

Wading through the New Normal: A discourse analysis of re-defined workplace norms

By

Abhipsa Dash Bhatt¹ and Pavni Kaushiva²

^{1, *} *Doctoral Scholar, Human Resource Management, IIM Lucknow*

² *Assistant Professor, Human Resource Management, IIM Lucknow*

Stream: Critique and Contestation at Work

Submitted to *Human Relations* 75th Anniversary Conference, April 2023

London,UK

*Corresponding author

Email addresses: phd22016@iiml.ac.in (Abhipsa .D.Bhatt), pavni.kaushiva@iiml.ac.in (P.Kaushiva)

Introduction

The world witnessed a rare phenomenon disrupting life and threatening the global economy in 2020 – a “global lockdown” due to a viral pandemic (Gowd et al., 2021). Restricted movements necessitated the concept of “work from home (WFH)” to continue the business. This was a revolutionary phenomenon that demanded many organizations to re-evaluate their work norms to define the “new normal”. However, the resultant blurred boundaries between professional and personal space became a double-edged sword for individuals, especially women. Women have been setting exemplars of dismantling the orthodox societal expectations. However, the onset of COVID-19 exposed the vulnerabilities.

Scholarly research on dual-earner couples exhibits uneven impact on females due to the pandemic with unfavourable transitions in the work-family interface (Vaziri et al., 2020). Faced with ‘a “double shift” of household responsibilities, mental health challenges, a more difficult remote-work experience, and concerns about higher rates of unemployment’ (McKinsey, 2021, pg1) for an extended period, 33% women in corporate America contemplated downshifting or quitting their jobs. This extended to women in emerging economies with increased severity. Evidently, unemployment peaked at 23.5 per cent in April’2020 in India (CMIE,2020), with women leaving the labour force at a pace 2.5 times that of males (McKinsey,2021).

Resultantly, an active conversation on the “great resignation and reshuffle” has presumed in the professional space (Saikiran, 2021). Employers moved to highlight “WFH opportunities” to attract and retain talent.

The representation of the “new normal” impacts how it is understood at the level of individuals as well as organizations. The media, particularly newspapers, has an essential function in creating expectations and offering frameworks for interpretation (Adamson, 2017). We thus use media as empirics to understand the discourse around the “new normal.”

Literature Review

Drawing upon Acker's framework, this study offers insights into how weighing production over reproduction percolates gendered norms (Acker, 1992) during the crisis. The inherent gender inequities in organisations are replicated through gendering processes that are frequently invisible and appear to be 'gender-neutral'. We use Acker's (2012) gendered subtext of organization as well as the organizational logic for analysing the emerging themes. We present emergent discourses and discuss potential future lines of research and policy-making.

Method

We studied the reports on work published in the leading English Newspapers in India using discourse analysis (Mishra & Bathini, 2020) to understand the social reality. Purposive sampling was adopted for this study. The Times of India and the Hindu were chosen considering they are the leading English dailies as per Dec'2019 Audit Bureau of Circulations report. Articles published between 1st April 2021, when the second wave of COVID-19 had started in India to 30th April 2022, when this study commenced, were identified using keywords in Lexis Nexis. Preliminary reading followed by in-depth study were instrumental in coding and performing the discursive analysis.

Findings

We interrogate the recent hype around work-from-home advantages and the passage into hybrid workplaces by adopting a critical perspective. Building on Acker's framework, our findings reveal the dominant discourse of working women bearing the domestic burden, which affected their career progression. The implicit symbols of discrimination have surfaced, leading to women losing jobs to men succumbing to societal expectations of handling domestic work. The media representation of organizations providing valuable career opportunities and big salary hikes undermines the fundamental fact of women grabbing them on account of career breaks. Counter-discourses that challenged this was limited, where men were shown to be shouldering domestic responsibility and projected as "progressive." These articles heralded men's contribution to child-care even though they were limited to participation in socially rewarding activities.

In arguably supportive participation of males in household chores, we see the active propagation of the unquestioned 'ideal worker'. The gendered division remains, albeit a few

instances of uninvited contribution from male partners or active movement of females away from core ‘reproductive’ acts. Notably, the discourse also apprises us of women introspecting, equipping themselves with cultural capital, making their own investment decisions and moving ahead with unending hope.

Conclusion

This study fills the vacuum of understanding the “new normal” from the perspective of working women. It incorporates Acker's (1990, 2012) framework to understand gender inequality and covert discrimination. Applying a gender lens to the study unfolded the seemingly new normal as rife with stories of struggle and clashes of aspirations with the expected reality. It enriches our understanding of the systemic and subtle forms of discrimination that emerge during times of crisis and have a permanent impact in subsequent times.

References

- Acker, J. (1992). From sex roles to gendered institutions. *Contemporary sociology*, 21(5), 565-569.
- Acker, J. (2012). Gendered organizations and intersectionality: Problems and possibilities. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*
- Adamson, M. (2017). Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and A ‘Successfully’ Balanced Femininity in Celebrity CEO Autobiographies. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 24(3), 314–327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12167>
- CMIE. (2020). Retrieved August 14, 2022 from <https://unemploymentinindia.cmie.com/>
- Gowd, K. K., Veerababu, D., & Reddy, V. R. (2021). COVID-19 and the legislative response in India: The need for a comprehensive health care law. In *Journal of Public Affairs* (Vol. 21, Issue 4). <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2669>
- McKinsey. (2021). COVID-19 Could Undo Decades of Women’s Progress: How to Counter the Pandemic’s Gender-Regressive Shock. Retrieved August 14, 2022 from <https://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/overview/in-the-news/covid-19-could-undo-decades-of-womens-progress-how-to-counter-the-pandemics-gender-regressive-shock>
- McKinsey. (2021). Women in the Workplace 2021. Retrieved August 14, 2022 from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the->

workplace

Mishra, S., & Bathini, D. R. (2020). Uber's entrepreneurship discourse and its neoliberal appeal: analysis of coverage in English-language dailies in India. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 17(4), 394-411.

Saikiran, A. (2021). The Great resignation: The buzz phrase of the modern times. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/the-great-resignation-the-buzz-phrase-of-the-modern-times/>

Vaziri, H., Casper, W. J., Wayne, J. H., & Matthews, R. A. (2020). Changes to the Work–Family Interface During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Examining Predictors and Implications Using Latent Transition Analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(10), 1073–1087. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000819.supp>