Original Article

Practical Gender Needs Assessment of Working Women:
A Step towards Gender Mainstreaming in Public Sector Organizations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract

This article aims to assess the status of Practical Gender Needs of Working Women in the Public Sector organization of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The focus is to identify the gaps in the needs and interests of working women to ensure provision and improvement of workplace conditions, promote gender equality and ensure gender mainstreaming. The study has been conducted through in-depth face to face interviews with a total of twenty-two (22) female employees of Provincial government organizations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The findings underscore the pressing need for governmental institutions to prioritize gender responsiveness and address the essential Practical Gender Needs of working women to foster a supportive work environment. Focusing on the experiences of female employees within the Provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and the paradigm of decent workplace. Findings of this study are crucial for policy makers, bureaucracy, organizations, and advocates striving to promote gender mainstreaming and create inclusive work environments.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Practical Gender Needs, Institutional Biasness, Work Life Balance, Legal provisions at workplace

1. INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of gender equality, the discourse on Gender interest and needs has emerged as a critical lens through which to understand and address the multifaceted challenges faced by women in the workforce. Within this context, this research embarks on a journey to unfold the lived experiences of working women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Public Sector, with a specific focus on their Practical Gender Needs.

Gender interests are those that women (or men) may develop on the virtue of their social positioning through their gender attributes. These may be strategic or practical gender needs. While Strategic Gender Needs (SGN) relates to improving the status and position within a society, Practical Gender needs (PGNs) are the immediate and short-term needs focusing on basic needs without altering the traditional gender roles and relationships. The dichotomy between these needs underscores the complexity of gender dynamics within society (Moser, 2002).

According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics' Labor Force Survey 2014-2015, 14.66 million women are part of the civilian labor force, as opposed to 46.38 million men. Pakistan's inclusive growth targets require women's participation in the workforce to rise from a current 26 per cent to 45 per cent (World Bank). Furthermore, women comprise only 10% of the entire public sector (Pakistan Burea of statistics, 2020). Gender inequality index of Pakistan is 0.54 ranking Pakistan on 133 out of 160 countries. (UNDP HDI Index, 2018). As per judgment passed by the Honorable Supreme Court of Pakistan, relating to fundamental rights of minorities, 3% of the Provincial recruitment is to be allocated to women, disabled,

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and religious minorities. (Supreme Court, 2015). Through this affirmative action, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, labor force in the Service sector is 39.8% where 45.73% are men and only 12.77% are women. (ILO, 2016).

The negligible number of women, only 10%, that enters the domain of productive work face severe unsafe working conditions that limit their abilities to work in the mainstream. Their PGNs related to their working conditions include equal access to and control over resources, provisions like washrooms, restrooms, breastfeeding corners, work- family and work-life balance, rooms for children of workers, and daycares (ILO, 2007).

Pakistan is signatory of ILO and UN charters related to women empowerment, gender equality, women rights and as well as Labor rights. Decent work is one of the core objective of the ILO and also has a broad focus in the SDGs 2030. Decent work has four strategic pillars i.e.; productive employment, rights at work, social protection and the promotion of social dialogues. The parameters of decent work are measured by ten different indicators that include, decent working time, work-life balance, non-discrimination, safe work environment and stability and security of work respectively. SDG goal 8 is exclusively designated to achieving decent work for all. It has embedded the targets and indicators of the ILO to ensure decent work and conducive working conditions respectively. (ILO, 2008)

Pakistan has launched National Gender Policy framework in 2022. Provision of conducive and decent working environment is one of the key objectives of the policy which is in line with the SDG goals in general in goal 8 in particular. Pakistan is also signatory of the Beijing Declaration and is committed to achieving 30% representation of women in leadership positions. For that to happen, more women need to participate in the labor force which requires practical steps on part of the government. These steps include creating a decent and conducive environment which means provision of facilities like cafeterias, washrooms, praying areas, day-care centers, transport services, and policies on harassment, gender-equal hiring and equal career progression opportunities (Gop, 2022). This is how women can thrive and are empowered to achieve their full potential.

