

## NGOs as employers: Plight of unorganized women employees

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### Abstract

Non Governmental organizations (NGOs) form the basis for management of Social Welfare services in India. Many of them have been vehicles of social change. 'NGO as employer' is an arena which is hardly ever focused on. The current article attempts to find out the occupational problems of women working in NGOs and seeks to suggest remedies for the same. It is noted that, NGO sector employ a good number of women as employees in their respective organizations. Women working in Grassroots level NGOs face lot of troubles including lower wages, multi tasking, work pressure, social problems etc. (Ahmad, 2002). The study tries out to bring out an account of such hurdles faced by Women NGO employees through two case studies. Beyond the values which the social work profession speaks for, it has to be aware of the plight of its own professionals. This indeed, is the essential epitome of this study.

**Keywords:** non-governmental organizations, NGO employees, economic exploitation, job stress, gender bias

### 1. Introduction

The Nonprofit sector of India contributes essentially to the maintenance of social security measures in our country. This sector constitute Child care Centers, Night shelters for vulnerable groups, Old age homes, Correctional settings, Administration of Community development programmes, Women welfare, Free legal aid to needy, Relief services, Volunteer support etc. Such a vast sector employs a hefty number of employees, chiefly women. These women mostly form the field staff of thousands of community level programmes in the region. Unfortunately, a lion share of these employees fall into the category of unorganized labourers. Social work being an established profession needs to harden the foot while considering the working condition of fellow social workers.

The present study is a brief enquiry concerning the work conditions and related problems faced by the women employees of NGO sector with the help of two case studies. The subjects were selected from two diverse grassroots level NGOs which the author felt to be representing typical cases which would essentially help to substantiate the points discussed in this study.

### 2. Statement of the problem

Recent Reviews indicate that women employed in the NGO sector face a variety of problems ranging from Wage problem to Sexual harassment. It is a ominous fact that most of the NGO workers in India especially a large number of women employed in Grass root level NGOs fall under the purview of Unorganized sector. Typical problems in unorganized sector are also reflected through the lives of these NGO employees. The Social Work Professional values are being eroded at many organizations especially at the regional context. Ironically the people who advocate for employee rights

themselves are deprived of them.

The current study with the help of two case studies tries to find out the problems related to occupation of the NGO employees.

### 3. Methodology

The current study is Qualitative in nature, indented to study the occupation related hurdles of women employees working in NGOs. Case study method has been adopted in this study. Two cases which seems to represent typically women employees in Grass root level NGO in India were selected using purposive sampling technique. The case studies involved in-depth interviews based on a semi structured open ended interview schedule. Through the analysis of cases, few conclusive remarks are drawn based on the commonality of themes.

### 4. Objectives of the study

1. To know about the working conditions of women employed in NGOs.
2. To identify the wage payment status of women employed in NGOs.
3. To identify whether any sort of gender bias exist in NGOs under study.
4. To explore whether women employed in NGOs experience any sort of work pressure.

### 5. Case studies

#### 5.1 Case-1

Swathi is a Social work employee working in a rural development organization. She is a Graduate in Social Work and is holding the position of Field coordinator at the NGO. Swathi starts her day by 9.30 AM in the morning which may extend up to 8 or beyond 8 PM at night. Low salary is the key

problem faced by NGO workers, as per the views of Swathi. It is not only this organization, the organizations in which Swathi was previously employed with, offered even meagre salary than this. She has been working for two years and is paid a fixed Salary of rupees Twelve thousand per month. This salary is fixed and it does not have any divisions like basic pay, allowances etc. Another major complaint by Swathi is that the salary is not dispersed not certainly in the first week of the month. Money management is definitely a trouble for Swathi. She is single and is living in a working women's hostel. A fraction of her salary needs to be paid for her food and accommodation. She says "At last nothing is spared, our health gets deteriorated for the whole day's drudgery, my mother is a widow, I struggles to support her at home." The organization have a very good infrastructure and celebrates anniversaries and general body meetings with much pomp and extravagance. But while considering the condition of employees it is worse as per the observations of Swathi. Another noted factor is that the workers can take a maximum leave of three days in a month, beyond which the salary of the employee will be cut. Three leaves per month is the only benefit which Swathi gets, but for this also a prior permission must be sought through and leave would be granted only in cases where the employer feels comfortable with.

