

Women in Masculine Jobs: Capturing Lived Experiences of Women in Sales Occupation

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This paper brings to cognizance the challenges faced by women in the male-dominated occupation of sales. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to decipher lived experiences of 10 female participants working with sales teams in different industries. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The research was conducted with the lens of social-role theory braced with sales taxonomy and occupational segregation literature. The study reveals gender identities that prevent women from crossing over to masculinity, quandary of heterosexual relationships and sexual advances from within the organization and market. Finally, women share their coping mechanisms and mitigation methods for overcoming the perplexities and sustaining in the occupation.

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Introduction

More and more women are enrolling in paid work across the globe through social, economic and developmental agendas. Sustainable Development Goal No. 5 aims to achieve gender equality across nations and organizations (ILO, 2016). In spite of these initiatives, India is listed in the bottom 20 among 156 countries in Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) (World Economic Forum, 2021). India's Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) has been slipping from 36.78% in 2005 to 18.6% in 2020. Females comprise 48.02% of the world's second most populous country, India. Thus, more than half of the unrealised talent base is under-utilised due to challenges in workforce integration, socio-economic and cultural factors (Bank, 2022; Chaudhary & Verick, 2014; Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016; Menon et al., 2019). Women are getting employed but in lowest-paid occupations (Anker, 1997; Anker et al., 2003; ILO, 2016; Zahidi et al., 2018). The gender gap is then not only in employment but also in quality of jobs that females are joining.

ILO indicates that sex-segregation in occupations are changing (ILO, 2016; 2018), more women are joining 'Shop and market sales workers' occupation. (Chakraborty, 2016; India & National Statistical Office, 2019; Ministry of Labor & Employment, 2015). The space thus created for females in non-traditional occupations, opens a box of opportunities as well as challenges. This research explores these opportunities and challenges for females in the occupation of sales. Why Sales? This function enables the transit of products and services to customers, generates revenue making it a crucial part of business. Professional selling posits a career for women wherein they can earn more, have a great deal of autonomy and a high level of training (Catalyst, 1995; Fugate et al., 1988; Gable & Reed, 1987; Morgan & Martin, 2006; Shoreibah et al., 2019). Challenges of working in this occupation surface in traveling arrangements, power-sharing, and sex-role stereotyping (Collinson & Collinson, 1996; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Hoogendoorn et al., 2013; Lane, 2000; Lane & Crane, 2002; Shoreibah et al., 2019). Researchers have examined the role of organization's HR policies and processes in hiring and retaining women (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013; Cohen et al., 1998). But these studies have missed netting the female incumbents' perspectives who are exposed to a myriad of experiences in the sales occupation. These issues are captured in this research.

Why Is This Research?

'Occupational segregation by sex occurs everywhere, causing labor mar-

ket rigidity and economic inefficiency, wasting human resources, preventing change, disadvantaging women, and perpetuating gender inequalities' (Anker, 1997; Blau & Jusenius, 1976; Siltanen et al., 1995). By exploring the lived experiences of women in one sex-segregated occupation of Sales, the dynamics that make it difficult for females to occupy and sustain therein have been epitomized. This research attempts to look from inside out – a perspective that will enable women, teams, organizations and connected social circles understand why women find it difficult to sustain in an occupation where they are a minority.

Research Questions

The research explores how women manage any potential conflict between the 'masculine' occupation and emergent gender dimensions. The following research questions are explored:

1. How do participants describe their life in the male dominant occupation of sales?
2. What forms of support are available to help them endure in the sales occupation?
3. What are the coping mechanisms and mitigation methods that women deploy in overcoming challenges?

Literature Review

Why segregate? As humans we have a tendency to categorize things in order to organize, make things/ people/ locations, etc. identifiable, and make us com-

portable in the notion that by doing so, we are more scientific in methods. But, when these categorizations become silos that have none or very limited access to each other, they create dark and delineating borders. Occupational sex segregation is an outcome of such classifications. Gender theories provide the principal explanation for existence and persistence of segmentation in occupations basis worker's sex.

Gender Theories

'Segregation' is the tendency for men and women to be employed in different occupations (Siltanen et al., 1995). Male and female jobs are used to describe occupations that are disproportionately and predominantly, but generally not entirely, performed by persons of one sex (England, 1982). Male-dominated/masculine occupations are those that occupy 25% or fewer women and vice-versa (De Mel et al., 2009; Hegewisch et al., 2010). Occupational segregation occurs both horizontally and vertically. Horizontal segregation is the disparate concentration of men and women across industries, occupations, employment spread across formal and informal sectors. Vertical segregation is disparity in social status, positions, or potential for promotion (Charles, 2003; Das & Kotikula, 2019).

