

OFFICE LIFE OF WIDOWED AND DIVORCED WOMEN WORKING IN ORGANISED SECTOR: SOME REFLECTIONS

Rajender K. Premi*

Abstract

This study was undertaken to explore the office life widowed and divorced women working in organised sector. These women who had been living with their husbands but at present they are leading their lives without them in the essentially patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal society in which male dominance in social as well as household affairs is persisting from the centuries past. The basic presumption underlying this study is that irrespective of the mode of departure of their men from their lives, widowed and divorced women share a common status of being women-without-men (WWM). Besides, being working women they also shoulder the household and other social responsibilities. Therefore, keeping in view their 'women-without-men' status at centre stage, their office life has been explored in terms of their attitudes towards their office as a place, office environment, behaviours of colleagues and other staff members in addition to their unpleasant experiences.

Keeping with the exploratory nature of the study, data was collected from 25 widowed and divorced women, developed into case studies and then put to content analysis. The result of the study shows that their employment was essential for their living, leading their families and bearing other social responsibilities. Their office is place for them which has given them emotional strength and where they found emotional companionship. The findings clearly indicates that their perception about self and the attitudes and behaviours of other men and women towards them also changes with the change of their status from being 'women-with-men' to 'women-without-men'. Owing to this, they also feel more prone to undue and unusual advances from the males as compared to their 'with-men' counterparts. The results also indicate

* Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla-5

women-divide as the respondents disclosed that married women are insensitive towards their problems.

Keywords: *Marital Status, Social Position, Gender, Working Women, Attitude,*

Introduction

Marriage is a social institution that regulates human behaviour, formulates families and extends the kinship networks. Being part of this institution, men and women attain the social status of husband and wife. The relationship of husband and wife is highly venerated for the social, religious and cultural responsibilities they shoulder and duties they perform. Together, they contribute in the growth of civilization by way of progeny, socialisation of new generation and transmission of cultural values. Beyond earthly goals, in their marital union, they also tend to achieve their spiritual goals.

The historical continuity of the institution of marriage is testimonial to the fact that the marital union of men and women is vital for functioning of a society. In some societies, marriage is a religious sacrament and in others it is a contract between a man and a woman. This is considered the most colourful and joyful union in which they share their sorrows, sufferings and joys severally and equally. The aimed dedication towards one another is such that the concepts like 'live together, die together' dictate the way of life and achievements of their specific goals in married and social life.

Besides monogamy, the other forms of marriage are polyandry and polygamy. The other least favoured forms of marriages are pairing marriages between lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender individuals. Different societies have shown different degree of acceptability for these forms of marriages. Historically, monogamy is the most prevalent and accepted form of marriages, dissolution of which is neither expected nor respected.

In monogamous order of society, women and men, in general, are considered incomplete without each other. Among Hindus, the women are prakriti, and the men are pursha, who are united through the samskara

(rite) of marriage, which is one of the 16 samskaras of an individual performed right from his birth to death. Thus, it has been a tradition to be married. This tradition bound monogamous marriages are believed to be arranged in heavens and solemnised on earth. Even when marriage is engulfed in destructive designs and when a man and a woman face difficult times in married life, efforts are made to save the marriage first. However, beyond all traditional bonding and religious instructions, on two occasions, the marital union comes to an end. One is death of one of the spouses and the other is divorce. As a result, in one case a man becomes man-without-woman and in the other the woman becomes woman-without-man. This means loss of their one half and demolition of their unit. In case of women they are referred as widows and divorced women.

The situation of women in India was characterised by the elements of inhuman treatment, restriction for social participation and socio-religious disabilities. These restrictions and disabilities were harsher for the widowed and divorced women (Altekar, 1962) who form a less open group. In marriage, when marital satisfaction is high, marriage tend to confer health benefits to women (Gallo et al, 2003) and equally established view is that the widowed and divorced women face different kind of health problems quite frequently. More or less widows and divorced women have existed in all societies.

