

Gender Discrimination in Urban Corporate Workspaces: A Sociological Study of Women Professionals in Kolkata

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the discrimination women face in the corporate sector, especially in the landscape of Kolkata. Examining whether gender discrimination is still persistent even today, affecting women's economic and professional sectors, and how women navigate and respond to such biases. This research tries to dive deeper into the complexities women might experience. The research adopts a quantitative methodology with limited qualitative inputs, using a questionnaire-based survey to identify patterns of discrimination. A purposive sample of 30 women professionals from Kolkata's corporate sector was selected. Data analysis uncovered the multi-face dynamic of the discrimination woman faces , Multiple thematic understanding detected in this research as : the dichotomist relationship between women's economic labour and domestic role how societal norms and family pressure affect women's career prospect , the transfiguration from dependency to independency ,unprofessional behaviour or sexual harassment being another barrier to women's career advancement and additionally, intersection of ethnicity becoming a burden in the career ladder of woman in corporate culture.

A key finding was prominent from the research and data analysis a pattern of silence among women in the survey . This overarching silence reflects a subservient notion of fear and foreboding persistent among women in corporate culture. This silence could lucidly be granted as a passive response or rather this silence could be resonating with the fear of her authorities or with the panic of damaging relation with the colleagues or inviting rivals in professional surrounding. Significant number of woman who are neutral about their opinion mostly might even be facing discrimination and not acknowledging the situation, as this is what is normalised for them, and they are accustomed to it as being the pattern and the trend in the culture of the corporate sector. Hence, majorly this silence could echo the fear of backlash.

KEYWORDS: Gender discrimination , Corporate Sector , Women , Workplace Inequality , Sociology, Kolkata.

INTRODUCTION

This research mainly focuses on how gender discrimination is still happening in the corporate sector of Kolkata, especially the kind that working women go through every day. Even though many laws, reforms and constitutional promises have been made after independence, gender inequality still shows up in different forms some obvious, some silent inside the workplace. From earlier times like when Sati was practiced to now where we talk about women empowerment and financial freedom, things have changed a lot. But still, when it comes to proper equal treatment in the corporate field, we see gaps. This study tries

to highlight the clash between the old mindset of women staying at home and the current shift where women are working outside. Even today, many working women are handling both office pressure and household responsibilities and society still expects them to do so without complaining. What made me take up this topic was the repeated and clear evidence of gender bias in professional spaces. Just because a woman is working and earning doesn't mean she's free from discrimination. Many times, this idea of "empowerment" hides the real problems they silently face. Kolkata was chosen as the base for this study because of its mix of traditional values and modern ambitions which makes it the right place to look deeper into these contradictions.

Even though Article 15 of the Constitution talks about not allowing discrimination based on sex, religion, caste etc., there is no specific act that covers workplace discrimination properly. As Shivangi (2019) mentions, these are mentioned very briefly, not in detail. Gender discrimination is not something biological it's socially made, and it continues because we keep practising these same patterns. M.S. Kumar (2008, 2018) also highlights that the unpaid household work done by women is one major reason why even today, women are expected to stay away from real economic power. Due to being treated as only domestic labourers for ages, women's education wasn't even prioritised. So naturally, this leads to more women working in low-paid jobs or informal sectors.

Volart (2004) talks about how women are missing from managerial positions. Even among working women, a clear class division is seen between the educated few and the rest stuck in the informal sector. And just passing general laws is not enough we need specific action targeting the workplace, because most of the discrimination women face today is subtle, routine, and workplace-specific.

Naznin and Bhabani (2021) pointed out how even now, women have to copy masculine behaviours to be taken seriously, or else they are labelled as soft or incapable. Eagly (2002) talks about how leadership is still mostly associated with men, and women leaders are often judged harshly.

These stereotypes are not new they are taught early, in families and schools. That's why they are so deeply rooted and hard to break. It is this conditioning that creates the bigger issue of workplace gender discrimination. Sometimes it's also not just about gender religion, caste, and even being married or pregnant becomes a reason for being sidelined. Women are still told to take a break during pregnancy, while men face no such challenges. Women also face tokenism, sexual harassment, or demands for favours and most of the time, they stay silent, either because of fear or because they've accepted it as "normal." William & James (1986) write that women with better qualifications still earn less than men who are less qualified which clearly shows the depth of inequality.

Even though globalisation has helped in women's employment in sectors like IT or BPO, this itself became another form of exploitation. These sectors often prefer women because they think women won't unionise, will work harder, and accept lower pay.