It has been a belief that both sexes are adept at one or the other things and they don't overlap. For instance, women are often seen as caregivers and gatherers purportedly in supportive roles, whereas males as hunters earning the bread.

Evolutionary researchers attribute such categorization to an individual's biological sex which can be distinguished on the basis of reproductive organs, hormones, gonads etc. (Kelly, 2016; Messing, 1982; Risman & Davis, 2013). The term sex instead of gender is hence used to distinguish between physiological characteristics.

But, gender has more psychological, social, and cultural context rather than limiting to evolution. Social constructionism theorizes that gender is constructed socially and is maintained in agreement amongst the members of a given culture (Lawson & Lips, 2014). Both sexes are socialized into dichotomous normative behavior by extended social members.

Social role theory explains how requirements in roles reinforce the qualities, thereby sustaining gendered division of labor. Each imbibes what they practice, and hence get stereotyped in the roles occupied (Eagly & Wood, 2012; 2016). Selection in occupations and other roles are a function of such stereotypes embedded in society. As an analogy, occupations such as nursing (requiring compassion) are viewed as feminine and doctors (higher order skills) as masculine, thereby gendering this division in labor. Such a static gendered socialization results in gender stereotypes and gendered roles. (Barbulescu & Bidwell, 2013; Charles, 2003; Eagly & Wood, 2016).

When individuals incorporate these social, cultural expectations and meanings associated with a person's sex into their self-concept, gender becomes part

of their identities. Individuals identify themselves and act in relation to the socially induced, self-defined gendered meanings ascribed to their sex (Eagly & Wood, 2016; Ely, 1995; Fiennes, 2009; Wendy & Eagly, 2010).

Demand and supply-oriented theories explain availability of occupations and stereotyping of jobs leading to employer discrimination in providing entry to women in occupations (Beller Andrea., 1982; Bergmann, 1981; Blau & Jusenius, 1976; Ellmeier et al., 2011; Polachek, 1981). For instance, employers preferences for hiring men/women change according to jobs requiring different time allotments such as extended working hours, night-shift, flexible working hours or conversely women choosing the occupation for balancing work and family life (Anker, 1997). In her groundbreaking findings on dynamics of interactions in group composition, Kanter (2006) found that female employees occupying 'token' i.e., minority positions were imperiled to stereotyping, social isolation, and performance pressures.

The interactionist approach explains how individuals are 'doing gender' instead of 'being in a gender' and hence is a routine accomplishment of everyday interaction (Butler, 1988; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is also personified for organizations wherein the norms act as a gendered sphere of working (Acker, 1990). Gender emerges as a dynamic construct as opposed to binary with different connotations in context of biology, psychology, sociology, and culture studies.

Taxonomy of Sales Occupation

Sales has been around since bartering cavemen. Selling is the first transaction between seller and prospective buyer. Selling is also encapsulated as the art of closing the deal. Buying food items for cooking at home and buying a car both are placed towards different ends of the spectrum. Thus, the spectrum of selling ranges from serving natural needs and created wants that are manufactured through marketing.

The selling profession has been classified in different ways. George N. Kahn and Abraham Shuchman categorized Selling as Creative and Maintenance selling. McMurry further modified it into a more complex categorization (McMurry, 1961). Dawson categorized it on the basis of evolution of sales management from production era, sales, marketing and finally to human era (Dawson, 1970). It was further elaborated into: (i) Missionary selling, (ii) Trade servicer, (iii) Technical selling and (iv) New Business selling (Newton, 1973).

In 2006, William C. Moncrief modified his earlier classification into different 'Sellers' '(i) Consultative, (ii) New Business/Channel Development, (iii) Missionary, (iv) Delivery, (v) Sales support and (vi) Key Account' (Moncrief et al., 1988, 2006).

More recently sales occupation is categorized as Personal and Mass Selling. Business to Business (B2B) Markets have lesser customers than Business to Customer (B2C) but have larger volumes. The

focus on relationship building also varies between B2B and B2C (Saha et al., 2014). Diversity of sub-occupational index in Sales occupation is observed due to the evolution and trends in Sales occupation described above.

Women in Sales Occupation

The GGI shows reduction in gender gaps amongst nine clusters of professional roles. Globally, share of females in sales profession is 37% (Schwab et al., 2020). Though this data is in proximity to gender parity, a closer look at national and sub-occupational classification reveals intricacies. Cosmetic product counters may employ more females, but female sales representatives dealing with distributors are in minority. While the sales executives dealing with the distributors reach home with a higher variable pay, those at the counter are paid lesser and commoditized thus reflecting pay-segregation. Employment surveys conducted in India affirming mere 15.3 percent women in 'sales occupation' reflect anomaly in occupational sex-segregation in this category (Ghai, 2018; India & National Statistical Office, 2019; Mondal et al., 2018). This demonstrates that women have yet to break through in this occupation.