Swathi's job requires a lot of travelling. However she can claim a maximum of Travel allowance of thousand five hundred rupees per month beyond which she has to bear herself. Swathi's work involves a lot of travel where she finds difficult to carry her lunch with her. She often has to dine outside in restaurants outside which indeed increases monthly expenses. Apart from the basic salary she does not receive any other benefits from the employer including provident fund or gratuity. Swathi's employment is restricted to the end of the project in which she is employed in. She says "If we work and die, there won't be anyone to see but we continue our work with the conviction that we are doing good to the society" Swathi says that women are the worst sufferers. At times she has noted that more women are employed in the field work level, with the perception that women have to be paid lesser than men. Swathi has the opinion that not only in wage payment, but right from the level of administration there is a Gender Disparity existing in NGOs. She quotes incidents where men were chosen instead of experienced women while sending them for study tours or tasks which needs long travel. Women are usually not preferred for attending such events.

Also Swathi is given a wide range of other responsibilities in the NGO office other than the field activities. She complains that she works under severe work pressure.

## 5.2 Case-2

Here we find the experiences of another professional social worker, Deepthi who is working as a counsellor at a counselling centre. She got placed under the same field work agency in which she did her internship during her Master's programme in Social Work. Her work starts at 10 AM in the morning and ends at 7.30 PM. After being employed, she was made to work as a trainee for about six months. The Payment at that time was nominal i.e rupees thousand five hundred per month. Deepthi agreed to this plan, aspiring for a better career growth at her vicinity. The NGO had a very good name in the

public which really attracted her to sustain as an employee there. The time of training, was one of worst periods in the life of Deepthi as explained by her. She had to struggle a lot to manage her daily expenses. By end of the training she got married, but continued her job. It was difficult for her to travel by taking two buses to reach the counselling Centre. She was then upgraded to a regular counsellor of the organization and the salary was fixed to rupees six thousand per month. She says "As a fresher, the social work jobs offer meagre payments, we have to struggle for years in order to attain a sense of stability" The salary which Deepthi receives is not structured. It is six thousand, fixed!

After working for few months, Deepthi noted that there is always irregularity in payment of monthly salary. The salary is paid through cheque in uncertain intervals. Deepthi finds it difficult to continue in the organization with irregular payment. The institution offers partial payment at times. Also it is noted that no other benefits other than salary is paid to the employees. She was convinced by the employers that there would be certain incentives in payment if she could organize some programmes like seminars, Conferences etc in the organization. She struggled hard to organize few events which with lots of pain were realized. However despite all these, there is no improvement in the pay structure of the employee. The organization has a very good infrastructure, vehicle and other facilities and receives funds from the central as well as state governments, but the conditions of employees remains pathetic. Deepthi also complaints that she is forced to sign documents stating that she is receiving a higher salary. There are issues of transparency in wage payment in the NGO. This organization employs only women employees. In the eyes of the management women are the most effective counsellors who have the capacity to manage complex cases through emotional treatment and compassion. According to Deepthi, men won't work at such a meagre salary. Deepthi is planning to quit working in the organization. Apart from this Deepthi is forced to take up many office responsibilities including cleaning the office premises at times. All these make Deepthi sad about her working conditions.

## 6. Analysis and findings

The first case represents a typical case of NGO employee employed in a community development organization. Her salary is fixed and she is given a variety of responsibilities other than her normal roles in the NGO. She complains that she is working under severe work pressure.

The second case was specially noted for the extreme economic exploitation which she underwent during her training period. She says that the NGO do not employ men due to its gender based thoughts and may be they use it as a smokescreen for their policy of paying less to women employees through irrelevant arguments.

By analysing the above cases, the following common themes emerged:-

### 6.1 Low wages

It is evident from the above mentioned cases that the wages paid to the women workers in NGOs are very nominal. This indeed is not sufficient enough to support the daily activities of the worker. Also it is noted that the wages are fixed and

there is less or no improvements in the salary for a long time. While considering the amount of work accomplished by these employees, the major occupational trouble identified in this study is low wages.

