



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2017; 3(7): 18-20
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 07-05-2017
Accepted: 08-06-2017

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Gendered practices and bureaucracy in India

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Abstract

Why study gender and work among clerks? There is scarce research on the influence of gender at the workplace in the context of bureaucratic organization in India. The central question of the thesis is that how gender affects the working life of clerks. Clerks constitute a part of the bureaucracy, specifically, the lower bureaucracy. Clerks are people who maintain records and files in offices. The fieldwork was conducted at two field-sites – Director's office in an Agricultural Institute and the Branch Office of the Ministry of Finance.

A bureaucracy is perhaps the clearest expression of a hierarchical and formal organization. The study of bureaucracy is primarily associated with Max Weber (1978). The article illuminates the dominant gendered practices intertwined as gender and bureaucracy as they emerge in conversation analysis with clerks and their seniors at both field-sites in my study.

Keywords: gender, work, bureaucracy and clerks

Introduction

This study of "Gender and Work: A Study of Clerks in Government Offices" is the title of my PhD thesis. It is an ethnographic study. The central question of this study is to investigate the impact that gender has at work in relation to clerks in government offices. Therefore I enquire into the lives clerks in two government offices in Delhi and their seniors and their gendered practices. I have interviewed clerks from two government offices – the Institute and the Branch Office.

A bureaucracy is perhaps the clearest expression of a hierarchical and formal organization. The characteristics of bureaucratic organization are clearly set out by Weber in his study of 'Economy and Society' (1978) [2]. Weber holds that bureaucracy affords "the highest degree of efficiency and is in this sense formally the most rational known means of exercising authority over human beings" (Weber 1978: 223) [2].

In a view that excludes Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) from consideration gender is often understood as "two fixed categories of persons – men and women – defined by biology" (Connell 2006: 838) [1]. Gendered relations, in this mainstream sense, are found everywhere including the bureaucracy.

In this article, I will illuminate the dominant gendered practices intertwined as gender and bureaucracy as they emerge in conversation analysis in my study.

Gendered practices: promotion, transfers, pay scales, and associations

I will now turn to the analysis of bureaucratic functioning as I encountered it in the field. I will analyse it along four dimensions that are integral to the working of the bureaucracy.

Promotion

There are two ways of promotion – seniority and departmental examination. Gender biases are not prevalent in terms of promotion in government offices because the clerks are promoted either through departmental exams or in accordance with their seniority.

For each employee, an Annual Progression Report (APR) is prepared by their seniors. One can prevent an employee from getting a promotion by giving him a poor Annual Progression Report (APR). In the Institute, a female Chief Finance and Accounts officer (CFAO) held that "if the employee's image is not good in the eyes of the senior, then the senior can make bad comments in the particular employee's Annual Progression Report (APR). But, it rarely happens".

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In conversation with the Chief Accounts Officer (CAO) of the Branch Office, I came to know that there is a Departmental Promotion Committee (DPC) for every post. For the process of promotion to begin, an Annual Progression Report (APR) is prepared for every employee by their seniors. The CAO observed:

“Whatever work a person does is annually recorded. Grades are given by seniors. This report is read by the employee concerned. Earlier, it was confidential and was known as the Annual Confidential Report (ACR)”.

Next, the seniority level is checked and the number of vacant posts is determined. There is no gender bias here, again. But promotion prospects varied for different categories of employees such as Tax Assistants, Hindi Translators and Stenographers (Group C), Inspectors (Group B non-Gazetted) and Superintendents (Group B Gazetted) in the Branch Office. Promotions are not evenly distributed because these depend on the number of vacancies. A Hindi Translator observed:

“Promotion is not given at regular intervals. There is stagnation. At the Board level, people are not interested in giving promotions to the Hindi section”.

A Stenographer stated: “I am not satisfied with the system of promotion because earlier the time-limit for a promotion was five years, but now it is ten years. Earlier batches have been promoted and we are not”. She had joined in 2007 and had completed eight years in the department. She was unhappy with the merging of employees from Group C and D into Group C.

If the employees have completed ten years of their service in government, then they are given what is called a Modified Assured Career Progression (MACP). This means that if an employee is not given a promotion, she can still avail the benefit of financial upgradation.

What this account of promotions showed up was the lack of uniformity with regard to promotions among different categories of employees. There were frequent time delays which caused dissatisfaction among government employees.

Transfers

In government offices, there are various grounds for transfers such as medical grounds, spouse grounds, inconvenience, and children’s studies and as punishment. Transfers are also made subsequent to promotion. Transfer orders are given from above. There are meetings held and seniors take decisions regarding transfers.

Is a gender bias discernible in transfers? A Chief Finance and Accounts Officer (CFAO), Mrs. Shanti said that:

“Women Clerks are privileged, as compared to men. Women are not given outstation posts due to family responsibilities. If women are asking for equality, then they should work like the men. Men are discriminated here when it comes to transfers”.

Here Shanti’s approach towards her staff was equal in terms of men and women. She thought that women clerks are given undue advantages as compared to men in government offices.