The Provincial 3% quota and inclusion in the general recruitment has compelled the departments to include women in their Human Resources. However, addressing Practical Gender Needs of women seems to be missing and overlooked. Women and men are required to abide by the Civil Servants Act, 1973. These rules are also not inclusive in terms of working women and the only need of women addressed is regarding Leave, i.e., maternity leave and that of leave at the death of their husbands.

In a patriarchal structure, especially in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where women are required to equally perform their reproductive works, it becomes difficult, and sometimes impossible to manage, and balance both the productive and reproductive work. There is, therefore, a great urge to dig deep and delve into the practical realities faced by working women in public sector of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to identify their needs, concerns as well as evaluate the institutional responses, and the legal provisions. Through empirical inquiry and grounded analysis, the study will contribute to the broader discourse on gender mainstreaming, paving the way for an inclusive workplace environment that will promote gender equality in these institutions in particular and result in promoting gender equality in general.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Needs and Gender Mainstreaming

Gender interests are those that women (or men) may develop on the virtue of their social positioning through their gender attributes. These may be strategic or practical gender needs. Practical Gender needs (PGNs) are the immediate and short-term needs that focus on basic needs. PGN focus on improving living conditions but not actively work to alter traditional gender roles and relationships. Practical gender does not need a challenge, they may rise from gender division out of women and labors' subordinate position in the given society. It is this response that brought these needs for a sudden perceived necessity, which is in specific context identified (EIGE, 2019). Their nature is practical and from inadequacies, they are often related to living conditions such as healthcare, water provisions, and employment (Moser, 2002).

Practical needs aim at making lives easier and better without challenging and hindering the existing structure of the society. It does not question the gender roles rather helps to make those easier and manageable (Hovorka, 2006). Practical needs emerges from the productive and practical need's amalgamation in the framework of triple role. It is not surprising as many of the income of the generating activities of women are carried out at the   household level, which are based actually on the household tasks that are practical, such as sewing, cooking, amongst other household responsibilities. Triple role

framework shows that women perform in all the three areas of roles and responsibilities; productive, reproductive and community, whereas, men are involved only in the productive domains and some community tasks (Khamati-Njenga, 2003).

Gender mainstreaming is an approach that include men and women's concerns needs and experiences at all levels of the program and interventions (Tasli, 2007). However, within the prevailing systems of oppressions and power dynamics within different dimensions of the society, gender mainstreaming is resisted and is viewed as a threat to the existing power structures and traditional institutional system and is therefore difficult to achieve (UNICEF, 2019).

Economic Empowerment and Workplace Gender Equality

Gender equality through economic empowerment of women is although an important yet crucial phenomenon. The women that enter the labor force are governed by policies and rules specific for women. International practices of ILO and UN are important to consider (UNWomen, 2015). Entering into the labor force, becoming working woman is one aspect whereas retention, perusing their careers, climbing up the ladders and proving their worth and productivity is another important dimension that affects women equality and mainstreaming. In gender lingo, it means there is not only issue in access to the required resources but also the control over these that are endangered when it comes to women inclusion and participation in the work domain (Haq et al., 2019).

Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) is the most detailed and comprehensive of all of the normative instruments in place which are based on international labour standards and Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as well as other UN treaties on gender equality. These instruments define the broader objective of gender equality, work on identifying the main issues of gender discrimination and thereby put in place systemic objective for tackling and resolving those (ILO, 2019) these include maternity protection, renumeration, nightwork women, family responsibilities and others.

Sustainable Development Goals and United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are the most important international frameworks, that highlights the importance and centrality of gender equality in sustainable development agendas (ILO, 2019). Besides having a standalone goals on gender equality in SDGs, gender considerations and gender equality frameworks are central to all the other SDG goals respectively.

Enabling and decent work Environment

"An enabling environment may be interpreted as a set of interrelated and interdependent systemic conditions such as policies, laws, institutional mechanisms, resources, etc., which facilitate the promotion of gender equality" (Womenwatch, 2005). Three important aspects of empowerment at work are identified by the millennium project task force that are capabilities-skills and education, access to opportunities and resources- employment and agency- women's ability participate in decision making (Hicks, 2002). Enabling environment would thus facilitate women's capacity to be involved, actively participate and benefit from the process thereby ensuring gender empowerment and equality.

