

Exploring the Meditating Role of Gender Equality in the link between Strong Institution and Mental Peace: A Study among Private Sector Working Women in Kerala.

Dr Mugesh P, Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce & Management, AMC- Allied Management College, Manissery, Palakkad, Kerala

Jishna V R, Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce & Management, AMC- Allied Management College, Manissery, Palakkad, Kerala

Divya C, Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce & Management, AMC- Allied Management College, Manissery, Palakkad, Kerala

Lalitha A, Assistant Professor, Department of English, AMC- Allied Management College, Manissery, Palakkad, Kerala

Abstract

Mental well- being of women in the workplace is ever more recognized as a vital aspect of organizational health, especially in the contexts where institutional strength and gender equality intersects. This study endeavors to investigate how Gender Equality (GE) mediates the relationship between Strong Institutions (SI) and Mental Peace (MP). The study was among the private sector working women in Kerala. Drawing on data collected from 450 respondents across three major districts- Thiruvananthapuram, Trissur and Kozhikode - the research seeks to understand how the psychological well-being of women in the workplace is impacted by institutional strength and workplace gender dynamics. The results affirm that the mental well-being of working women in the private sector is independently and positively influenced by both strong institutions and gender equality. Moreover, the study concludes that gender equality mediates the positive relationship between strong institutions and mental peace. It draws attention to the role of organizational gender equality practices as both a structural and psychological shield in the workplace. The findings of the study highlight the need for organizations to invest in drafting and executing gender equality policies to encourage a peaceful work environment for women employees.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Strong institution, Mental Peace, Women at Work Place.

1. INTRODUCTION

Workplaces serve as crucial environment that influence the well- being, productivity, and professional growth of employees, especially women in the private sector. Institutional strength plays a pivotal role in determining gender equality in the modern workforce, and mental peace among female employees. Institutional strength entails leadership effectiveness, organizational policies, workplace safety and employee support mechanism, directly influences job satisfaction and work environment (Kabeer, 2020). Gender equality as a fundamental aspect of workplace inclusivity, Gender equality ensures that women receive equal opportunities, recognition and resources compared to their male counterparts. Although, disparities in workplace dynamics often lead to causing stress, unequal treatment and affect the mental peace of working women.

In Kerala, which is known for its high literacy rates, relatively better gender development index, progressive social indicators, gender equality in the private sector remains a persistent challenge. Women in the private sector often face barriers such as glass ceiling effects, wage disparities, limited career progression, and work-life balance difficulties despite the state's socio-economic advancements. (Eapen and Kodoth, 2020). These workplace inequalities have been connected to increased psychological distress, anxiety and burnout among female employees. Studies have emphasized that institution support in the form of equal pay, anti-harassment policies, flexible working arrangements and maternity benefits can significantly contribute to reducing workplace -related stress and enhancing mental peace (Ghosh,2019). However, the extent to which private organizations in Kerala implement and enforce these policies requires further exploration.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Strong Institutions and Mental Peace

Strong institutions provide a keystone for societal secureness and mental peace by addressing structural stressors. Kaufmann et al. (2011) introduced the World Governance Indicators (WGI), to emphasize governance's role in societal well-being. According Rodrik (2000) political stability and corruption control reduce the anxieties of the public and improve mental health of the people. Helliwell et al. (2018) identified that psychological resilience and happiness closely correlates with the trust in institutions. North (1990) states that systemic uncertainties and mental strain can be reduced by institutional frameworks. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that inclusive institutions can provide neutrality and justice, influential for mental peace. The Positive Peace Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018) affirms that strong institutions mitigate stressors by improving societal smoothness. Putnam (1993) states that civic engagement and trust in governance a significant role in mental health. Foa et al. (2016) asserts that better governance reduces inequality, furnishing mental peace and societal smoothness.

Inglehart and Welzel (2005) illustrate that institutional trust improve social harmony, thereby reducing psychological anxiety. Harpham et al. (2015) express that institutional stability in under developed countries notably improves mental health outcomes. Kaufmann and Kraay (2007) highlight that strong institutions instill confidence, a crucial factor in alleviating mental stress. Mathew and Nair (2020) demonstrate how Kerala's governance framework improves mental health through inclusive policies. According to Kuruvilla and Joseph (2020) that Kerala's decentralized governance has foster societal certainty and mental well-being. Based on the literature the below hypothesis is framed:

H₁ : Strong institutions significantly contribute towards mental peace of employees

2.2 Gender Equality and Mental Peace

Gender equality plays a crucial role in assuring mental well-being, especially for working women. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) introduced by UNDP (1995) highlights the relationship between gender equity and well-being. Ely and Meyerson (2000) assert that equal workplace strategies increase psychological resilience. Schmitt et al. (2017) illustrates that lower level of anxiety and depression among women reported with higher GEM scores. According Kabeer (1999) the psychological distress can reduce with the control over resources and agency. Fraser (2009) argues that equitable governance fosters gender equality and mental well-being. Heise et al. (2019) shows that work place harassment can alleviate through gender-equitable policies.

