WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL WORKSPACES: A STUDY OF WOMEN BUS CONDUCTORS IN DELHI

Introduction

Gender identities are ascribed to us since the day we are born into society, and we are expected to behave in ways that are consistent with these norms. These norms and structures are often oppressive and infringe on human freedom and potential, as in the case of patriarchal set-ups. However, different spaces are also used to assert autonomy by individuals as modes of resistance against dominant structures of society, and the workspace is one such crucial space.

In a survey done to examine why women do not often make it to top positions in organisations, several women cited an unsupportive work culture as the main reason (Stocking 2016). Such a culture included interruptions and being ignored at meetings, male-dominated socialisation events, having to work harder to succeed and being judged on whether they are “tough enough”. Studies done of female-only workspaces find that the reason there are fewer women entrepreneurs in work settings is because of factors such as balancing work and family, societal expectations, lack of opportunities and fear of failure (Disney 2013).

There is a stress on the importance of women forming networks and connections that can advise and support them, and this need leads to the formation of women-only workspaces such as small businesses. The key motivations for women to choose such workspaces are comfort, safety and support. In such a context, the motivation for women to opt for and continue to pursue occupations that have traditionally been male-only spaces becomes interesting to study.

The 1990s in India saw increasing women’s participation in work along with a simultaneous decrease in sex segregation, or the tendency of women (and men) to place themselves in jobs dominated by their sex, a phenomena perpetuated by ascribing gendered qualities to jobs. Bakshi (2011) explains how this was made possible by the post-liberalisation economic reforms,
which, along with economic growth, also resulted in increased literacy and the opening up of new opportunities for paid work for men as well as women. The aspiration for improved standards of living along with the desire for consumer goods lent a new significance to the value of education, and it became common for women to pursue higher education in universities or go on to find jobs to supplement the family income.

Competitive trade requires efficiency for productivity, and this factor also helped override gender preferences to an extent. Women continue to be a source of cheap labour in India, like in most other developing nations. Along with an overall decrease in occupational segregation, there has been a simultaneous increase in the size of the informal sector due to trade liberalisation, with women also getting employed in this sector. While sex segregation has declined more in urban India, it is still an important feature of the Indian labour market. Also, while the quantity of jobs may have increased, the quality is likely to continue to be adversely affected.

Nonetheless, as Wright (2016) points out, the entry of women into non-traditional workspaces, i.e., jobs where members of one’s gender are in the numerical minority (less than one-third, in general), challenges notions of masculine attributes that are considered “natural” for such occupations. In her study on the transportation and construction sector in the United Kingdom (UK), she notes that such conceptions have for long justified male dominance and exclusion of women from certain workspaces and also led to hostility towards women by men in the form of sexual harassment and scrutiny of their sexual orientations. However, women who have continued with these jobs despite such forms of discrimination have been found to gain a sense of confidence and autonomy, because of challenging these notions and deriving some form of financial independence in the process.

The mobility that has been made possible with the image of the new modern middle-class citizen, which includes women, has pushed women’s role beyond the realm of domestic work. However, this has not entirely translated into an improved position for them in society. The forces of liberalisation and globalisation exist simultaneously with traditional values and practices, and often come into conflict. While opportunities are created to challenge existing structures, many of the older ones embedded within patriarchy are reinforced (Nielsen and Waldrop 2015). As an example, the information technology (IT) boom in India is providing more and more employment to middle-class women, but it is this very mobility that makes them targets of virtual abuse and threats and makes them more vulnerable to sexual harassment in public spaces.
It is within such an interplay of economic and social forces that this study is located, and it aims to understand the status of women within non-traditional workspaces through a study of women bus conductors in the government as well as privately run buses in Delhi. While Baglihole (2002) raises the important question of whether women opting for non-traditional work do so to challenge gender barriers and assert their autonomy, taking into account financial incentives or, more importantly, the inescapable necessities of subsistence and the need for a source of income further complicate the discussion. Another significant point of inquiry she brings up is whether these women are agents of change, pushing the boundaries for what is considered socially acceptable for women, or whether they are simply individuals who end up conforming for personal success, getting co-opted into the very systems that constrain them.