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A cordial working environment where individuals feel engaged and per-

form to their optimum capabilities is the key to employee job satisfaction, retention and advancement. Creating such an environment within the sales occupation is a challenge since most of their work is out-of-office. Markets are not under the supervision of walled workspaces, thus creating multiple challenges. Such out-of-office conditions disadvantage women through either encountering or avoiding getting sexually harassed by third party (Collinson & Collinson, 1996; Fine et al., 1999). Women are invariably excluded from settings such as golf and strip clubs that could provide access to critical information, sales opportunities and impact their productivity (Arthur et al., 2011; Morgan & Martin, 2006).

While inside the walled office, females have another exclusion conundrum to address. Interactions with working staff are crucial in shaping career. But activities such as socializing by way of out-of-office entertainment with colleagues (sometimes impracticable for women to attend such as sports events or topless bars, late night dinners etc.), a smoke break with team where informal discussions regarding workplace happen, use of swears as common parlance etc. create exclusionary effects (Kapoor, 2016).

Research Methodology

Issues pertaining to inclusion and relational dynamics of gender in such predominantly patriarchal group can be better understood through the lens of females occupying jobs in the work groups. In the process of exploration, it may be that each participant will have a different

reality to share. Thus, this study takes the qualitative subjectivist and constructivism stance (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). These realities are continually recreated psychologically and socially by the participants based on an intersubjective understanding of it (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Hellström, 2008).

A phenomenological approach is adopted to explore structures of consciousness as experienced from first-person perspective. This research has captured lived experiences and drawn rich descriptions and meanings from participants' everyday activities, beliefs in their surrounding life-world (Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). Heidegger believed that meanings are embedded in everyday occurrences. Hence, he propagated Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which seeks to explicate how some kind of people experience a specific experience by getting an insider's perspective. Thus, the design resorted to Heidegger's IPA (Eatough & Smith, 2017; J. Smith & Osborn, 2003).

In-depth interviews were conducted with the aid of a semi-structured inter-

view guideline. The participants were selected through purposive sampling in order to maintain homogeneity. Acknowledging recommendations for sample size in a phenomenological study, 10 participants were interviewed (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Robinson, 2014). Inclusion criteria for sample selection encompassed: (i) Females in sales occupation where proportion of males in team is 75% or more (De Mel et al., 2009) and (ii) At-least 3 years in sales for capturing rich experiences. Participants belonged to different industries (Table 1).

Finding participants was difficult because of low proportion of women in sales teams and their hesitation to be recorded. For instance, out of 400 sales representatives, one of the pharmaceutical organizations employed only three females (<1 percent). The organizations in the telecom industry were marginally better (but not adequately) than other companies where they only had 6.75 percent women in sales team.

Table 1 depicts basic demographic details and industry representation of participants.

Table 1 Demographic & Industry Representation of Participants

Participant Code.	Industry	Marital Status	Number of Children
P-1	Pharmaceutical	Married	2
P-2	Medical Devices	Married	0
P-3	Medical Devices	Married	0
P-4	Telecommunication	Unmarried	0
P-5	Telecommunication	Unmarried	0
P-6	Personal care	Unmarried	0
P-7	Banking	Married	2
P-8	Oil and Gas	Married	1
P-9	Oil and Gas	Unmarried	0
P-10	FMCG	Married	0

Interview guideline covered questions eliciting participant's daily experiences, feelings, beliefs about being in the masculine occupation. Due to Covid 19, online interviews were conducted and video recorded with participant's written informed consent. Transcriptions were read multiple times before being coded and condensed into specific codes to be explicated into themes of the phenomena.

Findings

The themes identified through the interviews are:

1. *Demarcations of Gender Identity and Incongruency with Role Expectations.* "This job requires us to do things that are tough for women, especially married women, such as frequent traveling, hosting coffee/tea sessions out-of-office for distributors, using rough language and gaalis (swear-words) etc. We are always interacting with males like colleagues, distributors, doctors, boss - anyone. But as a female, I don't find this comfortable at all. But I realized that I need to adapt or else I will never be accepted in the group and achieve my targets" (P-3). Swear words and aggressive tone of voice emerged as a common parlance for males. Females expressed discomfort using these. Participants felt that masculine characteristics such as these were a prerequisite for the job. Their identification with feminine traits created an incongruence with role requirements, which could lead to non-achievement of targets. Gender identity formation, gender-role differentiation and stereotyping were evident.