In India, as per Census, 2011, widowed/divorced/separated (W/D/S) females who have collectively been referred to as women-without-men (WWM) in the present study constitutes 8.2 percent of the total population. They are unevenly distributed in all parts/States of India ranging from 4.7 percent lowest to 12.4 highest in Bihar and Kerala, respectively.

Collectively, the widowed/divorced/separated population which involves males and females as well has shown variance in terms of the gender, region and residence. Tamil Nadu recorded highest percentage (7.6 percent) of such population followed by Kerala (7.2 percent), Karnataka (7.0 percent) and Andhra Pradesh (7.0 percent). In Bihar lived 3.5 percent

of such people, which is the lowest in India. Percentage distribution of population by marital status and sex is given in table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Percentage distribution of population of India by marital status and sex

Sex	Marital Status		
	Never married	Married	W/D/S
Male	52.5	45.2	2.3
Female	42.9	48.9	8.2
Total	47.8	47.0	5.2

Source: Census of India, 2011 (Total may not add to 100 percent due to rounding)

The data in table 1.1 reflects that the proportion of female population of women-without-men is higher than 'men-without-women' at national level by 5.9 percent. This is also higher than the national average by 3.0 percent. Besides the national level the gap is also noticed in the bigger States. This is significantly wide in the State of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. The data for the State of Himachal Pradesh is tabulated in table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Percentage distribution of population of Himachal Pradesh by marital status and sex

Sex	Marital Status		
	Never married	Married	W/D/S
Male	51.1	46.4	2.5
Female	40.0	50.9	9.2
Total	45.4	48.7	5.9

Source: Census of India, 2011 (Total may not add to 100 percent due to rounding)

In respect of widowed/divorced/separated population, it can be seen that average W/D/S population is 5.9 percent in HP which is higher than the national average of 5.2 percent. In case of females i.e. women-without-men, the average is 9.2 percent which is also more than the national average of 8.2 percent by 1 percent in Himachal Pradesh.

Persons below 10 years of age, in the SRS have been treated as unmarried. Marital status is considered to be more meaningful if such percentages are worked out for the persons of 10 years and above. The data for this group provides 10.1 percent women-without-men at national level and 10.9 percent in Himachal Pradesh. The percentage distribution of females age 15+ in India by marital status and residence is given in table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Percentage distribution of females in India by marital status and residence

Residential Area	Marital Status		
	Never married	Married	WWM
Rural	19.0	69.3	11.6
Urban	21.7	66.9	11.4
Total	18.9	68.6	11.6

Source: Census of India, 2011 (Total may not add to 100 percent due to rounding)

The data in table 1.3 provides that while rural-urban differences are significant for never married and married females, however, in case of WWM no such difference is noticeable. Moreover, in this group total percentage has increased to 11.6 percent from the national average of 8.2 percent for overall population. In this group too regional variations are visible from the lowest 7.5 percent in Bihar to 15.1 percent highest in Andhra Pradesh. The percentage distribution of females in age 15+ group in Himachal Pradesh by marital status and residence is tabulated in table 1.4.

Table 1.4 Percentage distribution of females in Himachal Pradesh by marital status and residence

Residential Area	Marital Status		
	Never married	Married	WWM
Rural	20.6	67.0	12.3
Urban	25.0	65.8	9.3
Total	21.0	66.9	12.1

Source: Census of India, 2011 (Total may not add to 100 percent due to rounding)

The data in this table indicates that in this age group the women-without-men population has significantly increased from the 9.2 percent overall average to 12.1 percent this specific age group of 15+ years. The variations are also visible in the rural and urban areas.

The data in preceding tables clearly indicates that the women-without-men constitute significant proportion of the overall population of India and female population of the whole country. They not only bear the status of being 'without-man' but also lead their lives in the conditions which specifically come to existence due to their status of being a 'woman-without-man'. The advantages attached to the women-with-men and the disabilities attached with women-without-men vary to a considerable extent which is enough to be called discrimination even among the women itself. They constitutes a vulnerable group of women who faces many socio-economic challenges including traditional stigmas associated with them (Angel et. al, 2007; Kotwal and Prabhakar, 2009; Levinson et. al. 2014).