The Study

The two key aims of the study were to (i) identify the degrees of autonomy that women experience in a non-traditional workplace, specifically in the case of women bus conductors in Delhi, and (ii) understand the perception of gender identity of these women and how it is influenced through their interactions with the workspace.

The site of the study was Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) bus depots, private cluster bus depots and the buses that ply on routes specific to these depots. These were identified as the workspace of the women conductors. Respondents for the study were women bus conductors and were identified through visits to various bus depots and the method of snowball sampling. The first part of the study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with the respondents and in the second part they were accompanied on their respective bus routes during work hours to observe their workspace more closely, along with their interaction with passengers.

Women Bus Conductors: The Background

The DTC began employing women bus conductors around 2008–09, as part of their broader goal towards empowering women before the Commonwealth Games in 2010. Currently, there are over 300 women conductors employed, while the number of men is in a few thousands. This is, however, not the first time that DTC is employing women as conductors. In 1976, around 200 women were recruited, but within a few years, they were all transferred to clerical positions within DTC. Many lower middle-class women are looking
at this job as an option today, mainly since it is a government job. The qualification required is being a 12th pass and the possession of a fitness certificate, and the selection process only involves an interview after the application process. Rampant unemployment is also cited by many of the respondents as a major reason.

The possibility of a permanent government job provides a glimmer of hope for the applicants despite all employment being made on a yearly contractual basis and the current Aam Aadmi Party government not having fulfilled its promise of making all the workers permanent till date. Another incentive for women is that their eight-hour shifts are compulsorily in the morning, and they are free by 2–3 pm to leave for home. This is done with their safety in mind, and women feel that it allows them to balance housework and childcare with professional work. Women conductors are also given duty only on routes that are considered “safe” or routes where the passengers are less likely to misbehave or create trouble. The daily wage for DTC conductors is Rs 447, and they are not granted any leave. There are monetary incentives offered for working over 26 days in a month, along with medical insurance under the Employees` State Insurance (ESI) provided by the government.

The private or cluster buses arose from the need for more safe, reliable and comfortable public transport, and came about through a corporatisation scheme by the Government of Delhi. All existing DTC routes are grouped into clusters, with each cluster allotted to a private entity through a bidding process for 10 years and to be serviced by both the private entity as well as DTC. A cluster bus depot currently employs 15–16 women bus conductors on average as opposed to between four and six in DTC depots. Hiring of conductors is outsourced to a third party agency, and these contractual conductors earn Rs 390 per day. While the work timings for these women conductors are similar to their government counterparts, more discretion and flexibility is employed occasionally, by extending their line duty to an extra late evening shift, as and when required.

Out of the eight women interviewed, six were employed in DTC and two with the private cluster buses. Six of them were married with children and were between the ages of 26 and 40, having worked at the job for three to six years. While one of the respondents was a 20-year-old unmarried student, another was over 40 years of age and was offered the job as compensation after her husband`s death. For six of the women, this was their first job, while two had shifted from their previous job as a teacher and a salesperson at a mall respectively.
Findings

The primary reason for getting this job was a financial one for all the women, either to support the family income or as the sole breadwinner of the family. This motivation was a strong enough factor to outweigh considerations about the unconventional nature of the job for women, and one of them articulated this as unemployment being the strongest overriding driving force behind women opting for this job. There were other concerns for some women who had taken a while to convince all their family members, but these concerns seemed to arise from the entire notion of a woman going out to work rather than choosing a job dominated by men. For those employed by DTC, there is a strong preference for government jobs, which are seen as more secure and accountable, with one of the women having left a private teaching job for this one.

When questioned about the fact that it is still an unconventional profession for women, everyone agreed and shared stories about their experiences of passengers being surprised by them, many just walking past them in search of the conductor, and some even expressing their admiration and appreciation (or disapproval in some cases) vocally. However, the women conductors feel these instances and reactions have decreased with people becoming used to their presence as well as the general presence of women in several unconventional jobs such as cab and auto driving or working at petrol pumps. The overall sense is that “there is no job today that a man can do, that a woman cannot”, as one of them put it.

