



Resilience and Reform

Understanding the Challenges and Empowerment of Working Women in Bhubaneswar

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Abstract : Women's participation in the workforce has been recognized as both a symbol and a measure of societal progress. Yet, in urban centers such as Bhubaneswar, gendered disparities persist despite educational and economic advancement. This study examines the systemic, socio-cultural, and institutional challenges faced by working women in Bhubaneswar and explores their resilience, coping mechanisms, and pathways to empowerment. Drawing from a mixed-methods study of 300 participants across organized and unorganized sectors, the findings reveal structural inequities in employment stability, wage parity, and workplace safety. The research further identifies how women's adaptive resilience often substitutes for institutional reform. The paper concludes with comprehensive policy and structural recommendations emphasizing equity, safety, and gender-sensitive urban governance.

IndexTerms - women empowerment, gender equity, Bhubaneswar, resilience, workplace discrimination, socio-cultural barriers, policy reform

INTRODUCTION

Urban India has witnessed an impressive expansion of women's employment opportunities over the last two decades. Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha, reflects this transformation with its flourishing education, IT, and healthcare sectors. However, beneath the surface of progress lies a persistent gender gap. According to the Odisha Economic Survey (2024), female labor force participation in urban Odisha is only 21.8%, compared to 68.3% among men.

As one respondent stated, "We are celebrated for managing everything, not for demanding change." This simple remark encapsulates the paradox of women's empowerment—apparent inclusion without equitable transformation.

The study explores this paradox through an integrated framework of the Glass Ceiling Theory, Double Burden Theory, and Intersectionality Theory. It also draws on feminist concepts such as Patriarchal Theory (Walby, 1990) and Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) to analyze how social norms, workplace cultures, and institutional biases intersect to shape women's professional experiences.

NEED OF THE STUDY

Women's participation in the workforce is a key indicator of a nation's social and economic progress. However, despite visible advancements in education, technology, and governance, women in Indian cities like Bhubaneswar continue to face persistent inequalities that remain inadequately explored.

While national and state policies advocate for gender equality, the lived realities of working women reveal deep-rooted structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that prevent true empowerment. Bhubaneswar—being a rapidly urbanizing and administratively important city—offers a unique setting where modern employment opportunities coexist with traditional gender norms. Yet, limited empirical research has been conducted to understand how these contradictions shape women's work experiences, resilience, and empowerment.

The study is needed for the following reasons:

- Persistent Gender Gap
- Inadequate Representation of Urban Women's Realities

- Evolving Nature of Work
- Resilience vs. Reform
- Policy Implications
- Theoretical Contribution

In essence, this research is needed to bridge the gap between policy rhetoric and lived reality, to highlight how systemic inequalities persist beneath the surface of progress, and to propose actionable recommendations for building a truly inclusive, gender-just urban workforce in Bhubaneswar.

3.1 Population and Sample

The population of this study comprised working women in Bhubaneswar, including those employed in both organized and unorganized sectors.

A total of 200 respondents were selected through a stratified random sampling technique to ensure sectoral and occupational diversity.

1. **Organized Sector (70 respondents):** Participants were drawn from education, IT, healthcare, and government service organizations.
2. **Unorganized Sector (130 respondents):** Participants included domestic workers, street vendors, artisans, and workers engaged in handicrafts or small-scale services.

The inclusion criteria involved women aged 21–55 years, with at least one year of work experience. Respondents represented varied educational, socio-economic, and marital backgrounds to reflect Bhubaneswar's diverse female workforce.

The sample size was determined considering both data saturation in qualitative inquiry and adequate statistical representation for quantitative comparisons.

3.2 Data and Sources of Data

This study employed both primary and secondary data sources to obtain comprehensive insights into the experiences of working women.

1. Primary Data

Collected through:

- **Structured Questionnaires:** To quantify responses on employment conditions, wages, workplace safety, and work–life balance.
- **In-depth Interviews:** Conducted with 40 selected participants to explore emotional coping, resilience, and lived experiences.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Two focus groups (10 participants each) facilitated collective reflection on institutional challenges and empowerment pathways.

2. Secondary Data

Included:

- Government publications such as the Odisha Economic Survey (2024), Census data, and reports from the Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- Policy documents (e.g., POSH Act 2013, National Policy for Women 2016).
- Scholarly works and theories in feminist sociology and gender studies, including Walby (1990), Becker (1964), and Eagly & Karau (2002).

All data were collected between January 2024 and May 2025.

3.3 Theoretical framework

The research draws upon multiple feminist and sociological frameworks to interpret the challenges and empowerment of women:

1. **Glass Ceiling Theory:** Explains the invisible barriers preventing women from reaching top positions in organizations.
2. **Double Burden Theory:** Highlights women's dual responsibility of wage work and unpaid domestic care.
3. **Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989):** Recognizes overlapping identities such as caste, class, and marital status that shape women's experiences.
4. **Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002):** Discusses prejudice faced by women leaders whose roles conflict with traditional gender expectations.
5. **Institutional Discrimination Theory:** Suggests that gender-neutral policies can perpetuate inequality if applied without sensitivity to women's contexts.