So overall, the problem is still alive patriarchy has just moved from homes to offices, and capitalism plays along with it. The laws are there, but only on paper not in real life. The corporate sector may present itself as modern, diverse, and inclusive but the reality often doesn't match that image. A woman's performance at work is not judged purely based on merit, but also through the lens of her gender roles, her availability outside working hours, her appearance, and her willingness to stay silent.

Many women have shared how they had to suppress their voice just to "fit in" or to not be seen as troublemakers. This forced silence has become a survival tool and that says a lot about the existing corporate culture. Also, the way companies use women in branding and marketing showcasing "gender equality" in advertisements and social media does not always reflect the internal situation. Real

empowerment should include equal decision-making opportunities, equal pay, and a safe, respectful workplace. But in many organisations, these things are either missing or only applied on paper.

In many cases, women are overrepresented in lower posts but underrepresented in leadership roles. This is not always due to lack of ability but because of gender stereotypes, lack of trust, and fewer opportunities given to women. When women do rise, they are constantly tested and doubted more than their male colleagues. And if they fail, it's often seen as proof that "women are not meant for this."

So this research does not aim to just study gender inequality it wants to underline the silent everyday practices, micro-aggressions, and institutional gaps that women face in the corporate world. By focusing on the situation in Kolkata, it aims to reflect a broader Indian reality as well where development and discrimination continue to run parallel. Gender equality in the workplace will not happen automatically. It needs to be addressed directly, with more awareness, stricter policies, and a change in mindset starting from homes to schools to offices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When we talk about gender discrimination in the workplace, it is important to first understand how scholars and earlier researchers have looked at this issue. Over the years, different studies and authors have pointed out that gender inequality is not a new or recent thing — rather it has been present in the structure of Indian society for centuries, and even after all kinds of progress and reforms, it still shows up silently in modern-day work culture, especially in the corporate field.

One of the first things that I came across in my reading is by Shivangi (2019), who mentions that although Article 15 of the Indian Constitution says there should be no discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth there is no clear and detailed act that talks about workplace-specific discrimination. This is an important gap because just saying "no discrimination" in general terms is not enough. The workplace brings its own challenges, especially for women, and not having a clear law makes the problem even more difficult to fight. M.S. Kumar (2008, 2018) also talks about how gender discrimination is not something that happens by chance it's deeply rooted in social and cultural practices. He explains that for a very long time, Indian women were expected to stay within the domestic walls, and because of that, their education, freedom, and decision-making power were not encouraged. This long history of being treated as less than equal still affects the present-day working woman. Even now, when a woman joins the corporate world, she is still expected to take care of domestic duties and compromise on her career when needed. Kumar also says that women are seen as responsible for adjusting whether it's about salary, job role, or work-life balance.

Sumanjeet (2017) takes this thought ahead and says that even though India has seen high economic growth in recent years, gender inequality still continues in various forms. He points out that this inequality doesn't just affect jobs, but also things like literacy rate, access to quality work, and representation in leadership positions. According to him, patriarchy is still powerful only now it has modern forms. So, a woman may be allowed to work, but the rules and expectations around her are still controlled by traditional thinking. Berta Volart (2004) adds to this by saying that there is still a visible absence of women in managerial positions. She explains how the labour market is still male-dominated, and even the women who are employed face inequality based on their education level and social class. Volart points out that women who are in informal sectors or low-income jobs are often more vulnerable to exploitation, while the few who are in formal sectors still face barriers in terms of promotions and equal pay. This kind of class difference between working women is also a major sign of workplace discrimination.

One of the most powerful observations came from Naznin & Bhabani (2021) who discussed how, in the past, women were not even allowed to step outside the home freely or talk to outsiders without permission. This masculine control over women's movement and choices has now shifted into the office environment where women, even if employed, are expected to behave in a certain way. They also mention how, in many cases, women have to imitate masculine traits to be taken seriously. If a woman is soft-spoken or emotional, she is seen as weak. But if she is bold or firm, she is called aggressive. This double standard shows how women are constantly judged not just for what they do, but how they are perceived.

This connects with Eagly's (2002) concept of Social Role Theory, which explains how men and women are expected to behave according to the roles society gives them. Eagly says that in the professional world, leadership is usually associated with men. People naturally assume that men make better leaders, and this kind of thinking makes it much harder for women to rise in their careers. Women are not seen as natural leaders, and even when they are in those roles, they are judged more harshly. William & James (1986) also support this by showing how women with better qualifications still get paid less than men with lower qualifications. This shows that the problem is not about education or performance it's about gender bias that exists at the core. They also highlight that women are mostly pushed into job roles that are lower in training, lower in pay, and lower in importance. It's not because they can't do better roles but because the system doesn't allow them to reach those places easily.