Basic guidelines for creating an enabling environment include flexible working arrangements, family-friendly policies, and common standards of conduct to ensure a safe and supportive workplace environment (UN, 2019). Economic empowerment of women necessitates equal access to resources, elimination of discrimination, and promotion of family-work harmonization (ILO, 2019). There are four strategic pillars or components of decent work: employment, social protection, workers' rights and social dialogue. Goal 8 of the 2030 Agenda calls for the promotion of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work, and will be a key area of engagement for the ILO and its constituents. Furthermore, key aspects of decent work are widely embedded in the targets of many of the other 16 goals of the UN's new development vision. (ILO, 2019).

Working Women Issues

Despite considerable efforts to promote the agency of women, the transformation of policies from gender-neutral to gender-sensitive remains limited. Gender and Development (GAD) approaches have predominantly focused on the supply side, neglecting efforts on the demand side (Chauhan, 2014). While representation of women is one aspect, providing an enabling environment and accommodating their needs are equally crucial. Affirmative actions like quotas have facilitated women's entry into the public domain, yet merely entering is insufficient to ensure their retention and career advancement.

Gender inequality persists in the public sphere due to low representation, gender-insensitive policies, and insufficient resources to meet practical gender needs (Chauhan, 2014).

Post-World War II, significant efforts have been made to integrate women into the mainstream and secure their fundamental rights. Women often undertake triple roles in society, with distinct needs in each domain. In the productive sphere, where they engage in economic activities, their specific needs are often overlooked. Various international frameworks such as CEDAW, ILO conventions, UN Conventions, and the SDGs aim to protect women's rights, fulfill their needs, and mainstream them across society (Chauhan, 2014).

The Context of Pakistan

In Pakistan, working women face issues solely because of their gender (Zhu et al., 2012). Despite constitutional provisions and ratification of international agreements like CEDAW, the condition of women remains unsatisfactory (Ansari, 2018). Women represent only a fraction of the labour force, with particularly low representation in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Challenges in the public sphere include social, legal, material, and institutional constraints, compounded by a lack of affirmative action to address practical gender needs (Radloff, 1975).

Government affirmative action has facilitated women's entry into the public sector but falls short in ensuring access to essential resources like transportation, accommodation, childcare, and restrooms (Avais et al., 2014). Women face discrimination, unequal division of labour, harassment, low wages, and limited career opportunities compared to men (Zhu et al., 2012). Issues such as sectarian problems, job insecurity, work-life balance, and inadequate workplace design further exacerbate their challenges (Zhu et al., 2012).

Transportation issues, inflexible work schedules, and the face-time system contribute to women's dissatisfaction in government organizations (Shehzadi, 2013). Work-family balance is a significant concern, impacting women's wellbeing and productivity (Clarke, 2001). Despite legal protections, maternity protection lacks adequate implementation, with challenges in breastfeeding support and childcare facilities (S. Albanesi, 2016). Harassment remains prevalent, with limited redressal mechanisms (Abdul, 2022).

The absence of suitable washrooms poses health risks, affecting women's hydration and hygiene practices (Rockaya, 2016). Moreover, exclusion of women from social networks and lack of gender responsive policies further marginalises women (Tanvir, 2014). To ensure gender equality and decent work environment for women in Pakistan, crucial steps must be taken that include provision of practical gender needs and ensure provision and implementation of gender sensitive policies. (ILO, 2007).

Although number of women in Pakistan public sector is increased through governments affirmative actions, yet, women face multifaceted challenges on daily basis within and around their work domain. Therefore, it is time to go beyond numbers and take steps to ensure practical gender needs of working women are addressed to ensure gender equality and conducive, decent work environment which will contribute to minimizing gender parity and the achievement of global sustainable goals respectively..

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology includes detailed literature review to establish the baseline and the requisite knowledge for conducting the study. It also provided the gaps in the research question and the key concepts for the study. It also supported in identifying and developing a Theoretical Framework for the study. The Moser Gender Planning Framework was used for the study, suing the tools of gender role identification, gender needs assessment, disaggregated control of resources and decision-making and balancing. The process was carried out through in-depth interviews with 22 women employees through purposive sampling including women from grade 11 to grade 22. All respondents resided in Peshawar. Among them, five of the respondents were unmarried and 17 were married having children. Among the 17 married, 14 women had children under age of 5 and only 3 had children above 5 years of age. Six of the respondents were living in joint family whereas 16 were living as unit family respectively.

