

**THE PRIVATE SPHERE OF WOMEN
WORKING IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
SECTOR: A STUDY IN URBAN KOLKATA**

SYNOPSIS OF THE THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
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Synopsis:

The study is done under the fellowship program offered by Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata in association with the Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University. This study is the culmination of 6 years of research with 155 women, married and working at the corporate sector in an attempt to arrive at the understanding of their private sphere and the way to strike the work-life balance despite being in a job that lacks the predictive 9 to 5 work schedule. The reasons that prompted me to undertake the study are manifold- the rise of the information technology sector in Kolkata, so much so that every second person in my residential area turned out to be a corporate worker; this intrigued me to look into the corporate sector not from the work/labour perspective rather focus on the way work is getting embedded in daily life and within the family. It is rhetorical that corporate sector has ushered new 'corporate culture' or a gradual seeping of a way of living which in contrast with the public sector jobs. Quinn and Cameron (2011) have delineated four types of corporate cultures:

- **Clan** oriented cultures are family-like, with a focus on mentoring, nurturing, and "doing things together."
- **Adhocracy** oriented cultures are dynamic and entrepreneurial, with a focus on risk-taking, innovation, and "doing things first."
- **Market** oriented cultures are results oriented, with a focus on competition, achievement, and "getting the job done."
- **Hierarchy** oriented cultures are structured and controlled, with a focus on efficiency, stability and "doing things right."

Each company has its own set of values and a quick scan of some corporate office in Kolkata will actually reveal that these values are made tactile by tactically printing them out and framing them on the wall to help the workers internalize them. A percolation of this new value system has also affected the life choices of those working at the corporate sector. The stress on efficiency and time saving techniques have made the IT sector lucrative in the eyes of those who are getting used to fast paced lifestyle. The obvious mixing of capitalism and consumerism along with IT hub has reinforced the 'speed' in the lifestyle and giving the youth a channel to escape the 'repetitive' works that existed prior to the rise of the IT sector. My first foray into the field apparently proved this to be true since the percentage of IT workers above the age of 55 or 60 is rather negligible and

this phenomenon is not susceptible to vary with gender of the worker concerned. Upon enquiry the reason for the absence of the senior or lack of importance attached to seniority could be unearthed, which has been described in great details in the thesis.

The main focus of the thesis is to provide a descriptive understanding of the private sphere of the women working at the corporate sector in urban Kolkata. The unit of analysis considered for the study is married women, with or without children (preferably with children) and working at the firm in the position which is above the position held by the call centre employees. The rationale for keeping the call centre employees out of the study is because majority of them are young, unmarried, fresh graduates, who join work as a source of easy pocket money than as a way to further their professional inspiration. The majority of sample thus selected for study turned out to be data analysts. The respondents have been chosen using the combination of judgemental, quota and snowball of the non-probability variant of sampling method. The data have been collected using a combination of structured questionnaire and unstructured interview schedule. Premised on the applicability of the mixed method, the thesis combines the qualitative and quantitative approaches to research under the enveloping epistemology of pragmatism. Pragmatism amalgamates the scientific approach and ideas and believes that knowledge should be put to practical use. Hence pragmatism qualifies as the umbrella philosophy of the mixed method approach that unites the quantitative research with the qualitative analysis. The pragmatist approach rejects the idea of dualistic epistemology and stresses on the fact that human beings are not passive observers rather knowledge arises out of the survival adaptation they make in this world that results in active transformation of the surrounding. Any knowledge is the product of interaction that agents have with the structures they are embedded in and that very knowledge becomes 'instrumental' in guiding the future interactions and relationships. Corporate women, being the first generation workers become the perfect source for the knowledge creation and applied practices that can be emulated by the future workers. This is an attempt to juxtapose the women as labors and women as homemakers and the inherent contradictory forces generated by these two roles. Two theoretical poles form the backbone of the study- structuration and feminism. As has been pointed out in Structuration theory by Anthony Giddens in his *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (1986), that there exists a dialectical relationship between agents and structures where the former has the capability to create, alter or modify the latter and vice versa. Structuration theory amalgamates 'a sophisticated version of

functionalism and a naturalistic conception of sociology' (p-xiv). Structuration deals with the interplay of the agents and the structures and how one affects and modifies the other in a social setting. The 'structuredness' of the structure can be debunked in a social setting by the agents embedded in that setting. The term 'structure' in the thesis is used not only to refer to the spatial quality of a space or a tangible physical place but also to the relationships, interaction and patterns of behavior that impart the qualities to a particular setting. The presence of women in a patriarchal corporate setting is an attempt to move past the projected invisibility in a male domain. The study amalgamates structuration with the feministic understanding of the public/private dichotomy and the attempt on the part of the women to negate the dichotomy to make the space ungendered and fluid. The 'agent' 'structure' interplay and the resultant alteration in the social setting have been backed with the feminist's understanding of the category 'agent'. The study also establishes a distinction between the agency and empowerment and how the presence of the former does not guarantee the simultaneous presence of the latter. The study attempts to understand the choice rhetoric within the context of the private sphere. This problem could have also been approached and explained with the assistance of the theory of role strain, which can be undertaken by the future researchers. The main objectives of the study are:

