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Work Engagement among Women in the Unorganised Sector of India

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ABSTRACT

Women in the unorganised sector are generally unskilled and undereducated labourers who face many serious work-related problems at their workplaces. Despite these challenges, poverty, limited education, lack of skills, and family circumstances often leave them with little alternative to such employment. Their skills are rarely advanced, as they are typically restricted to certain types of work and generally assist male workers. India represents one of the world's fastest-growing economies, with a large number of women employed across its many unorganised sectors, including agriculture, construction, and small-scale industries. The agricultural industry is the largest employer of unskilled labour in the Indian economy, followed by the construction industry. Although a large number of women work in the unorganised sector, the question of whether they are satisfied and feel engaged in their work deserves critical attention. This paper identifies the factors responsible for low work engagement among women workers and, drawing on existing literature on work engagement and women in the unorganised sector, relates the challenges they face to low work engagement in the form of low vigour, dedication, and absorption.

Keywords: *Unorganised Sector; Work Engagement; Indian Economy; Vigour; Dedication; Absorption.*

I. INTRODUCTION

No one chooses to work as a labourer at low wages in unskilled employment. Illiteracy, lack of skills, and a range of other circumstances compel many individuals to accept such conditions, and this is equally true of women workers in the unorganised sector. In this conceptual paper, we examine the different factors affecting the work engagement of women workers in organisations within the unorganised sector. We focus on the factors responsible for low work engagement among women workers, namely gender bias, wage discrimination, sexual harassment, low wage rates, and health hazards; these may also be termed disengagement drivers.

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II. WOMEN IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR

The term ‘unorganised sector’, as used in the Indian context, is defined by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector in its Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods as ‘consisting of all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale or production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis and with less than ten total workers.’¹

Among the characteristics of this sector are ease of entry, smaller scale of operations, local ownership, unclear legal status, labour-intensive and lower-technology methods, flexible pricing, less sophisticated packaging, lack of a brand name, inadequate storage facilities, an inefficient distribution network, insufficient access to government schemes and finance, lower entry barriers for employees, a higher proportion of migrant workers, and a lower rate of compensation. An NCEUS report estimates that, in 2005, 95 percent, or 435 million, of the 458 million people employed in India worked in the unorganised sector, producing 50.6 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product.

In India, women make up nearly half of the total workforce. However, more than 96 percent of women in the informal, unorganised sector participate in this labour market. Overall, the formal sector accounts for 93 percent of the Indian population’s workforce. These workers contribute 62 percent to the Gross Domestic Product and 50 percent to national income. The female workforce makes up one-third of Indian rural workers. Women workers face serious work-related problems and constraints such as lack of continuity, insecurity, wage discrimination, unhealthy employment relationships, and lack of medical and accident care.

Millions of women around the world have taken up paid labour, but in the unorganised sector their workforce participation lags far behind that of men. Gender inequalities have placed women at the lowest level in the global value chain, including in less-paid jobs, sub-contracted work, self-employment in poverty, and positions lacking social protection. Half of the world’s women are denied access to decent housing, adequate working standards, parental leave, and maternity leave in the unorganised sector. Moreover, if women were to play an equal economic role to men, the global GDP could rise by 26 percent to US\$28 trillion by 2025.

¹NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR ENTERPRISES IN THE UNORGANISED SECTOR, *Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector* (Academic Foundation 2008).

III. WORK ENGAGEMENT

Kahn conceptualised employee engagement as the self-harnessing of organisational participants to their positions of employment. Throughout task performance, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally.² Several factors define an engaged employee. Employee engagement is generally viewed as positive and beneficial for the organisation. Work engagement is important for determining the organisation's future. Workers who are engaged make full use of their skills, which improves the quality of their responsibilities and performance at work. They are willing to take different steps, such as developing new initiatives and exploring different opportunities. Engaged workers also assist the group within the organisation, for example through mentoring, volunteering, or paying attention to colleagues. They do more than specified in the job description and become more creative in their work.

Work engagement occurs when people choose to invest their full selves in role-related activities and become psychologically present in playing their roles. It is also defined as 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption'.³ Another accepted definition describes work engagement as a positive attitude held by employees, characterised by a willingness and ability to help their company succeed through sustained discretionary effort. Engaged employees are likely to be more satisfied and to hold more positive emotions about their job and organisation; they are willing to go above and beyond their formal obligations, as characterised by their identification with the organisation's goals and values.

The success of high-quality relationships is contingent on mutual respect and trust. Respect, trust, and performance are the foundations of employee engagement. Hence, this study hypothesises that respect and trust are essential for high-quality relationships between employees and their managers or supervisors, and that these quality relationships, in turn, predict employees' engagement.