The notable aspect is that women population in general is also polarised in terms of their inter-relations based on their status of being working or non-working and married, widowed or divorced. They also differ on account of their perception and understanding of the their social situations as well as social orientations (Srivastava,1978).

One view is that despite social changes the position of women, especially that of widows and divorced women has not registered any remarkable shift from that of the former societies (Altekar, 1962). The widows are still considered inauspicious on many occasion and divorced women have weak character (Mehta, 1975) and the society is not conducive for their growth. However, in the recent years women in general and women-without-men in particular have got success in identification of their potentials and have made their subsequent impressive manifestation in various working fields.

Employment in white collar job, in private as well as public sector, is one of such areas where women have made their presence felt. Among the

organised sector employment, Government sector employment is considered to be one of safe and secure kinds of employment. This sector also provides employment to family members including widows of Government employees who die in harness. The war-widows are also considered for employment by the Government in special circumstances. The woman-without-man has also shared this field of employment. Their employment has been seen as the factor having force for bringing about changes in their social situations. Female participation has increased in the Government sector due to direct recruitment. Besides, widows have also been given employment on compassionate grounds by the Government as per their prevalent policies.

Over time there has been gradual increase in the number of women gaining employment in the Government sector. There has been continuous increase in demand for recruitment of staff in administrative departments, no gender discrimination in selection, equal opportunity for development in career, congenial working conditions, special incentives for females like maternity leave, relaxation in income tax limits, establishment of women sensitisation cell for addressing women problems, fixed duty hours, special provisions for adjustment of women/widows at the placed convenient to them. However, their employment cannot be said to be a smooth riding. Their employment has its own inherent challenges for the women in general and women-without-men in particular.

At a time, employment of a woman was viewed as detrimental force acting on the institution of family and marriage at macro level, and at micro levels it was held responsible for worsening the societal relationships. The reason was that women's roles were confined to home boundaries and they were considered to be best in household works. Their employment has resulted in change of their physical world but on mental planes they are still bound by tradition (Chauhan,1986; Mehta,1979) as the socialisation of women is to be traditionally feminine (Kanhare,1987). Due to employment, their roles include the role of family bread-earner, which is traditionally assigned to men. Women in general face the cold and hot currents of being employed and office life. The challenges of employment are relatively more and severe for the women-without- men. Empirical

evidences have established positive effect of employment on women in general (Sethi, 1976; Srivastava, 1978; Devi,1982) but the fact on other side is that on the working places, the vulnerability of women-without-men is far greater than their 'with-men' counterparts (Devi R,1998).

Their socialisation comes to be a collection of painful impressions upon their minds that are difficult to set aside. Soon after they become women-without-men, they undergo a process of re-socialisation, restructuration and reconstruction of their social and personal lives as per social expectations. Traditionally they are reminded of their duties and obligation as pativarta even if husband is not alive or living with her. It may be possible for women-without-men to get inclined towards the adoption of new values but it is more difficult to make a break-through from the traditional bonds continuing from centuries past that have been culturally imbibed by them.

In the times when the spread of education and technology have brought revolution in the tradition ridden static minds, women-without-men have acquired a new notion of dignity of self, of the sanctity of personhood and new values. Now, they have become receptive and full of question for their concern as individuals. They are leading either single-person or single-parent families. They have started to question the traditional role expectation. They have begun to cherish their own strength and have shown self strength in dealing with the issues related to their lives. They are marching to win their freedom through self-realisation and self-expressions. There has been enlargement of the group of women as well as women-without-men who think that there must not be two way application of tradition and custom.

The data of WWM for national level and State level show that WWM constitute significant segment of population that deserves to be understood in the light of the new forces emerging in the globalising world due to the processed of modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation in the globalising world. They are also important for study as their work is important for family and community. In the absence of their men they have become the real home makers fulfilling the social, economic and other needs of their family and they are compulsorily doing

the 'second shift' (Bharat,2003). Their livelihood measures tend to have great impact on their overall social orientations. Besides, income of an individual is also associated with their overall social status. The social and societal changes brought about by their employment and resultant economic independence demands to see them as 'person' in action following their own will and reason. It is not possible to discuss women-without-men except in relations to their professions, which virtually facilitates their existence.