- i. Understanding the private sphere of the married corporate women, especially the gender roles in a two-job family, the way these women experience their everyday surrounding and the way they strike their work-life balance in a demanding job-home scenario, especially after child birth.
- ii. The study also highlights the problems faced by these women in transcending the spheres and their coping strategies.
- iii. Conceptual categories like 'choice' and 'agency' has been explained in the context of the corporate women and an attempt has been made to refrain from equating financial independence and 'empowerment'. Cogent arguments have been presented to explain that choices are value laden but these values are 'taught' or are 'internalized' that guide the overall decision making capability of the women, be it corporate or otherwise. The objective is to find out whether with the change in spheres the agency and empowerment get altered and subtracted from each other. The study also criticizes the propensity on the part of the economists to explain the private

sphere and internal strategies with the help of game theory by presenting the counterview that decision making in the private sphere is much complicated. In a game involving two genders the probability of similarity of choices available to both to make informed decisions is rather low.

- iv. The wider objective of the study is to negate the age old public/private dichotomy by busting myths related to existing gender segregation and spaces. It is premised on the idea that only mean to un stall the stalled revolution is to do away with the spatial segregation and gendering and hierarchizing of jobs. 'Fluidity of space' refers to the intermingling of the elements of both the spheres that eats into the apparent 'structuredness' of a sphere; where space can be conceptualized as the continuum. The most important has been the structural change in the family with the rise of the IT sector and the subsequent urban conurbation associated with it.

The chapterisation of the thesis has been done in keeping with the theme and the above mentioned objectives in mind. The first chapter lays out the overall theme, along with the researcher's introduction to the study. The chapter reveals the author's rationale and rhetoric behind selecting the topic. The chapter also introduces the readers to the various aspects of the thesis and what to expect in the subsequent chapters.

Review of Related Literature forms the second chapter. The existing relevant literature has been covered, though there is a whole repertoire of knowledge to be unearthed when feminism, spatial analysis, globalization and corporate culture are combined. The sheer volume of the works to be reviewed prompted me to add literature review as a separate chapter all together. The chapter discussed the relevant works on the topic along with an explanation of how this study adds to the existing body of knowledge. The corporate sector being a recent addition to the urban Kolkata work culture and the involvement of the women in the corporate work being at a budding state, there is rather limited number of works that combine corporate work and married women.

The third chapter *Rise and Rise of the Corporate Sector- Tracing the Rise and Growing Influence of the IT Sector in India with special reference to Kolkata* gives a detailed account of the rise of the IT hub in India in general and Kolkata in particular. The revenue generated by the IT sector in India shows an upward surge economically but sociologically the effect on the IT culture in India is not negligible either. The chapter outlines the growth of Nabadiganta (covers the whole sector v in Kolkata, known as the

industrial area) and its impact on the employers, the chapter also discusses the introduction and proliferation of the corporate culture and how it separates the IT work from the public sector jobs.

The fourth chapter suggestively titled *Research Methodology* sums up the stages of doing the research which includes the way a conceptual framework is turned into an empirical one. Research methodology introduces the readers to the methodological paradigm, the choosing of the method and the rationale behind sticking to the particular method of doing research, the theoretical perspectives, modes of sampling used, the field survey and the problems faced during the overall process of data collection. This chapter will definitely provide a guideline for the potential researchers who want to replicate the study or conduct similar researchers in the same field.

From the fifth chapter to chapter seven, data collected through the fieldwork have been analyzed and presented. The fifth chapter *Situating Work within the Family*, is in actuality the first chapter based on the empirical study of the 155 women working at the corporate sector that corresponds to the first objective of understanding the private sphere of those who have consciously chosen to continue working even after the maternity sabbatical. The chapter is descriptive that gives a glimpse of the scenario of the corporate women, their family, their relationships and their aspirations. The chapter also deals with the work-life balance of these women and how the balance has shaped their identity and agency.