Hossain and Kusakabe (2005) express that gender parity enhance job satisfaction and mental well-being. Bhattacharya et al. (2017) associates' gender-sensitive policies to improved psychological reactions for working women. Basu and Mukherjee (2021) exhibit that inclusive workplaces minimize stress and enhance mental health outcomes in urban India. The Positive Peace Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018) outscores that gender equality reduces societal stressors. Bianchi et al. (2012) find that equitable sharing of household responsibilities mitigate women's psychological pressures. Tesch-Romer et al. (2018) assert that European nations correlating gender equity into strategies experience higher mental well-being. Sen et al. (2020) find that Kerala's gender-supportive family policies mitigated stress and enhanced women's mental health. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H₂: Gender equality significantly contributes towards mental peace of employees

2.3 Role of Gender Equality in the Positive Influence of Strong Institutions on Mental Peace

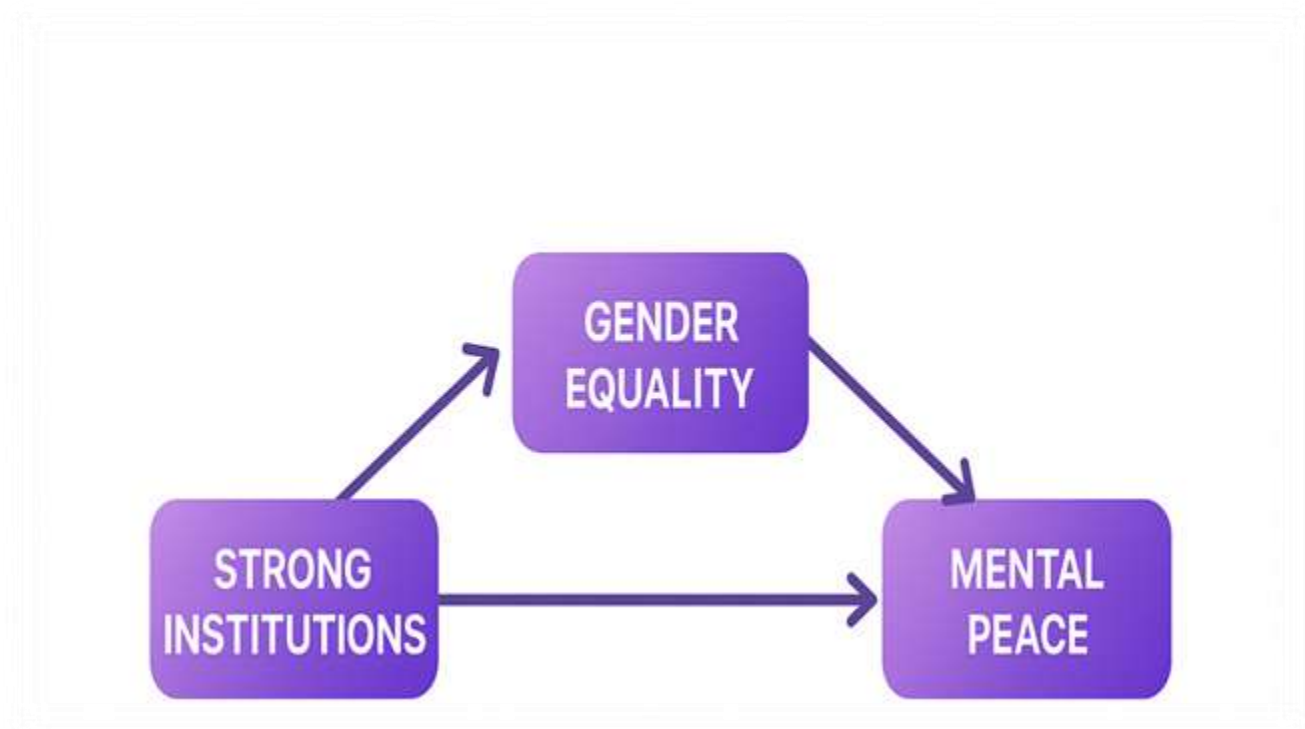
A crucial determinant of workplace inclusivity and gender equality is institutional strength. Organizations with strong institutional frameworks are more likely to implement policies that ensure equal pay, equal representation, leadership opportunities, and a safe working environment for women. Gender-sensitive policies can help mitigate discrimination, promote career advancement and create an environment where female employees feel valued and respected (Bhattacharyya and Ghosh, 2021). In contrast, workplaces with a weak institutional structure often fail to provide adequate support systems, leading to workplace stress and gender-based inequalities.

Gender equality is not just an ethical or moral issue, it has considerable psychological and professional implications. Women who perceive their workplace as supportive and fair tend to experience higher levels of job satisfaction, professional commitment and motivation. Conversely, gender -based discrimination, limited leadership opportunities, wage gaps contribute to feelings of frustration, increased stress and lower self-esteem among female employees (Kabeer, 2020). To ensure gender equality strong institutional policies addressing systemic biases prevalent in many workplaces, particularly in male-dominated industries where women often struggle for equal recognition.