Study Area and Methodology

This study was carried out in Himachal Pradesh, India. The subject of the study were women-without-men working in Government Sector. Keeping in view the objective of the study, the urban area was preferred over the rural areas. The reason for this preference is that the urban population is considered relatively more expressive due to their greater rate of exposure. Moreover, the issues like marriage, widowhood and divorce are sensitive issues. It was considered difficult to discuss their office life keeping these statuses at centre stage with the women-without-men employed in rural areas as compared to the urban areas. Therefore, preference was given to the women-without-men working and residing in urban areas who are likely to be more visible in social participation than their counterparts living in rural areas.

Gender wise, as per Census, 2011, total population of Himachal Pradesh comprises 34,73,892 males and 33,82,617 females who are residing in rural (90%) and urban areas (10%). Among the other urban areas of the State, Shimla city was selected for the reason that it is capital of the State besides being bureaucratic and administrative centre and essentially a white collar service city. Almost all direction office of nearly all govt administrative departments are situated in and around Shimla including Government Secretariat and Vidhan Sabha Secretariat. Besides, three Universities and other educational institutions including Himachal Institute for Public Administration are situated in the vicinity of Shimla city. Due to this, the population of Shimla is amelioration of people from many part of the State including neighbouring States. The researcher also had his social base in this town and it was convenient for him to approach the

respondents directly or to find the intermediary and he was conversant with the socio-cultural malady of the city.

The women-without-men working in Government sector constitutes universe of the study. In the hierarchy of administrative system on the top level, the presence of women is not sufficient but at bottom level the numerical strength is relatively satisfactory. Since, the overall numerical strength of women working in Class-III posts is relatively more sufficient than other cadre posts, therefore, the women-without-men working in class-III posts constitutes the study units. Despite best efforts, total number of women-without-men working in all offices could not be ascertained.

Working women in the present context encompasses those women who are gainfully employed in which duty hours are fixed and they are paid regular salary with year-wise incremental prospects including promotion avenues for climbing high in the hierarchy ladder in the system. Moreover, being explorative in nature, the study aimed at developing case studies of few units, therefore, subject of the study who have completed minimum 3 years service in Government sector were purposively drawn by snowball sampling technique.

In all, 25 women-without-men (21 widows and 4 divorced women) constitute sample of the study. Widows are those women whose husbands have died and who have not married till the date of interview. Divorced women refer to the women, who have either legally separated from their husbands or deserted by their husbands or they have deserted their husbands. They are either living independently or with their parents but strictly not with their husbands. Since divorces are negligible in old ages and widowhood in old age is acceptable proposition, this study focused on the young women-without-men. The sample comprises young women-without-men in the age group of 20-40 years.

The respondents were connected through intermediary, who explained the future respondent about the researcher and his research topic. The information was collected by way unstructured interview in a

conversational manner. This way of interview was preferred in view of the exploratory nature of the study and the structured interview would have delimited the depth of study. Immediately after the interview, notes were prepared and thereafter case histories were developed. Thereafter, content analysis was done and result was drawn.

The primary question, inter alia keeping in view their 'without-men' status at centre stage was to explore their office life, which is an important place of their live, after departure of their men from their lives. As such, exploration of their attitudes/opinions about their office in which they were working is central to this present paper.

Discussion and Result

The aim of study was to explore the attitudes of women towards their office life specifically keeping in view their 'without-men' status at centre stage. It was endeavoured to explore their attitudes towards the areas their concerns in their office, their office environment, gender relations, behaviours of colleagues, their participation in office political and cultural organisations, and to understand their attitudes towards their employment. The focus was on to estimate what their employment has given to them besides economic strength and what their employment meant to them beyond an economic activity.