When questioned on the difficulties that women face on entering such unconventional fields, they did not stress much on the unconventional nature of the job as much as simply claiming that women face problems of harassment, safety or combining housework with professional work in any field that they choose to enter. A possible cause might be that the women seemed happy with the department staff at their depots and said they were extremely friendly, cooperative and supportive. It can also be argued that the nature of the workspace itself, which is on the bus and involves dealing with passengers, and not in an office space with other men, is one of the major reasons that the non-traditional nature of the job is not perceived too strongly. There is, however, an acceptance and consensus that the job of public dealing in buses is a tough one, and it is easier for men to carry it out than women, not because the women are any less skilled but because of the attitude of some passengers who do not take them as seriously.
When questioned directly about whether passengers perceive women conductors differently from men, they responded that most passengers treat them as they would treat any other male conductor, with the occasional miscreant who is usually asked to de-board the bus. The driver usually helps them out when there is such a case. The women do not feel that they face any problems on the buses simply by virtue of their gender and that the occasional passenger who is rude or misbehaves is present irrespective of the gender of the conductor. This seemed a strange opinion since when directly talking about specific experiences, there were clear cases of passengers attacking women on the basis of their gender.

As an example, during one of the bus journeys, one of the respondents got slightly agitated after she was blamed for giving a ticket worth Rs 5 to a passenger who had paid Rs 10 (she did not feel it was her fault, though it was probably an oversight on her part), and immediately a group of male passengers congregated at the back of the bus to loudly and pointedly converse about how such problems would never arise if women stayed and worked at home, where they belonged, and did not try to pursue work meant for men. Instances of sexual harassment in the form of staring or touching are also seen as a normal everyday experience, but unlike many female passengers, these conductors do speak up when it occurs.

The behaviour of women conductors with passengers is polite but firm, and they do not hesitate to raise their voice if required. While some do not shy away from resorting to abuses when a passenger does so, and they even feel it is necessary, others felt that it is not possible for a woman to converse with a man using such language. Some, for example, while acknowledging the difficulties a woman faces in public dealing, are clear on the fact that they will not tolerate any kind of misbehaviour or rudeness without retorting, and they have gotten non-cooperating passengers thrown off the bus. Others prefer to stay away from unnecessary trouble and only interfere as much as required. Each of them has their own way of dealing with passengers, some being friendly and building relationships with regular commuters, while others stick to their jobs. They find their own ways to handle misbehaving passengers and push themselves only as much as they personally regard as appropriate within their work environment.

A common cause for dissatisfaction amongst them all is that during the resolution of complaints filed regarding disputes between passengers and the staff, the passenger’s account is taken as the final word on the matter, and such complaints by passengers on buses could lead to loss of working
days for them. On the other hand, no internal complaints committee has been set up in any of the departments for grievance redress of staff members, or specifically for the redress of sexual harassment complaints by women employees, despite this being mandated by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act of 2013.

According to the respondents, no such problem had arisen which required the need for filing of complaints, and minor problems were resolved informally. Each one of them spoke positively about their department staff, calling them supportive and cooperative. One of them mentioned that the older male staff treated them like daughters and others too treated them very respectfully. While there have been cases of men gossiping about women interacting with male colleagues, she claimed that in person, everyone behaved respectfully. They did, however, mention that women in some of the other depots did not have colleagues as supportive or understanding.

In general, the interaction with male colleagues is minimal since these women work in early morning to afternoon shifts and immediately leave for home after work, unlike the men who stay back longer and have a chance to interact with others. At one of the depots, a respondent was unhappy about not having a separate room for women to rest in during breaks, and she would spend these breaks outside the depot office at the bus stop since she would feel uncomfortable sitting in a room full of men.

Another common complaint cited by all the women was the lack of toilets en route and at some of the terminals where buses halt during line duty. They manage the problem by not drinking too much water while on duty so as to minimise the need for using the toilet. This problem is not perceived as an issue to be taken up with the employers and is seen as another adjustment to be made by women.

All the women feel that their confidence in public spaces has increased after doing this job, while for some the change has been quite drastic in making the transition from being quiet and scared of using public transport to feeling extremely confident. Their confidence is evident in their manner of conversing as well as their interaction with passengers. Some of the women are extremely proud of their job since it is their own independent source of income earned through their hard work, and one of the respondents even brought her two children along to work one day to show to them how their mother earns her money to support them. For others, it is simply a responsibility to be carried out, and they would prefer other opportunities such as teaching. One of them feels that while her transition to a working
woman may not significantly improve her situation at home and only adds to the amount of work she has to do, she does think it influences the way in which her son sees her, making him sensitive to the amount of work and effort she puts in daily.