### 6.2 Irregularity in payment

The payments paid to the employees were on irregular dates. The second case denotes the fact that partial payments are paid at times. As the payment is not regular it leads to higher financial constraints backed up by low wages.

### 6.3 Multi-tasking

The women staffs of the NGOs working on different projects are given additional responsibilities. Most often other than the prescribed field work, office responsibilities are also entrusted on the employees. The second case describes that she has to even clean the office premises at times. This multi-tasking adds up to the burden of Women employees of NGOs.

### 6.4 Irregular working hours

Usually most of the organizations have a prescribed working hour schedule. However, here the employees are made to work for long duration that is from morning to night. These irregular working hours are very difficult to cope up, especially for women to work at places where there is less security at night. Also it is specially noted that irregular working hours are not compensated with extra payments.

### 6.5 Gender bias

NGOs are not devoid of gender based discrimination. The first case complains that even though seniority and capacity wise she is superior to other men employees, she is not preferred during long travels in the name of the NGO. Also she finds discrimination in payment of salary and recruitment of professionals. The second case says that men may not be willing to work at such a lower wage in that particular organization. Gender bias is visible in both the cases.

### 6.6 Work pressure

The working hours are more than the prescribed timing in both the cases. Also they are entrusted with multiple responsibilities both in the field as well as in the office setting. This indeed creates severe work pressure for the employees.

## 7. Discussion

As mentioned in the case studies, long working hours is a major problem encountered by Women NGO Employees. In NGOs, women are expected to work for long hours starting from morning to evening. It results in disruption in their family structure (Mohyuddin & Farooq, 2015)<sup>[9]</sup>.

Under Analysis it was noted occupational stress and resultant work pressure is experienced by the NGO workers. (Barati, Arab & Masoumi, 2014)<sup>[3]</sup> through their study explains that Occupational stress is most important aspects in women's work life. Balancing work and family life has become pivotal in many societies. Pursuing vocation outside the dwelling is unusual than the traditional gender roles, and women often experience anxiety. (Burke & Mckeen, 1988)<sup>[4]</sup>.

The study by (Ahmad, 2002)<sup>[1]</sup> substantiates all the arguments dealt in this study. According to his study, the lives of

fieldworkers are problem rich, which indeed is the consequence of meager salaries, benefits, and work conditions. Good number fieldworkers live with this state of affairs as there is no other option. Among the NGOs studied by (Ahmad, 2003)<sup>[2]</sup> only one of the NGOs had efficient regulations and hours of work. NGO workers are experiencing harms including job insecurity, lack of promotions, pathetic wage structure harassment. (Siddique, 2009)<sup>[10]</sup>

The low wages was the major issue discussed in this study. (Vasan, 2004)<sup>[11]</sup> also identifies the fact that among the numerous NGOs registered and established in India large sums of money is circulated for wages and honoraria. Conversely, minimum wages, various benefits and secure working conditions are hardly ever raised in the NGO sector as the employees there are suitably termed as project staff, or part-timers or even volunteers and their wages are labeled an honorarium at times.

Gender bias was another theme which emerged from the interview of the cases. NGOs are not devoid of gender bias. (Women's Resource Centre, 2008)<sup>[12]</sup> According to study, patriarchal family systems resist women to work in NGOs. (Kakakhel, Saeed, & Gul, 2016)<sup>[6]</sup>. (Mitra & Knottnerus, 2008)<sup>[7]</sup> finds that the chief social problems of Indian society is gender discrimination. Gender is a crucial aspect while considering NGOs as workplace (Mitra, 2013)<sup>[8]</sup>.

## 8. Conclusion

Insufficient legislation and unsuccessful enforcement of safeguards to defend women workers, in terms of their working conditions are the key reason leading to contemptible situation of women workers. (Dave, 2012)<sup>[5]</sup>. A labour policy encompassing the special aspects of job at NGOs should be formulated by governments at different levels. Most often, the laws are in the paper and rarely followed. Stringent measures should be taken against the employers who break the law. Social professionals need to advocate for their own rights, this indeed is the need of the hour.

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