At the time of interview among the 25 respondents, 24 were widows and 4 were divorced women. Their age ranges from minimum 29 years to maximum 39 years. Their average age was 33.7 years. At the time when they became 'women-without-men' their average age was 25.7 years with maximum 31 years and minimum 22 years. On an average, they have put in 10.2 years service which ranges from minimum 4 years to 19 years. At the time of interview, they all were working on class-III posts in different government departments and have put in minimum 3 years of service. The data indicates their attitudes/ opinions towards their office life as a whole. The specific areas of their concerns are summarised in the following points:

(i) Office as a Place: The data gathered and so analysed indicates that office is their major activity area as most of their time they spent in office i.e.8 hours per day and if their two and fro journey from home to office and vice-versa are included, they spent more than 8 hours a day. Besides, office life is eventful place for them so they also prepare themselves for it. All respondents unanimously held that their office has become a place for emotional solace for them that have inserted meaningfulness to their lives. They remarked their office as a place that completes their lives with the specific phrases like 'my life is all about office' 'office is the best place in my life' 'eventful area in life' etc. They all were of the view that office was the place where they have 'got company,' 'emotional companionship' and also 'emotional strength'. They take their lunch with their colleagues. They join their office friends while moving from office to home and vice-versa frequently. As such, they considered their office 'essential for their lives' and remarked office is the better place than they would have been if they were not employed. They also consider that their office is free from clear manifestation of discrimination on the basis of sex.

(ii) Attitudes towards Employment: All respondents understand that their employment has given them economic independence and power to control their economic and financial affairs. They construed their employment as positive force in their lives. They felt that with the passage of time they have become more confident in dealing with people. One of the respondents remarked that her responses to this study are also the result of her confidence that she has gained due to her employment. They also consider their employment as a powerful force to stand against anything happening against their will. Another respondent while referring to her employment and that of women-without-men as a class commented:

Employment has given us the confidence to stand against atrocities but the social dogmas are still hanging over us. It will take time for a change.

All respondents were of the view that their employment has given as well as enhanced their status in the society and has contributed positively in development of their personality even after departure of their 'men' from their lives.

(iii) Behaviours of the Staff Members: All respondents were full of praise, admiration and appreciation towards their staff members/colleagues for their co-operation and support they provided to them in office work. All reported their cordial relations with their staff member. In many cases their office acquaintances have turned into good friends and familial relations in turn.

(iv) Office Working: While talking about office working, a few of the respondents feel that there is no appreciation for good work and an attitude of somehow running the office is prevalent among all. They are not happy with this situation. A few of them also reported discrimination in assigning work because a few officials are favoured against others. They also feel that this discrimination is also due to gender bias but sometime women-divide is visible as some women are also favoured against the others.

(v) Participation in office organisations: Respondents participation in the office organisation like employees union, cultural and sports groups is in low ebb despite there is unanimity in the view that such participation leads to personality growth. Out of 25 respondents, only 1 respondent reported participate actively in political union and 1 another other was part of cultural group. They also reported that this is not the case with women-without-men only but the women in general are less interested and involved in such activities. They considered that this is due to their socialisation and upbringing in childhood that was centred to their household activity. For the present, in addition to lack of time, and their perception of themselves in wider society as women-without-men is the factor delimiting their participation in these activities. The consideration, 'what society will think of them' is the ingrained attitudes that discourage them. Locating other reasons, one of the respondents also revealed that such groups are largely dominated by males and some persons are heads of such organisation for years together who do not allow the new ones to come and participate.

(vi) Self-Perception: The perception about themselves was deep seated in their minds that they were prone to exploitation or unpleasant experiences in their office by virtue of being women-without-men if there

had been little carelessness on their part. They understand that to be 'with-men' and 'without-men' makes a wide difference in the perception of their colleagues about them. They also found that the married women have not shown good level of understanding about them. To have good impressions, they take care of their orientations to avoid any wrong impressions on others especially on males. They have experienced that to be 'without-men' was a kind of mental pressure, which they always bear.

(vii) Gender-Relations: Among all respondents of the study, unanimity was formed on the issue that the majority of male colleagues were good and miscreants were comparatively a few in numbers. They had noticed change in the attitudes of man towards women in general and women-without-men in particular. But they still feel that the change would be on positive side only if women change themselves. Some respondents reported that they have noticed change in the behaviours patterns of their colleagues and other staff members, when they became women-without-man. One of the respondents asserted with a fact like strength that 'a good life is married life, everything except that is bad'.