The sixth chapter *Corporate Women and Public/Private dichotomy: Problems, Solutions and Modifications* is a take on the problems faced by the corporate women in striking the work-life balance, the conflicting demands of both the spheres and how the women are handling the problems which is in turn modifying the spheres. This chapter is an analysis of the spaces frequented by women and how these spaces are transforming overtime. This chapter will give an idea of the emerging forms of family in urban Kolkata as a result of proliferation of IT hub in the outskirts leading to urban conurbation. The chapter discusses the various reasons for the structural-functional changes in the family of which the rise of two-job couples is one. Inspired by the latest work of Husain and Dutta (2014) this chapter combines game theory with sociological analysis where the former is an attempt to provide a solution to the problematique discussed by the latter. The problems faced by the women in both the spheres have been discussed to arrive at a holistic understanding.

Empowerment, Agency and Constraints: A Glimpse of the Gender Socialization and 'The Culture of Adjustment', the seventh chapter of the thesis introduces the researcher to the detailed discussion of the concepts like empowerment, agency with the introduction of the newly coined culture of adjustment after drawing the similarity with Lewis' subculture of poverty. Empowerment and Agency have always been discussed within the context of women's right but this chapter analyses the two concepts within the spatial context i.e, how these concepts are applied in the both public and private spheres along with the constraints women face in the daily realization of them. The chapter also tries to understand the ontological problem of situating empowerment and agency within the culture of adjustment, the latter being so strongly ingrained within the fabric of the society. The attempts have also been made to understand the concepts in the context of corporate culture in urban Kolkata. To highlight the inherent discrepancy between the theoretical meaning attached to the two concepts and the practical constraints involved in realizing the same, the narratives of the chosen 5 women have been added to impart authenticity to the study and to help readers understand the real life situation.

The eighth chapter, the concluding chapter, *Public/Private Dichotomy and the Stalled Revolution* is the last chapter that is based on the empirical study of 155 women. Keeping the theme of the study in mind, the chapter sums up the repercussion of the movement of women between spaces and also discusses the lack of reciprocal involvement of the men in the private sphere. The chapter attempts to provide of the typology of the women working at the corporate sector in Kolkata; typology premised on the combination of the effort and attitude of the women towards work-life balance. The typology is not exhaustive or mutually exclusive, thus proving room for the future scholars to make modifications to it. 'Stalled Revolution' made its appearance first in the work of Hochschild and Machung (1989); this chapter tries to analyze the probability of applying the same term in the context of two-job families in Kolkata. The emerging fluidity of the public/private dichotomy has been discussed along with debunking of the notion of 'private' or 'privacy' when one tries to situate work in family or vice versa. Inspired by the saying that 'home is more dangerous than street at night', this chapter extends tacit statistical proof to it by showing that the dichotomy is farcical in actuality. Two categories of crime have been taken into consideration to arrive at the statistical analysis, one committed in the private sphere like domestic violence and one committed in the public like sexual harassment at work place. Then a t-test has been

done to arrive at the conclusion which is explained in details in the chapter. Certain crimes have been deliberately kept out of the purview of the dichotomization due to the inability to ascertain the spatial nature of the crime committed.

The questionnaire used to collect data and the tabulation of data based on the questionnaire have been presented as Appendix A and Appendix B respectively in an attempt to provide a more holistic view of the work. The process of field work has been colossally enriching experience for me as a researcher. For the last 6 years, I have not only collected data but ‘lived’ the life of the corporate women in my penchant to understand the nuances. I extend my gratitude to all my respondents who have spontaneously assimilated me in their life and encouraged me by providing unrestrained information, out of which only a tiny fraction of the relevant parts could be accommodated in the academic research.

This study can be categorized as a pure research rather than an applied research. Pure research aims at scientific understanding of the phenomenon and adding to the body of knowledge which guides the future applied research which is mainly concerned with providing solutions to any practical problem. This understanding of the work-life balance of the women working at the corporate sector, especially the problems they encounter after the childbirth will definitely help the potential women workers to chart out the course of action and organizations to come up with policies that will cater to the need of the workers since their problems have a direct effect on their productivity. A successful work-life balance is an imperative, but it will be a gendered idea if this balance is demanded only from the women. A gendered idea of child rearing reinforces the public/private dichotomy by placing it within the purview of private. This in turn affects the productivity of the women workers who try hard to make their presence felt in the public. Hence, the study is an attempt to show that with the proactive involvement of the men and the organizations, by unstalling the ‘stalled revolution’ and by moving past the idea that private is ‘safe’ hence private is women, that the spaces can be made fluid and degendered for both the genders to access and a perfect work-life balance can be struck.

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