Data and Analysis: Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four prominent themes:

Triple Role of Women:

The women interviewed said that they were supposed to perform these tasks and the ones living in

joint families said that when they were not present at home, their children were taken care of but when they are at home, they are responsible for all the household chores along with childcare. This implies that women engaged in the productive work are equally performing their tasks at home (reproductive) and community. When the respondent were asked about their reproductive and community roles, they responded that they are supposed to perform house chores, community roles and also childcare. One of the participants said that "As working women, we are considered to be at rest and only responsible for the productive work at office. People and even our colleagues say and think that we do not perform any task at home rather are enjoying because we do not have any task. However, in reality, we are performing both the domestic traditional responsibilities of nurturing and nursing as well as responsible to give our best at the office. We are feeling overburdened and that is why hardly get time for ourselves to rest or take care of our physical and mental health".

Talking about community roles, all women were of the opinion that since social network and social cohesion is important in our culture. Therefore, they said that they do take part in social and community activities. They can sometimes avoid gatherings like wedding etc. abut funerals are something they need to attend which in turn becomes more burdensome.

Women in the public sector juggled responsibilities in the productive, reproductive, and community spheres, facing a double burden of work both at home and in their careers. Tasks such as childcare, household chores, and community engagement were highlighted, emphasizing the need for support to ease their workload.

Enabling Working Environment:

Enabling Working Environment: Respondents underscored the crucial need for basic facilities and a gender-friendly atmosphere in creating an enabling workplace. One respondent articulated, "When you give a chance to women to serve in your department, at least give her the basic facilities... space to sit, attached or designated washrooms, day-cares for children, and a clear non-discriminated path for career growth." This sentiment echoed across interviews, with another participant emphasizing, "Enabling environment is where a woman is accepted as an employ and not an unwanted imposed minority." However, the reality fell short for many, as they described feeling like "unwanted aliens" within the system. Supervisory support emerged as pivotal, with one respondent noting, "We have a good and accommodative boss who listens to our concerns and resolves our issues."

Non-Discriminatory Environment: The pervasive feeling of discrimination was palpable among all participants, especially concerning career progression. They lamented being excluded from field positions, on-the-job trainings, and leadership roles. One respondent poignantly expressed, "We are in a dilemma that if we say something or express our opinion on a certain matter, we are labelled as disrespectful and cunning but if we remain silent, we are termed inefficient and irresponsible".

Besides, women also shared instances of harassment by the male colleagues and how they receive derogatory comments and misconduct. Exclusion from social network is one other area where women employees are discriminated and not welcomed.

These responses show that gender-based discrimination is observed in the offices to larger extent. They are deprived of career growth opportunities that include trainings exposure visits and outstation postings only because of their gender. Furthermore, official social gatherings, and events are also considered as men only and therefore, women cannot become part of these as it is considered unappropriated for them. Women also because of their gender and the stereotypes associated with them are prone to harassment.

Practical Gender Needs:

Basic practical gender needs highlighted by the respondents included seating, washrooms, work life balance, childcare facilities, maternity support and transportation which they said would ease their burden and ensure gender equality at workplace.

Seating arrangements:

Responses have shown that in almost all of the offices, women were not provided proper sitting places where they could feel at ease and had all required facilities. Some of the women had to share office with men colleagues and these offices does not have any common rooms or separate places for women to sit or even offer prayers. Women are not even encouraged to work in these departments are told and demotivated by not giving them proper responsibilities or facilitate them. The challenges extend beyond

mere physical discomfort, with respondents lamenting the lack of privacy and religious accommodations. One respondent expressed, "We lack a gender-sensitive society. Even during my prayers, I have seen male constables or lower staff bend over me to put or take files from my table."

The absence of designated prayer spaces for women further exacerbates the marginalization experienced within bureaucratic settings. Despite requests for separate prayer areas within office mosques, respondents were met with resistance, with one recounting, "During construction of mosques in the office building, all the female staff requested to make separate prayers place for the women in the mosque that is under construction... this request was denied, stating women have no place in the mosques."