According to a male Assistant, “men cooperate...they take transfers but women prefer to stay here in the Institute...and senior officers also let women have this benefit”.

In the Branch Office, employees up till the rank of an Inspector can apply for a transfer to the Inter-Commissionerate Transfer (ICT) after completing two years of a probation period and passing the confirmation exam. Those employees who have joined the department through the SSC are required to pass the confirmation exam within a time-span of two years.

It is mainly women who apply for transfers on what are called ‘spouse ground’, I was told. There was one such employee I met who had asked for a transfer on ‘spouse grounds’. She was a woman Hindi Translator seeking a transfer from Ahmedabad to Delhi. She applied for a transfer when she saw a vacant position. Both husband and wife now work in the same department. Her husband is the Superintendent. They got married via a matrimonial website. This indicates that marital alliances occur between Group B Gazetted and Group C officers.

In the Branch Office, the ratio of men to women is 10:3. Several men, however, were away on field postings, raid groups, and border postings. Here, I came across women Senior Tax Assistant (STA) who chose not to opt for promotions for the post of Inspector because it would have led to more field jobs, raids and border postings, which were perceived as men’s work. So women preferred to opt for the post of Deputy Office Superintendents (DoS) on promotion since it entailed administrative work in the office.

Apparently, there is a gender difference at work when it comes to transfers. Men feel that women often get the benefit on this count. At the Institute, women did not take outstation transfers and even seniors allowed them this advantage. In the Delhi Zone, most of the Administrative Officers (AO) in the Branch Office were women which meant that women wanted to stay in the State where they were residing. As there were more men in the Branch Office, they were deputed for raids, field and border postings. Women were sometimes saved from transfers because of family reasons but the men claimed that they too had families. Government service rules and policies, it was often claimed by men employees belonging to Group C, Group B Gazetted and non-Gazetted was pro-women.

Pay Scales

Pay scales were a recurring topic of conversation in the lives of clerks in government offices. Assistants in the Institute were not happy with their grade pay. According to them, “the grade pay of Assistants at the Institute is Rs. 4200 and the grade pay of Assistants at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is Rs. 4600. ICAR is the governing body and Institute is one of the units of ICAR. The nature of job is same but there is a difference in the grade pay”.

A young male assistant pointed out that:

“The gap between the grade pay of Assistants at the ICAR and the Institute will be reduced by the Seventh Pay Commission. But after some time, the grade pay of ICAR Assistants will be increased because ICAR wants to maintain the difference.

Since ICAR is the dominating body, it wants to have an upper hand”.

Many employees in the Branch are not content with the pay scales. A Male Tax Assistant said that:

“I am not paid according to my efficiency and output. I want to have an enhancement in my pay scale. I was working with the SBI earlier as a customer assistant in Kolkata and I earned Rs. 16000 per month. I came to the Branch Office as I thought that I will earn more here and that it is a good department, but I do not have the same passion for work that I used to have in the earlier job. The work culture here is not encouraging. I am trying for a Probationary Officer (PO) position in a bank.

The Branch Office appears to be glorious from the outside but the inside story is different”.

The Role of Associations

There were associations of employees at all levels of government employment though the level of participation varies. The role of associations was to deal with grievances related to pay revision, transfer postings, housing, and Departmental Promotion Committees (DPC). The members of these associations were office employees and, a small amount was contributed towards their functioning from the salaries of those who were its members. An association, however, could not take a matter to court and it is an individual who had to file a case if he/she faced any problem.

Assistants at the Institute believed that “the actions taken up by Union are of minor importance to the welfare of the employees”. Most of the employees in the Branch Office were not aware of such associations.

The role of associations or unions was not very strong in most government offices. But associations were a form of relieving stress as it is a body that catered to the collective grievances of employees. It puts some pressure on the superiors by raising issues related to the service matters of the employees.

Conclusion

For Bureaucracy to be understood we should see it both as an organization in itself and in relation to the wider society. Bureaucratic or formal organizations are best described by Weber (1978) ^[2] as hierarchical in nature, where power and authority is vested in the hands of superiors. There are commands to be obeyed by the subordinates, with a commitment to the conduct of office in accordance with rules and regulations, an appointment, fixed salaries of employees and pensions for the retired employees. Within a bureaucracy, officials are required to keep secrecy. Bureaucracy laid profligate emphasis upon hierarchy which results in bureaucratization.

When viewed in relation to wider society, we obtain an idea of how bureaucracy works in practice. The gendered practices in the government offices reveal that the promotion system in the bureaucracy does not function uniformly. Gender biases were prevalent in transfers and difficult outstation postings were allotted largely to men. This policy proved to be pro-women because of their lack of acquiescence to such transfers and postings except the case of a woman Hindi Translator who opted for transfer on spouse grounds. Some women who were overqualified for the lower grade posts settled for lower aspirations rather than be transferred. In government offices, this was

especially striking with women clerks. The vertical sex segregation of occupation was noticeable in the Institute where women were missing from the top positions.

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