2. *Opportunity Isn't Necessarily Inclusivity:* "Today I manage a team of 40 male reportees. But, the ride till here was very-very tough. My colleagues could go out for a smoke or take my boss out for a drink and party late night. For me, that was not possible. This created a hindrance in getting accepted in the team and with the boss as well. I quickly realized that this communication gap will always exist since there are some things that I will never do as a female" (P-5). Non-conformity to masculine elements such as smoking, socializing late night and swear words were a hindrance in getting heard, delegating/sharing work and achieving targets. Their feminine efforts to be accepted as an in-group member left them feeling excluded. Stereotypes regarding their ability to perform certain roles and acceptability in the occupation were expressed openly by male colleagues, also displaying the patriarchal gendered occupation.

3. *Sexual Harassment:* All participants, barring one (P-7), faced issues in the heterosocial setting. A few customers or colleagues viewed them as sexual partners and produced heterosexual relationships, making it difficult for women to work. "I can never forget the time when a member of distributor's team developed a liking for me and also proposed for marriage. When I softly denied, he became very aggressive. He followed me home for many days. Though he didn't do anything, this scared me to my bones" (P-9). The dilemma with another participant was developing

a strategy to deal with a senior authority in the organization. She confessed to living in constant fear of losing her job if she did not answer appropriately, until one day when she made up her mind and started acting 'stern' as informally advised by her senior female colleague.

Participants had to be cautious about casual flirtatious conversations, backfence talks, sexual advances and even threat of losing a business account. The double-bind situations had to be managed with extreme tact since their target achievement was at stake. Lack of organizational proscription left women to fend for informal advice from senior female colleagues. Situations such as these triggered their intention of leaving the occupation. Sexual harassment brings out elements of patriarchal society as well as gendered organization where men express their ownership over women through sexual advances (Morgan & Martin, 2006).

4. Mitigation to Move On: Participants emphasized bearing an additional burden of 'paid' along with existing 'unpaid' work. Since women are expected to manage routine responsibilities of home, ensure a protective ecosystem for children and seniors as compared to males who just 'earn the bread', women felt they were sharpened planners. As a mitigation strategy, women collaborated with connected social groups viz. family, friends, peer group, reporting authority to tackle challenges and endure in their career. P-6 stated: "In festive seasons, it sometimes becomes very difficult to visit

distributor sites. On one such visit to a distributor, all members in their team were drunk. I immediately called up my Zonal manager and he came to the location. He asked me to remain out of the distributor's unit till the time he interacted with them. This kind of support gave me courage and I focused only on work." P-1 felt "Late working hours, constant reply to calls has a deep impact on our personal lives especially with two children at home. You are always worried about their studies, spending time with them and all. I had my In-laws shift with us. We also kept a full-time bai (caretaker) and outsourced rest of the tasks. I speak with my children at given time slots during the day. My spouse, who is in the same job of sales understands the rigor... is also supportive."

Supportive workplace culture (peer group, reporting authority, policies) and family members appear to be a silver lining. This helped participants to become more productive and also created a cohesion amongst the team members and organization. Such participants also reciprocated with sincerity and an additional effort to ensure that work doesn't suffer in their absence, seemingly also a feminine characteristic.

Discussion

Despite of adversities, all participants consciously joined and persevered in an occupation where prescribed societal gender roles were challenged. They developed coping mechanisms and strategies to overcome difficulties. Ste-

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reotyping made their acceptance within the in-group difficult. Females were constantly either in fear or anxiety of being out-grouped since they were unwilling to undo the genders they identified with. These were career derailers leading to vertical segregation. All this had to be managed while ensuring their target-achievement was unaffected. These uneven conditions create inequity for women.

Conclusion

Differences in organizational distribution of men and women are persistent; it may be moderate than in the past but by no means has it vanished, even after decades of attention and numerous interventions. We know little about phenomena of women in sales, especially through the lens of minority gender occupying sales jobs. This research identified and tried to understand the conditions under which women experience the job and its gendered elements. This study contributes to an evolving body of knowledge regarding women in sales, thereby exploring covert causes of gender inequality. Organizations' efforts should be directed towards retention of talent along with attraction of diverse talent through policies and their uncompromising implementation. Unrelenting sanctions must be made for preserving dignity of women. Making salesforce more diverse and inclusive vis-à-vis increasing diversity in the customers is a

Strategic HR and Business consideration.

The study was conducted with a limited yet pertinent sample. Future research can focus on studying and recommending talent management strategies for females in the sales occupation. It can also address implications of 'doing and undoing' gender at work.

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