Moreover, the systemic neglect of female employees' needs extends to office amenities, as evidenced by a respondent's experience of renovating her own workspace. "Due to some political affiliation, I had got a small office which was a public place but made of partition in a big hall. It had no AC, Heater, or even fan. I had to renovate the office myself and procure all these things," she shared.

The alienation experienced by female staff is further compounded by the lack of support from colleagues and superiors. Recalling her initial days, one respondent revealed, "When I joined the office, for almost a whole one month, I used to come sit on a chair, any random chair with no table etc., and spent my time looking here and there... Every other person would tell me that this is not a place for a female, females should go and join either teaching or medical field."

b. Work-life balance and Face time value: Many respondents expressed the pressure to extend their work hours beyond the designated office timings, particularly due to prolonged meetings and deadlines common in bureaucratic settings. This practice disrupts their work-life balance, as they are often expected to arrive on time the next day despite late sittings. The prevailing face-time culture, where physical presence in the office is valued over remote work, poses a challenge for female employees. Despite the feasibility of remote management for certain tasks, traditional norms emphasize the importance of physical presence.

One respondent highlighted the impact on productivity, stating, "Most of my work requires internet which I can easily manage remotely. In our office, there is always an internet and electricity issue so my work is hindered. I am mostly unable to complete the work at the office and therefore when I am back home, I do the required tasks remotely."

The consequences extend beyond professional spheres, with many women citing disruptions to their family life, particularly during periods of unpredicted and prolonged office hours. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when remote work was encouraged, female employees reported working beyond the stipulated hours, compromising their family's well-being.

The face value, and late hours sitting in the government offices is one of the issue highlighted by the respondents. They said that these longer hours effect their time and responsibilities at home and thereby sometimes it becomes difficult to manage the work life balance (Ansari, 2018).

c. Maternity, newborn childcare and breastfeeding: Of the respondents, many were married with children, highlighting the challenges faced by working mothers in balancing their professional and maternal responsibilities. Pregnancy in the workplace remains a taboo subject, with many female employees choosing to conceal their pregnancies from colleagues to avoid potential ridicule and stereotypes. The lack of accommodation for pregnant women, such as accessible washrooms and elevators, further exacerbates the risks associated with pregnancy.

one of the respondents, who was pregnant said that, "I am four months pregnant with my second child and I will try to hide it as much as I can. I know it won't be possible for long but will try as much as I can. I am also sharing room with the male staff but cannot do anything as here we do not have separate space for women staff".

Pregnancy in itself is a risky and difficult period, one respondent said that "I had an early premature delivery because of the stairs that I had to climb in the office which I was forbidden by the doctors to do so". This was shared by 4 other respondents as well. Although their office was on the first floor but they had to climb the stairs for washrooms which caused their childbirth long before due time. Another respondent shared that "Woman and their needs had never been the priority, so all the offices are constructed in a way that are gender blind and not concerning health and wellbeing of the women".

One of the unmarried members said that, "while my colleague was pregnant, I in personal capacity,

had to take care of the things that could make her (colleague) feel at ease. Like doing fieldwork, sitting for longer hours and covering for her during meetings and other official requirements".

Maternity leave/post childbirth and new-born care- When asked about maternity leave, which is a total of 90 days in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, those who had availed all or most of the leave, but when they rejoined, their kids were younger than 3 months as they had to take leave before the birth. Some responded that although maternity leave is 90 days, however, most of the female have to come to office after 40 days or even earlier. One of the respondents said that, "During maternity leave, most of our allowances are deducted which impacts our monthly budgets as we are supposed to contribute economically and financially. That is why despite our designated leaves we had to come to office before time". Another said that, "She had taken leave one-month prior childbirth as she was advised bed rest. So, she re-joined office when her child was only 2 months".