Workers who are not engaged are only physically present at work. Such staff do not devote emotion, energy, or passion to their work. Disengaged workers have little or no emotional investment in their job role; they do not care about organisational objectives and do not enjoy their work. There are three aspects to work engagement. According to Taris, Schaufeli, and

²W.A. Kahn, *The Essence of Engagement: Lessons from the Field* (2010).

³S. Rothmann & S.J. Rothmann, *Factors Associated with Employee Engagement in South Africa*, 36 SA J. INDUS. PSYCHOL. 1, 1–12 (2010).

Shimazu (2010), workers with work engagement will work hard (vigour), remain engaged (dedication), and feel happy in their work (absorption). Vigour is characterised by a high level of energy and mental stamina when working, a willingness to strive in the workplace, and perseverance even in the face of difficulty. Dedication refers to employees who are involved in their work and feel it is important, and who feel enthusiastic, inspired, proud, and challenged. Absorption is defined as a state in which workers are completely focused on their job and happy in their work; most such workers feel that time passes rapidly during work and have difficulty separating themselves from their employment.

Research Gap

A review of the available literature on women working in the unorganised sector and the concept of work engagement reveals a critical research gap. No study was found that examined both areas together, yet such a study is needed: it would illuminate the conditions of working women in the unorganised sector through the lens of work engagement and suggest practical ways to improve them.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to explain what work engagement means and why it is important, particularly in terms of its impact on women's performance in the unorganised sector, and to identify the factors critical to successful engagement. This is a conceptual paper that describes the engagement level of women working in the unorganised sector in India.

IV. FACTORS OF LOW ENGAGEMENT AMONG WOMEN

Many factors are responsible for low engagement levels among women workers in the unorganised sector in India. The principal ones are as follows:

Gender Bias: Women make up half of India's construction workforce and hold semi-skilled and skilled jobs in other industries, but in the construction sector they mostly work as unskilled labourers. They perform various unskilled tasks, such as cleaning construction sites and carrying bricks, dirt, mortar, and water to professional carpenters and masons. Regardless of years of service, they have not advanced from unskilled to skilled status as men have. This has led to gender discrimination in work allocation and wage distribution. These discriminatory, anti-women practices have further damaged the workplace culture faced by these women labourers. They lead difficult lives without the status equality and social justice they deserve.⁴

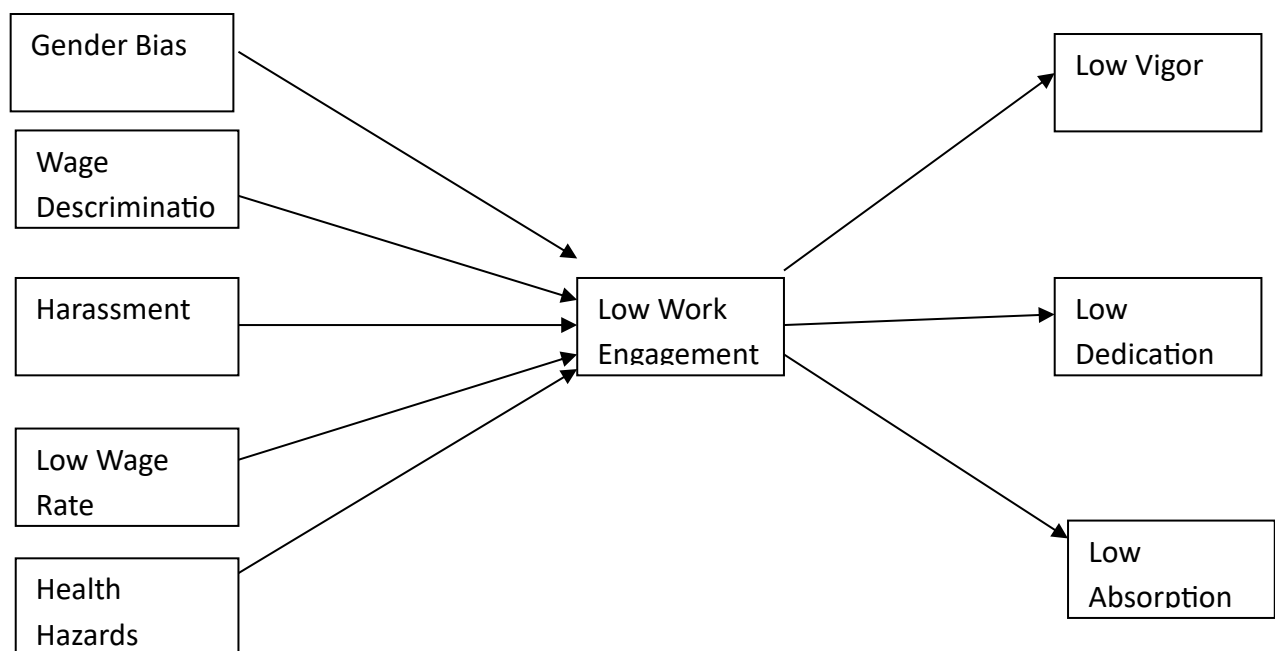
⁴P. Tripathi, R. Tiwari & R. Kamath, *Workplace Violence and Gender Bias in Unorganized Fisheries of Udupi, India*, 7 INT'L J. OCCUPATIONAL & ENVTL. MED. 181 (2016).

