a government job,..., I am working, otherwise I could have resigned" (R33). Watts (2009) argued from a poststructuralist framework that instead women should assert their independence and self-confidence by negotiating work-family conflicts with a measure of gender autonomy and assertiveness to deal with the subjectively experienced organizational reality of the

interplay of workspace and social space dynamics.

Socio-occupational Segregation by Diffidence & Avoidance

The extract reveals a certain underlying diffidence and attendant anxieties, which only serves to reinforce the occupational segregation undercurrents implicit in organizational dynamics. Anticipatory apprehensions about the nature of the job or fear of making mistakes even before joining could have a deleterious impact on self-confident functioning and ultimately only serve the interests of occupational segregationists. "In the beginning, I was afraid of joining the commercial department...I was in a dilemma, whether I would be able to work as a traveling ticket examiner (TTE) or not? I used to think how will I do this tedious task? ...how others will react if I would make some mistake" (R10).

Yet another respondent quoted below further reveals the implications of a diffidence syndrome, which also shows an inclination towards dependency because the initiative to get relevant information is in one's own interest and should be seen as one's own responsibility. Such diffidence combined with dependency provides fodder for the gender based occupational segregationists. "Earlier, I had apprehensions, whether I would be able to work in the commercial department or not? Because at the time of joining, I had no information about the nature of the job" (R10).

The women employee's excerpt referred to below reveals yet another facet

Prevailing social bias related to suitability of roles and self-imposed job-role hesitancies constitute restraints on career choices by women.

of an orientation which can only further strengthen the segregationist arguments of “lack of fit” and lack of suitability – that it is best for women to adopt a policy of avoidance when it comes to taking up engineering roles. “Girls themselves don’t want to join engineering workshops... they think that these [technical] jobs are not for them... I think, their [girls’] interest, mindset and will-power is of prime importance, rest all things are secondary” (R22). This shows how the combined effect of prevailing social bias related to suitability of roles and self-imposed job-role hesitancies constitute restraints on career choices by women. The extract also suggests that attitude is important when making career choices. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of the study by Fouad et al. (2016) where he compares women engineers who persist with or drop out of engineering job-roles.

Socio-occupational Segregation by Irreconcilable Dualities

Occupational segregationists thrive on intensification of opportunistically constructed notions of irreconcilable dualities. Faced with the dilemma of balancing work pressures and motherhood responsibilities, the respondent suggests that had she anticipated the conflicting problems of a working mother, she would not have joined the organization. Seeing

the dilemma in terms of meeting the expectations of the spouse at home and manager at work and concluding that the dual expectations are irreconcilable is at the heart of the gender based occupational segregationists. “Until a girl is married then it’s ok to work in the operating department but once you [woman] become mother, it becomes really challenging to work in the long duty hours. Earlier, I did not know about these difficulties otherwise I would never join” (R42)

The next respondent quote depicts the dilemma of women’s freedom to choose a career of her choice coming into direct confrontation with culturally crafted notions of career suitability for women based on the cultural “lack-of-fit” argument flowing from family and society. “When I expressed my interest in joining the security department as a police constable in IR, then my mother supported me but my relatives and villagers created a lot of problems for me. They used to pass negative comments on my parents stating that don’t allow your daughter to join the security department... Consequently, my father came under their influence...and it became difficult to become a police constable” (R26).

This clearly shows two arguments coalescing together – that of work-family conflicts and the family/society-women career choice conflicts – where the father-mother-relative-society coalition comes together before choosing a career and the society-spouse-manager conspiracy coalesces together post entering careers to create powerful partnerships in producing and reproducing the organizational reality which con-

fronts every woman – the latent reality of socio-occupational segregation – to work or not to work; to pursue a career or not pursue a career; if working, whether to prioritize spousal-motherhood work or organizational-employee work.

Discussion & Conclusions

The experiences of women in the workplace have been examined from various perspectives and there are diverse theoretical lenses through which gender at work has been investigated. This study, drawing from literature, has tried to see this phenomenon from a gender-based socio-occupational segregation frame of reference. Data was collected by interviewing 44 women respondents and the transcripts, while providing a sense of the contextual totality, also provided data extracts from individual respondents to piece together a sensitizing conceptual frame revolving around gender-based socio-occupational segregation lens. This is a study not of the projected objective reality of an organization but the equally significant reality of an organization as subjectively experienced by ‘women-as-employees’ from a gender-based socio-occupational segregation frame and as articulated by women subjects.

There is gender-based segregation in the latent world of the organization.

The interpretations of the articulations show that there is gender-based segregation in the latent world of the organization, evidence of polarization

of the genders along an unfounded basis of “lack of fit” and “lack of suitability” arguments which in turn leads to a pervasive sense of rejection even when there is demonstrated capability. Socialization processes cutting across the social milieu as well as at career entry levels ensure the perpetuation of the gender biased socio-occupational segregation and its production and reproduction. The latent organization reinforces the socio-occupational segregation through biased portrayal of role and responsibilities, asphyxiation of aspirations, unaddressed dis-satisfiers, placement of obstacles in the way of competence and performance, prevention of movement to higher levels of responsibilities, sometimes even using intimidation and biased profiling revolving around job roles. Given the environment as depicted above, women-as-employees may sometimes display dependency orientations, job-role diffidence and even avoidance in the face of gender-based socio-occupational segregation and polarization.

Organizations may be in its objective existence claiming to be clued in to the problem and may even be claiming to be progressive in terms of responses to the gender question by way of policies and practices - maternity and child care leave facilities may be offered as evidence. But from a gender perspective, the organizational reality as subjectively experienced by ‘women-as-employees’ from a gender-based socio-occupational segregation frame and as articulated by women subjects shows a gap between what is claimed by the objective organizational entity and

the gender-infused latent organization.

Fusing together the insights from this exploratory study from a gender based socio-occupational segregation study, the subjectively experienced reality by women-as-employees” can be characterized as latent, pervasive “regimes of exclusion” and the various factors identified in this study are factors which contribute towards the reproduction of the soundless “regimes of exclusion” which lurk behind the sounds and symbols of the projected objective organizational reality. Further studies along these lines could illuminate this line of approaching the workplace gender question to bridge the gap between the subjective experiences of omnipresent exclusion and the projected objective organization’s claims of inclusion.

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