The respondents employed various strategies to manage childcare responsibilities for their newborns. Only a minority had access to daycare facilities within their offices, allowing them to bring their children to work with the assistance of a full-time caretaker. Others relied on support from extended family members, leaving their kids at home with relatives while they were at work. Some mothers entrusted their children to their spouses or left them with their mothers before heading to the office. However, one respondent faced challenges breastfeeding her child in a shared office space, necessitating reliance on formula feeding from birth. These diverse approaches highlight the need for comprehensive childcare support in the workplace to accommodate the varying needs of working parents.

d. Childcare/Daycare Facilities: Working mothers emphasized the importance of daycare facilities within their workplace to maintain a balance between their professional responsibilities and childcare duties. One respondent shared her struggle, stating, "I have been assigned a special assignment by my high ups, I had to remain busy and occupied because of which I could not give attention to my children, especially during their exams. This is why their grades have dropped." Despite rhetoric on gender equality, practical support for women's needs often falls short, with policies remaining gender-blind or neutral. Another respondent expressed frustration, saying, "We women are required to perform and are told this is gender equality but when it comes to fulfilling our needs all the policies are thereby either gender blind or gender neutral."

Daycare Challenges: While some offices offer daycare facilities, their effectiveness is hindered by inadequate infrastructure and resources. Limited space and insufficient staffing compromise hygiene and care standards, affecting the well-being of children. One respondent described the situation, stating, "Although there is a daycare facility in our office, it is open for all the departments nearby and there is only one designated maid/Aya for the kids. This daycare is an open hall with no facility at all." Despite proposals for improvement, bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of priority from authorities impede progress. International support offers potential solutions, but internal resistance prevents meaningful change. Another respondent lamented, "Our own authorities are against it for some reason. Since it is again not the priority of the high-ups, that is why we are not given permission and are told that there is no place for daycare."

d. Breastfeeding Support: The absence of designated breastfeeding areas and time constraints force many women to resort to bottle feeding, despite the health benefits of breastfeeding. Without proper accommodations, mothers face challenges in fulfilling their infants' nutritional needs during work hours. One respondent shared her experience, saying, "With my first baby I could not breastfeed because I was sitting with male colleagues and didn't have any separate place, however, with my second, as I had got a separate place, I tried to both breastfeed but again due to official responsibilities and no proper time for feeding, I had to wean him off to bottle feed." Some supervisors offer temporary solutions by providing privacy for breastfeeding, highlighting the need for formalized support structures. Another respondent recounted, "My child was not taking bottle feed so had to breastfeed her. I was sitting with male colleagues and had no place to breastfeed her, however, my immediate supervisor facilitated and whenever it was time to feed her, he would leave his office to me and thereby I could feed her and put her to sleep there."

Overall, women in civil service navigate various stages of motherhood while contending with practical gender needs. From pregnancy-related safety measures to postpartum childcare, these needs underscore the importance of workplace support, including breastfeeding corners and daycare facilities, to facilitate women's dual roles as professionals and caregivers.

e. Washrooms and toilets: The absence of separate and women-friendly washrooms emerged as a significant challenge for female staff in office environments. One respondent expressed discomfort, stating, "Basically, the structure of the building is such that there are 4-5 toilets constructed in one place. One of these toilets is designated for females. It means male and female can go to the area at the same time." This lack of privacy and gender-specific facilities creates a sense of shame and embarrassment, leading some women to avoid restroom use altogether.

The issue extends beyond inconvenience, as menstruating women face additional hardships. Some resort to drastic measures, like avoiding water intake or taking leave during menstruation. Others endure long journeys to nearby establishments or suffer discomfort during meetings in offices without designated facilities for female guests. The struggle for separate washrooms reflects a broader neglect of women's needs in public sector offices, highlighting the urgent need for gender-sensitive infrastructure.

One of the respondents shared and explained that, "Basically, the structure of the building is such that there are 4-5 toilets constructed in one place. One of these toilets is designated for female. It means male and female can go to the area at the same time. This is the most important and a priority issue that they were facing. Because mostly when we are in the toilets, we feel so ashamed to come out of it when the male members are in the toilets near us".

Another respondent said that "We do not even take water or eat all day to avoid going to the toilets. While we are on our periods, we mostly take leave and remain home as it is difficult for us to manage and go to the washroom".

One of the respondents also said that, "Like many other issues, this is also a power game that is why whenever I join an office, am transferred, or designated a role, I literally put a big lock to one of the washrooms and designate it to female. I believe I can do this only because of my authority and grade. Not all the members can do that".