Nonetheless, this positive change in their own perceived personality has not translated into any changes in the private sphere, with all the women having to carry out all the household duties, taking care of their children, and, in the case of some, still requiring their husband`s permission before leaving the house. The one unmarried respondent was working while simultaneously pursuing a correspondence bachelor`s course and did not intend to continue the job after she got married, unless her husband`s family wanted her to. It is not clear whether these women have any independent control over their incomes. It is household work that is their prime concern, while the requirements of the job are expected to adjust around it, making the timings of this particular job very convenient. Even the choice of opting to work was a decision taken by the husband or accepted by the husband`s family only due to pressing financial considerations.

One of the respondents explained that once a woman gets married, her family does not have rights over her anymore, and she must live according to the “terms and conditions” of her new family, which entails the full responsibility of domestic chores and bringing up children. Thus these women unquestioningly take up double the workload, working hard towards balancing work life with their personal life. When questioned further on the fairness of such a set-up, there was a reference to the “mentality” of people, which changes gradually over time, and that for the time being it is necessary to get used to things the way they are.

There is an interesting interplay of contradictory values for some of the younger women who have pursued higher studies till graduation and have aspirations of their own, ranging from jobs with Delhi Police and the teaching profession to marrying out of their poverty. While, on the one hand, they would like the freedom to pursue certain kinds of jobs, at the same time, they all see getting married and managing a household as a major priority, even if it acts as a barrier to their independence. For these younger women, there is some sort of compromise involved in taking up this job, and they are merely settling for it till they are faced with better opportunities, but for the older women nearing 40 years of age, the nature of the job is not relevant as it is simply a source of income and a responsibility to be carried out. Nevertheless, few of the older women also talk about their job proudly as it does serve as
an independent source of income through which they feel they contribute to household expenses and building a secure future for their children.

**Conclusion**

Space, as generally perceived, is not just a static entity to be to be occupied, but should be viewed in the context of time, as space–time, and as a dynamic concept that comes from changing social interrelations. Since social relations involve various changing configurations of power and meaning, spaces are also constantly evolving configurations of power. The lived experience thus becomes the intersectionality of spaces, each of which may be perceived differently by different individuals. The attempt to denote spaces and places as fixed and with boundaries is an attempt to stabilise their meanings and understanding. These definitions can be challenged by questioning the particular boundaries or, as Massey (1994) points out, by challenging the entire framework of understanding space as fixed and bounded itself. This is important for realising that spaces are not always natural or universal, they may be entirely manufactured, and also to resist the imposition of meaning on spaces that makes them rigid and closed off to the multiplicity of meanings that people attribute to them. Such an understanding of space, or more specifically, the workspace, is useful for understanding how women engage with them.

As an example, this particular workspace being considered non-traditional by virtue one’s gender being in the numerical minority, or the relationship between gender and the workspace, is not a factor actively discerned by any of the respondents. On being directly asked about it, everyone agrees that the job may be a tough one for women or that it was odd initially to work amongst so many men, but the job’s non-traditional nature is not of particular significance. Almost all the respondents spoke about having gotten used to the job to overcome the conscious awareness of its unconventional nature, even though it might be perceived in that manner by external observers.

Gender as a category itself is not associated with influencing the workspace, and wherever the existence of gendered differences in experiences is acknowledged, it is talked of in terms of a general social inequality. The experience of the workspace for each woman then is a combination of factors beyond her control, aspects of which can be shaped to an extent through conscious or subconscious action. For reasons such as financial compulsions, the instinct for self-preservation and sheer commitment to the job, and values at an individual level around the appropriate role of women, these individual
women have construed the workspace in a manner that is most suited to them. Whether or not this interaction with the workspace and its construction within a particular individual understanding entails any positive changes for these individuals is debatable, but each such experience redefines the workspace and its non-traditional nature.