Zakir & Mousumi (2014) look at this issue in the context of globalisation, especially in the IT sector. They mention that while globalisation has increased job opportunities for women, especially in places like BPOs, this has also led to a different kind of discrimination. In many cases, companies prefer hiring women in these sectors because they think women are docile, hardworking, and less likely to unionise or protest. So, even though women are present in large numbers, they are being chosen for reasons that still treat them as a "tool" for cheap and stable labour, not because they are respected as equal employees.

This creates a situation where women may seem present in the corporate world, but their actual power, agency, and recognition is still very limited. What looks like inclusion is often a form of tokenism where women are shown in company reports and campaigns, but are not given real leadership space or decision-making roles. Even in internal office environments, they continue to face unspoken barriers like being excluded from important meetings, being interrupted during discussions, or being overlooked for promotions. From all these studies, one thing becomes clear the issue of gender discrimination at the workplace is not just about one law or one policy. It is a mix of patriarchy, capitalism, social norms, and internalised stereotypes that are working together. And because these are silent and embedded within everyday behaviour, they are even harder to notice or challenge. Most of the scholars I've referred to agree that workplace discrimination is not always loud or obvious sometimes it is in the form of unequal expectations, denied opportunities, stereotypical roles, or forced silence. And this is exactly what this research is trying to understand how these layered and complex discriminations affect working women in Kolkata's corporate sector, and what patterns come out when we hear their voices and stories.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study mainly aims to explore how gender discrimination still exists in the corporate workplaces of Kolkata, even in today's modern, seemingly progressive times. Though the surface looks empowered and equal, there are still hidden and silent ways in which working women face bias, inequality, and societal pressure.

The main objectives of this research are:

1. To identify the forms of gender-based discrimination faced by working women in corporate offices of Kolkata.
2. To understand the relationship between women's domestic roles and their professional roles, and how societal expectations affect their career growth.
3. To find out how caste, religion, and marital status add more complexity to the discrimination women face at work.
4. To examine how women deal with workplace harassment, unprofessional behaviour, or expectations to remain silent, and how that impacts their mental and emotional well-being.
5. To analyse whether women are truly being empowered through work, or if their struggles are just being hidden under the label of "professional success."

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quantitative research methodology, using a structured questionnaire comprising mostly close-ended questions. However, one open-ended question was included to allow respondents to express additional views. This added a minor qualitative layer, enriching the overall findings, as I wanted to focus on patterns, data, and common responses from women who are actually working in the corporate setup. To collect the data, I prepared a questionnaire-based survey, which included both close-ended and open-ended questions. This helped me get clear yes/no-type answers, but also allowed some respondents to express what they really felt.

The sample size was 30 working women, all from different corporate backgrounds in Kolkata. I selected the participants using purposive sampling because I specifically wanted to hear from women who are part of corporate offices not just any working women. So I didn't go for random selection, but handpicked the sample based on relevance. The respondents were from sectors like IT, BPO, finance, and management most of them working at junior or mid-level posts. I made sure to include women from different age groups, religions, marital status, and caste backgrounds to get a diverse view. Once the responses were collected, I analysed the data by grouping them into themes, such as workplace pressure, family expectations, career challenges, harassment, and silence. These recurring themes helped me understand how deep-rooted gender bias still is and how women are navigating it every day. This methodology doesn't claim to speak for every woman in India, but it tries to highlight the patterns and realities many women in Kolkata's corporate sector are still experiencing, often without a voice.

OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

1. Dichotomous Relationship between Women's Economic Labour and Domestic Role

A recurring and unavoidable theme that came out from most of the responses is the constant double burden women are made to carry the office work and home responsibilities running parallel, often without any relief. Out of the 30 respondents, around 73.3% of women strongly agreed that even after being financially independent, they are still expected to cook, clean, take care of children and do all domestic work, as if their job is just a side duty. What's more disturbing is that their families themselves don't consider their jobs serious enough. Some women mentioned they are forced to compromise their careers just because of the pressure to be available for domestic roles.

Marriage, in-laws, and having children these were mentioned repeatedly as major hurdles. Many shared how even before they applied for a better job or role, their families discouraged them from applying, especially if it involved night shifts, outstation travel, or high-pressure responsibilities. They are expected

to “settle” for safer, lower-level jobs just to maintain peace at home. It clearly shows how the corporate role women are trying to build is always expected to come after their domestic role, never alongside or ahead.