When the respondents who had no designated, washrooms were asked what do they do if they feel the need and urge of using toilets, they responded, "I try not to go to the washroom all day but even if we need because we spend more than 8 hours in the office, I wait for the male officials that they may leave so that I can attend the restrooms and relieve myself". Another said, "For two years I used to go the nearby restaurant just to use the restroom. It was at a distance of 10 minutes from the office. Female have struggled a lot for separate washrooms, but they are not yet provided."

One of the respondent said that, "We try not to use the washrooms all day but during menstruation it becomes so difficult for us to avoid the need of going to the washrooms. As we can to some extent stop our urge to urinate but cannot do anything with the menstruation. To cope with it we at our office mostly take leave during these days".

f. Transport- Journey to work: The transportation challenges faced by female employees compound their workplace difficulties. With no official transport provided, women rely on personal arrangements, public transit, or family assistance. However, rising fuel costs and safety concerns pose significant barriers, particularly for those using public transport. One respondent shared, "We face issues like harassment and unavailability of proper mechanisms, and it is tiring to use public transport, but we have to as it is mandatory."

One of the respondents using public transport said that, "We face issues like harassment, and also unavailability of proper mechanisms as well as it is tiring to use the public transport but we have to as it is mandatory and they do not have another option. Again, there is discrimination, and we are not even allotted our designated vehicles whereas male influential are having more than one vehicle for their use."

The unequal distribution of resources, including designated vehicles, further compounds the challenges faced by women in the workforce. This disparity not only affects their daily commute but also contributes to broader gender inequalities within the bureaucratic system.

These testimonies from the female employees show that the existing gender disparities in the public sector of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa need priority and urgent response by ensuring gender sensitive policies, structural reforms, gender budgeting and institutional reforms. There is also a need for advocating practical gender needs that include seating arrangements, work life balance initiatives, childcare and maternity facilities, restrooms and safe equitable transportation facilities. This is how a conducive work environment can be ensured and women are able to utilise their full potential within the public domains respectively.

Policies and Provisions:

Most of them mentioned the Constitution of Pakistan, Anti-Harassment policy, and maternity leave policies. However, the rest of the respondents did not know about any gender-based policy as it is never experienced by them in their offices. Mentioning maternity leave policy and the harassment policy one of the respondents also highlighted that, these policies are mostly reactive as policy for maternity leave doesnot take into account the pregnancy period and also three months old child is not considered and neither is there provision for breastfeeding of child care.

The findings of the study show that working women in the government institutions are facing issues that are mostly related to their practical gender needs and interests. These issues range from their very basic needs like a place to sit, , office hours, journey time, a proper washrooms, breastfeeding, maternity, and childcare, to issues such as harassment and overall discrimination. Furthermore, policies and laws that are more gender friendly are also lacking and those that are existing are not part of the practice.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women working in the public sector of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are involved in triple roles in the society, productive, reproductive and community. Women who enter the productive sphere are equally supposed to contribute and carry out activities related to reproductive sphere such as house chore, children and elderly care as well as take part in social and community gatherings. Because of the unequal division of labour, this poses an extra burden on women as they need to stretch themselves in fulfilling the responsibilities of both at home and at work. In each of these sphere that they work in, they have their specific practical gender needs. The non-provision and unavailability of these needs make it more difficult for the women to perform their tasks.

Responses shows that the respective government institutions lack enabling environment for their women employees. Their understandings of "enabling environment" somehow complies with the definition given by women watch and many other agencies. It is an environment where one feel empowered and are having access too and control over resources and opportunities (Womenwatch, 2005). Where they feel active participants of the office and not alienated figures. For all the working women, enabling environment is one where they feel secure, and their rights are protected, and their concerns and their practical needs are fulfilled and understood. Accordingly, enabling environment in these offices are basically not institutionalised. However, offices where there are good accommodative bosses, have provide their staff with a decent environment with all basic facilities. It means that enabling environment is not institutionalised but depends upon good supervisors respectively.

The study, however, shows that women in the government offices are feeling gender-based discrimination, alienation, because of which they are mostly not able to work or progress in their careers. They are deprived of their postings, transfers and skill enhancement opportunities like trainings and capacity building activities, either directly or indirectly. Indirectly means, they are not supported in terms of providing their gender needs, if they had to take steps for their career growths.