Wage Discrimination: Based on hours worked, the government has set wages for unskilled and skilled labourers in both the public and private sectors. Sadly, the industry often operates under arrangements that allow companies to negotiate wages, enabling cost savings that frequently come at the expense of workers. Unskilled and skilled male workers negotiate higher wages than their female counterparts, indicating gender bias. Variations in men's and women's wages persist even when they are engaged in the same work.

Harassment: Sexual harassment is a significant issue for women working in the unorganised sector.⁵ The majority of women in this field feel insecure. They are not treated equitably and face discrimination from their employers.

Low Wage Rate: The low wage rate is another major factor contributing to low work engagement in the unorganised sector.⁶ Women workers receive very low wages relative to the work they perform.

Health Hazards: The safety and security of women workers is also a factor of low work engagement. A healthy life is rare among women workers in the unorganised sector; they must work in difficult conditions because of their poverty.



[FIGURE: Conceptual Framework]

⁵R. Yousaf & M. Qadir, *Sexual Harassment Among Women Working in Unorganized Sector*, CONTEMP. SOC. SCI. 49, 49–54 (2014).

⁶Sarika Patel & Rameshwari Pandya, *Problems of Women in Unorganized Sector: A Study on Home Based Women Workers and Domestic Women Workers in Vadodara*, 4 INT'L J. APPLIED HOME SCI. 593, 593–610 (2017).

V. IMPACT OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

Prominent scholars in psychology and organisational behaviour describe engagement as an optimistic, satisfying, employment-related mental state characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Research in this area has concentrated on the facets of engagement, namely vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). High scores on all elements of engagement indicate a high level of work engagement overall (Demerouti et al., 2003; Langelaan et al., 2005; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Schaufeli and Bakker (2006) describe employee engagement in three dimensions: vigour, dedication, and absorption. They note that (a) vigour is defined by high energy levels and mental resilience while working; (b) dedication is characterised by a sense of meaning, passion, motivation, courage, and challenge in one's job; and (c) absorption is described as being completely focused and happily immersed in one's work.

Vigour: Employees with a high level of vigour have stamina, zest, and strength when they work in their area of interest, while those with a low level of vigour have less energy and enthusiasm for their role in the organisation.⁷

Dedication: Dedication is measured by indicators such as deriving a sense of meaning from one's job, enthusiasm, feeling proud, excitement, and inspiration. Those who score high on dedication identify strongly with their work because they view it as significant, inspiring, and challenging; they feel excited and proud of their job. Those who score low on dedication do not identify with their work because they do not perceive it as significant, inspiring, or challenging, and they feel neither excited nor proud of their work.

Absorption: Those who score high on absorption are generally fully immersed in their job; they feel completely absorbed and have difficulty detaching themselves from their work, as it engages them mentally as well as physically. As a result, everything else is overlooked and time seems to pass very quickly. Those who score low on absorption do not feel involved in their job and have no difficulty detaching from it; nor do they lose awareness of their surroundings or lose track of time.

VI. METHODS

Researchers used a review methodology for this analysis. A wide range of research papers and literature in the areas of work engagement and women workers was examined. The review

⁷Navneet Gera, R.K. Sharma & P. Saini, *Absorption, Vigor and Dedication: Determinants of Employee Engagement in B-Schools*, 18 INDIAN J. ECON. & BUS. 61, 61–70 (2019).

process identified the factors most frequently mentioned in the existing research. The authors synthesised the findings from each source to produce the conclusions presented in this paper.

VII. FINDINGS

Factors affecting engagement at both the macro level (organisational) and the micro level (individual) have been discussed in this paper. Variations in these factors may arise from differences in individual characteristics such as occupational diversity, ethnic diversity, and the type of work performed. The paper also outlines various approaches to improving work engagement for workers, especially women, including robust orientation plans, comprehensive training and development plans, certification programmes, and practical job previews. The findings will be useful to any organisation seeking to build strong work engagement policies that incorporate these factors, regardless of the type of organisation. Based on the factors outlined, managers can redesign jobs and policies to create a more satisfied workforce. This paper will be of interest to anyone seeking a better understanding of work engagement and the performance of women workers.

VIII. APPLICATIONS

The results of this study have a future reference scope for organisations in which the engagement factors responsible for low engagement levels among women workers in the unorganised sector are reduced or eliminated, resulting in lower turnover among women workers and enhanced productivity.