(viii) Exploitation and unpleasant experiences: They reported that remarks to beauty & singlehood with a tinge of sexual colours from the men towards women, in general, and women-without men, in particular though less visible in office scenario but were in existence. In the order of occurrence, the following three factors come to notice:-

- a) Indirect request for sexual favours by males, common use of double meaning words by the males while talking to each other which was vulgar and indicated verbal sexual pleasure seeking tendency.
- b) Most of the males (mainly married) sought company of the respondents to nearby town alone or to meet them alone over a cup of tea or coffee in a restaurant.
- c) Participation of some women in talks with men using equally indecent words as men and molestation by male colleague.

The reason for such unpleasant experiences, the respondents noticed that the male consider women easily available for sexual gratification. They feel that they were prone to such advances. One of the respondents traced the reason of such exploitation:

On surface, there appeared no exploitation. There was no pressure in office work to bend to the wishes of the others, but one thing was common to all women including me; men tried to take advantage of our problems. That may be personal, familial or social. Women are still considered as objects, no doubt there are women who are smart enough to make the men dance to their tunes.

Though the respondents did not completely deny the exploitation of working women like them but they believed that women have become more aware and they do not let unpleasant things happen. Out of total 25 respondents, only 1 respondent reported incidence of molestation by colleague, however, they all belt that many cases were not reported and women did not want to talk about it. They strongly feel that they should be tactful for avoiding such males and they were hopeful that women employment can change the situation in their favour.

(ix) Job Satisfaction: All respondents were fully satisfied with their jobs. They upheld the view that their job had enabled them to fight the odds of life, enhanced their confidence in themselves and facing/meeting different kind of people.

(x) Overall Estimates: All respondents estimated their overall office life as 'good'. None of the respondents had any negative opinion about it.

The perception of women-without-men about their office life found to be associated with the socio-economic and cultural developments in the recent times that had brought about changes in the value based system. The confluence of tradition and modernity along with the employment generated economic independence can be expected to effect attitudes and overall behaviour of a person. Their level of adaptability has increased, area of orientations has widened, and they have strengthened their household economy. Their office is a place from where they lead their dreams, aims and goals of lives. They want to settle their issues at their own level.

Conclusion

Human beings are conditioned by the component of tradition and custom and they develop a fund of social values and social attitudes towards these values. The women-without-men besides, being a women, enliven the life that is built around their status of being 'without men'. Widows social life is sum total of womanhood plus widowhood, analogously, divorcehood is to divorcee women.

The irony affixed to the social situation of young widow and divorced women is that on the one hand their physical charms are admired and they are also revered as mothers but on the other hand, denigrated as widows and despised as divorcees. Their office life is clearly dominated by their status of being 'women-without-men' where they strongly felt the behaviours of their colleagues/staff member specific to their WWM status. They also felt women-divide on the basis of their being with-men or without-men and insensitiveness of the married women, the with-men counterparts, towards their situations. While they reported cordial gender-relations, their self-perception is of being prone to sexual exploitation by males who would take advantage of their social, familial or personal problem. Though they admired their colleagues for support but simultaneously reported existence of such male members they termed as miscreants.

Despite all this the respondents consider their employment not only as a socio-economic booster but also a necessary element for their survival and their social existence. Their office is a place from where they get emotional-strength and emotional companionship as well. This is an eventful place for them from where they get energy to beat the overall social negativism prevailing against the existence of women-without-men. Conclusively, these findings, though from a very small sample, is able to indicate the differences in the self-perception of the respondents and behaviours of others based on their 'without-men' status.

The findings of the study recalls for more interactive gender relations, fill up the gaps of women-divide and specific provisions for meeting the humanitarian aims and human rights that a women individually posses

due to her existence as a human being beyond any social and traditional concerns in all spheres of social life in which a woman moves. Specific efforts are warranted in this direction with special focus on 'women-without-men' enabling them to explore their lives with their inherent potential and capabilities.

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