Women in the government sector organization, irrespective of their marital status are facing sexual harassment. Although harassment committees are part of the institutions, yet women feel reluctant to report any case as they mostly fear about their own reputation and also the circumstances that they may face onwards. Women fear for their reputation as such cases are not encouraged in these departments. Women are blamed for being harassed by targeting their dresses, or the way they carry themselves.

Official gatherings and social networks is another aspect where women are alienated. Although these networks and official gatherings are important for career growths, yet they are not considered appropriate for them as these are considered "men only". Furthermore, because of the unwelcoming environment of these gatherings and because of women's responsibilities at home, they are not included as part of these events respectively.

Practical gender needs of working women are neither considered nor provided to most of these working women. When asked about their basic facilities and gender specific needs, following were the most frequent ones identified issues that they face;

• Proper offices with attached washrooms are lacking. They are mostly required to share offices with male colleagues and thereby becomes difficult to sit easily due to the cultural and societal values.

• Washrooms are usually not attached with the offices and are not easily accessible. That is why most

of the women avoid drinking or eat during office hours to avoid going to the washrooms which has serious health implications. Most of the women even try to stay home during their menstrual cycle periods for the same reason.

- Work life balance is disturbed because of extended working hours. Most of the official meeting and proceedings start (late) ahead of the designated time and without specification of when it will end. This has affected the work life balance of most of the working women.

- Women are not provided with pick and drop and therefore they have to rely on public transport or personal means. They mostly face harassment and take a lot of time to reach offices. Furthermore, due to higher fuel prices, cost of the transport is also difficult to be managed.

- Most of the women when enters the government service are in their childbearing ages. During pregnancy, they face issues related to their health and wellbeing. Post childbirth, they face issues to keep their newborn and breastfeed for the requisite period.

Women employees in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are mostly unaware of the legal provisions/ gender-based policy as they have never experienced by them in their offices. The ones they know about are the constitution of Pakistan and Anti- Harassment policy. Although KP has launched women empowerment policy in the year 2020, yet the respondents said that they are not aware of this act. They said they have yet to see any gender-based initiative that is been taken on institutional level. Although, women have been included in the system through competitive and quota systems, yet they are not being mainstreamed as their practical gender needs are overlooked, neither understood, nor accommodated. In order for the women to contribute and play part in the development of the country, it is important to provide them with their practical gender needs.

Recommendations

Women in the public sphere face issues that are basic but important. There is, therefore, a serious need to ensure that women are provided with the basic facilities and their practical gender needs are addressed. Women who are recruited along with their productive, reproductive and community roles. That is why it is important to consider their needs and interest and to make sure that they are able to manage their productive work without compromising their reproductive work and also to ensure that their basic official facilities are ensured. In order to make government offices become enabling and decent for the working women, there is a need to transform the offices to become gender friendly and gender sensitive. Following are some of the recommendations that may be considered:

- Government is required to take affirmative actions to ensure women are provided with their practical gender needs and ensure these are fulfilled.

- Women employees must be trained to know their rights and legal provisions so that they may feel empowered while demanding their due rights

- Policies related to harassment must be implemented in practice and women employees may be encouraged to file cases when needed.

- All government offices may provide separate offices to women employees which are not shared with men colleagues.

- It is to be ensured that the offices have attached usable washroom having all basic facilities as per water and sanitation standards.

- If there are no attached washrooms, separate designated and easy to access washrooms must be allocated for women.

- Women may not be compelled to sit for longer, extended hours, so that they are able to manage their work life balance.

- Transport is to be provided to all working women for the purpose of pick and drop to office and home.

- Special measures to be taken to ensure women's health and wellbeing during pregnancy/maternity period. This may include offices on the ground floors to avoid stairs, minimum or flexible working hours, etc., so as to avoid pregnancy related complications and hazards.

- Offices must provide breastfeeding rooms with all the requirements and also provide time to

ensure breastfeeding is completed as per tenure.

- Daycares may be made mandatory as part of all the office buildings so as to facilitate mothers to keep their children near them.
- Legislators may work with the women employees to pass gender-based legislations that are related to women in the government offices.
- Public sector offices must ensure inclusiveness while devising policies, regulations, and Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) that may have influence on working women. Their role in the decision-making process would make a difference in creating an enabling environment for working women in the public sector.

Competing Interests

The authors did not declare any competing interest.

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