While their individual perseverance is no doubt commendable, the lack of recognition of certain kinds of behaviour of passengers as sexist, the problem of lack of toilets on bus routes or separate resting rooms in their depots or the scrutiny of these women’s relationships with their male colleagues as a specifically gendered problem inhibits the potential for collectivisation of demands to make their workspace more women friendly. Instead these women choose to adjust and adapt in whatever manner possible, and stress on the need for individual resolve, determination and self-sacrifice to work well. Hulme (2006) in her study of women making the transition from pink collar to blue collar jobs in Canada shows that these women had a tendency to “de-gender” the workplace, i.e., they viewed their success at their jobs as a consequence of individual choices, skill and determination and did not identify any structural barriers they might have faced in entering male-dominated spaces because of their gender. This was despite the fact that many of their problems at the workplace and their choices were actually shaped as a result of their gender.

While these individual women may act as role models for other individual women, the author concludes that isolated women in isolated workspaces, who have chosen to conform and adapt to workplaces so as to undermine the significance of their gender identity as a crucial factor, will not have any major implications for change in the highly resistant sex-segregated workplaces that currently exist and the systematic barriers they create for both men and women wishing to enter such non-conventional occupations.

While the respondents do not consciously associate or identify any gendered aspect to their jobs, their sheer commitment to their work and responsibilities allows them to find avenues to overcome whatever sexist behaviour they might encounter, whether it is in direct forms of speaking up against misbehaviour or simply in adjusting to their problems to minimise its effects. A distinction needs to be made here between overt and covert forms of feminist resistance. As Nielsen and Waldrop (2015) explain, overt feminism involves an active mobilisation of people, with clear intentional goals of subverting patriarchal practices, while covert feminism need not have any such goals and is often carried out through individuals navigating through their own perceptions and experiences.
Covert practices can be said to be a spontaneous expression of human agency within the constraint of overarching structures. The kinds of avenues, overt or covert, available to women from different socio-economic settings will differ. Hence women opting for an unconventional job, even if it is due to financial constraints, and overcoming barriers they encounter in sub-conscious ways can be seen as an example of a covert form of resistance. While the women conductors themselves do not give too much importance to these practices, they are perceived externally by many women as figures of inspiration, as is clear from their interaction with female, and even male, passengers. One of the respondents herself made the observation, that at least for women coming from economically poorer backgrounds, simply the knowledge that there are other women engaged in this profession acts as a motivating factor to enter the field. The general sense from talking to the respondents as well as other DTC officials was that more and more women are beginning to apply for the job of a bus conductor.

However, one cannot assess yet whether an increase in the number of women in this profession would be sufficient to eliminate gender-specific discrimination. As Zimmer (1988) points out, there is much literature that attributes the problems and barriers faced by women in non-traditional workplaces to their numerical minority or their “token” status. She, however, observes that the concept of a gender-neutral tokenism as an explanation is inadequate since undoing tokenism by simply increasing the number of women employed in a male-dominated occupation does not necessarily eliminate inequality at the workplace. Some of the evidence cited gives examples of the differences that men in female-dominated professions face, which are not found to be as disabling as women’s experiences in non-traditional jobs, and in fact at times privilege them over other women at their workplace. The concept of tokenism precisely ignores this aspect of gender inequality, and it needs to go beyond numbers within an isolated workplace to look at the larger structural inequalities and notions of sexism that exist in society within which the occupation is embedded. It is suggested that eliminating the practice of tokenism will not significantly improve women’s occupational status at the workplace, which would require a more holistic attack on sexism in every sphere of society.

The DTC, for example, has rules in place precisely so that women working with them can be home safely before evening and can also balance housework with the job. While these are well meaning rules to encourage more women to take up the job, it might also inadvertently end up justifying the notion that women are responsible for housework or that they should not be out
after dark. Tackling such conceptions obviously require a larger and more holistic approach, but it could begin at the workplace with provisions to allow women to safely work evening shifts and actively encouraging them to do so, and providing facilities that make them feel comfortable at the depots. Instituting formal grievance redress mechanisms will be another crucial step towards this end. Aside from the construction of toilets, the additional creation of spaces such as separate resting rooms within depots would enable women to feel more at ease within the depot while not on line duty and may also offer opportunities to foster relationships and support networks through a common physical space for interaction.

References