2. Transition from Dependency to Independency

This was one of the more positive themes most women mentioned that joining the workforce gave them a lot of strength and pride. For many, it was their first time contributing financially to the household. Especially for women from middle-class or modest backgrounds, this transition from being someone who “asks” for money to someone who “gives” it meant a huge change in identity. Around 80% of the respondents said that their working status gave them more say in family matters.

However, the journey is not smooth. Several women stated that their independence was questioned. Some said they had to justify working late or even hide salary details from relatives to avoid uncomfortable discussions. Also, getting promoted or applying for leadership roles brought doubts both from inside and outside. Some women even said that they feel the need to constantly prove their loyalty and performance, especially in teams where they are the only woman. This shows that while the shift to independence is happening, social mindset has not caught up.

3. Unprofessional Behaviour or Harassment

About 36.6% respondents admitted to facing unprofessional or uncomfortable behaviour at work. Some mentioned being stared at, passed comments on, or joked about in a way that made them uncomfortable. A few said their ideas were dismissed or ignored, only to be repeated by a male colleague later and appreciated then.

Interestingly, most of these cases were not reported. Almost all respondents said they chose to stay silent because they didn’t want to be labelled “over-sensitive” or a “drama-queen”. The workplace culture especially in male-dominated offices forces women to “adjust” and “act like nothing happened”, because speaking up is seen as risky. One respondent shared that after she reported an incident once, she was treated coldly by her own team which made her regret ever saying anything.

4. Intersection of Ethnicity and Religion

This came up mostly through the one open-ended question in the survey. A few women from minority backgrounds ST, SC, and Muslim women mentioned how they felt excluded or made to feel different. Some even shared that their attire, names or dialect led to subtle comments or “jokes” that weren’t funny. While the number wasn’t very high, the pain and impact were deep.

They shared that promotions and good projects often go to people who ‘fit in’ more easily, and that they had to put in more work just to prove their capability. The feeling of being “tolerated” rather than welcomed came up repeatedly. Even though they never reported these incidents formally, the emotional and mental exhaustion of dealing with this “othering” regularly was clearly present.

5. Silence as a Pattern

This was one of the strongest observations in the whole study. When asked about discrimination, career barriers, or harassment, 43.3% either selected “neutral” answers or didn’t answer at all. This silence can be interpreted in many ways some may be scared, some may not want conflict, and some may have normalized the discrimination so much that they don’t even see it as worth talking about anymore.

A few respondents said they avoid “complaining” because they don’t want to spoil relationships at work or be excluded. One woman clearly said “If I speak up, I may not get assigned to the next project.” This kind of conditioned silence shows that fear of backlash is real. Many are taught from home and school that adjustment is a woman’s job, and this mindset follows them into offices.

CONCLUSION

After going through all the responses and analysing the patterns, one thing is very clear gender discrimination in Kolkata's corporate world is still real. It may not always be open or direct, but silent discrimination, subtle bias, and stereotypical expectations are still strongly present. Women are working, earning, and balancing home and office, but are still expected to do more than their male counterparts, especially when it comes to domestic responsibilities.

Even though most women in this study expressed that working gave them confidence and independence, they also shared how their efforts were often undermined by family members, managers, or society itself. Being a working woman doesn't automatically mean she is respected or treated equally many times she is expected to do her job quietly, without asking for support or complaining about workplace behaviour. Another major issue that surfaced was the silence around discrimination. Even when women face unprofessional behaviour or clear biases, many choose not to speak up out of fear, fear of being isolated, losing respect, or facing backlash. This silence is not proof that problems don't exist — it shows how normalised inequality has become. Especially for women from SC, ST, or Muslim backgrounds, the feeling of being left out or judged unfairly was also strongly present. Overall, the responses prove that laws and policies alone are not enough the mindset of both society and the corporate system needs to change.

Suggestions:

1. Gender sensitisation workshops should be a part of every workplace so that employees understand the small, everyday behaviours that create discomfort for women.
2. Every organisation must have a clear, trustworthy complaints system where women can report issues without fear or blame.
3. Flexible working options like hybrid work, childcare support, and paid maternity leave should be strengthened to help balance home and work.
4. There should be active efforts to promote minority women into leadership roles by giving them fair project opportunities and mentorship.
5. Companies should take regular anonymous feedback from female staff not just about work but also culture and inclusiveness.
6. Lastly, society must stop teaching women to adjust all the time. Families and schools must also be a part of this change.

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