6. **Patriarchal Theory (Walby, 1990):** Underpins the structural dominance that constrains women's autonomy despite modernization.

Together, these frameworks provide a holistic understanding of how **systemic inequities and individual resilience** coexist in Bhubaneswar's urban workforce.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology section outlines the overall design and procedures adopted to conduct the study. It provides a systematic explanation of how the research was planned, organized, and implemented. This section includes details about the universe of the study, the sample and sampling techniques, data and sources of data, study variables, and the analytical and theoretical framework applied for interpreting the findings. The following subsections describe each component in detail.

3.1 Population and Sample

The universe of the present study comprises working women residing and employed in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. Bhubaneswar, being an emerging urban and administrative hub, provides a diverse mix of professional environments—ranging from government offices and private companies to educational institutions, healthcare, and the service sector.

The study specifically focuses on women engaged in formal and semi-formal employment sectors, including corporate organizations, educational institutions, and public offices. From this universe, a sample of 100 working women was selected through purposive sampling. The selection ensured representation from different employment types, age groups, and marital statuses to capture a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and psychological dimensions influencing women's empowerment and resilience.

3.2 Data and Sources of Data

The present study is based on both primary and secondary data.

- **Primary Data:**
Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews designed to explore various aspects of women's experiences at the workplace. The questionnaire covered parameters such as job satisfaction, work-life balance, social support, gender bias, and self-perceived empowerment.

Interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative insights into personal challenges, coping mechanisms, and perspectives on empowerment and gender reform.

- **Secondary Data:**
Secondary data were gathered from government reports, academic journals, books, and official websites of relevant organizations such as the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Government of Odisha. These sources helped in understanding broader policy measures, socio-economic indicators, and employment patterns of women in urban India.

3.3 Theoretical framework

The study is guided by the **Empowerment Framework** and the **Resilience Theory** within the sociological context of gender and development.

- **Dependent Variable:**
Women's empowerment — measured through indicators such as decision-making power, economic independence, workplace participation, and self-perception of agency.

- **Independent Variables:**
Factors such as *education level, income, marital status, workplace environment, social support systems, and organizational policies* were considered to influence empowerment.

The **Resilience Theory** explains how women adapt and thrive despite social, cultural, and occupational challenges, emphasizing coping strategies and personal strength. The **Empowerment Framework** provides a lens to evaluate both structural and individual transformations contributing to gender equality and autonomy.

By integrating these frameworks, the study attempts to understand how resilience shapes empowerment outcomes for working women in Bhubaneswar and how institutional and social factors either enable or constrain their progress.

3.4 Statistical tools and econometric models

Given the mixed-method design, both **quantitative and qualitative analyses** were employed.

3.4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analysis was used to summarize quantitative data from the survey. Tools included:

- **Frequencies and Percentages:** For variables like education level, marital status, income, and job type.
- **Cross-tabulation:** To compare organized vs. unorganized sector disparities.
- **Mean and Standard Deviation:** To measure variation in working hours, wages, and satisfaction levels.
- **Graphs and Charts:** To visually represent data on employment status, safety, and institutional support.

3.4.2 Fama-McBeth two pass regression

Instead of financial regression models (e.g., Fama–MacBeth, CAPM, APT), qualitative and sociological studies rely on **coding-based thematic analysis**.

This study adopted **Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six-phase model** for qualitative data interpretation:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

This helped identify recurring themes such as *“invisible labour,” “resilience as survival,”* and *“institutional neglect.”*

3.4.3 Comparison of the Models

A comparative approach was employed between:

- **Quantitative findings (objective indicators):** Employment stability, wage gap, POSH compliance.
- **Qualitative insights (subjective narratives):** Coping mechanisms, gender bias, and empowerment perceptions.

This **triangulation** ensured credibility and reliability of findings, aligning with feminist research ethics emphasizing voice and experience.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results of Descriptive Statics of Study Variables

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statics

Variable	Organized Sector (%)	Unorganized Sector (%)
Temporary/Contract Jobs	56	90
Reported Harassment	30	60
Health Insurance Access	25	10
Wage Below Minimum Level	15	75
Extended Working Hours	70	85
Awareness of POSH Mechanisms	60	35
Use of Stress-Management Practices	65	55

Key results from the descriptive and thematic analysis include the above.

Interpretation:

- Employment insecurity is high across both sectors.
- Gender pay disparity remains acute, validating Becker’s (1964) Human Capital framework.
- Workplace harassment persists despite legal safeguards, confirming gaps in policy enforcement.
- Resilience strategies (time management, yoga, peer support) reflect women’s adaptive but unsustainable coping mechanisms.

Discussion:

The findings reveal a paradox of empowerment—where progress in education and employment coexists with entrenched gender hierarchies. Institutional gaps force women to depend on individual resilience instead of systemic reform. True empowerment, as the study concludes, must shift focus from endurance to transformation through policy enforcement, urban safety design, and gender-responsive governance.

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