Gender equality correlates the positive influence of strong institutions on mental well-being, expanding governance effect. Sen (1999) argues that institutions fostering justice and equity mitigate societal stress, improving mental well-being. Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (2018) illustrate that gender-sensitive governance enhance the mental health benefits of institutional capabilities. The GEM model (UNDP, 1995) underscores how gender equity correlates institutional strength in fostering mental well-being. Kaufmann et al. (2011) assert that gender-sensitive institutions minimize workplace stress, improving societal well-being. The Positive Peace Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018) confirms that sound governance combined with gender equality improves mental well-being. Budig et al. (2012) argues that gender-inclusive strategies improve the mental health benefits of institutional constancy. According Fraser (2009) the equitable governance has a crucial role in addressing gender-based disparities, improving mental peace. Heise et al. (2019) argues that mitigating gender-based stress within institutional frameworks significantly foster mental health outcomes. Mathew and Nair (2020) exhibit how Kerala's governance correlates gender-sensitive strategies to improve mental peace. George (2021) connects workplace equality laws in Kerala to alleviate psychological strain among working women. An OECD (2019) report assures that nations incorporating gender equity into governance see improved mental health outcomes among working populations. Tesch-Römer et al. (2018) assert that gender-sensitive institutions in Europe better mental peace through sound policies. Harpham et al. (2015) illustrate that gender equality highlighted the psychological benefits of institutional durability. On the ground of the reviews, the following hypothesis is framed:

H₃: Gender equality mediates the positive influence of strong institutions on mental peace of employees

Figure 1 Model mediating GE, SI and MP



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection and Respondent Profile

The study is empirical in nature and focused on private sector working women across three major regions of Kerala- the northern, central and South geographical area. To ensure broad representatives of respondents, Kerala was stratified into three geographical regions, and one of the prominent districts was selected from each stratum: Kozhikode (North) Thrissur (Central) and Thiruvananthapuram (South). These three districts were chosen due to their dense private sector employment and Urban workforce diversity. A multistage stratified sampling method were adopted and data were collected from women employees across various private companies in these three districts. The survey instrument comprised structured close-ended questions based on standardized scales measuring three key constructs: Strong Institutions (6 items), Gender Equality (10 items), and Mental Peace (8 items). Five-point scale were adopted in the questionnaire to evaluate all the variables. The questionnaire was first piloted with a small group of 40 respondents to ensure clarity, reliability, and content validity. Minor revisions were made based on feedback before full-scale administration. The final version of the survey was distributed using professional networks, women employee forums, and corporate contacts. 600 questionnaires were distributed among the sample units and 472 responses were received. Response rate of the data collected was 78.7% and valid response after screening for completeness and consistency was 450. Thus, the validity rate is 95.3%. The participants of the survey were grouped into three age brackets for demographic profiling – below 30 years, 30-60 year, 60 years and above. Three marital status brackets – Single, Married and others were used for classification. Industry based classification of respondents was done and grouped into four category- Finance, Information and Communication Technology, Health care and others. The diversity of these classifications and regional representation helped ensure the study's findings are robust and generalizable to the broader population of private sector women employees in Kerala.

3.2 Measures

This study investigates the mediating role of gender equality (GE) in the relationship between strong institutions (SI) and Mental Peace (MP) among private sector working women and all the constructs were conceptualized and measured using validated multi- items scales. Gender equality (GE) was measure using 10 selected variables of The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) introduced by UNDP (1995). Equal number of managerial and leadership positions, receive equal opportunities for promotions, the same access to professional training and career development, well-represented in key decision-making committees, no gender based wage gap, encouraged to participate in policy-making processes, equal access to financial benefits, involvement in budget allocation and financial decision-making, well-defined maternity and paternity leave policy and effective system for reporting and

addressing workplace harassment or discrimination are the 10 variables used to measure gender equality. Strong institutions (SI) were measured using six selected variables of World Bank's World governance indicator. The variables used to measure strong institutions (SI) are Voice and Accountability, Political Stability and Absence of Violence, Organizational Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law and Control of Corruption. Mental peace (MP) is measured using eight variable of The Positive Peace Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018). Well-Functioning Government, Sound Business Environment, Equitable Distribution of Resources, Acceptance of the Rights of Others, Good Relations with Neighbors, Free Flow of Information, High Levels of Human Capital and Low Levels of Corruption are the eight variables, Reliability of these three major constructs used in the study were measured using Cronbach's Alpha and the value are 0.843 for the construct Gender equality; 0.837 for Strong Institution and .862 for the construct mental peace. Cronbach's Alpha (Table 2) values signify the three constructs are reliable.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Nature of data was analyzed using skewness and Kurtosis. The values of Skewness and Kurtosis of GE, MP and SI given in the table 1 and indicates that data follows normal distribution. The model framed for the study is shown as figure 1. The Convergent validity of the model was assessed (Table 2) and to ensure the constructs used in the model are truly distinct from other constructs statistical test based on Fornell-Larcker Criterion (Discriminant Validity) was conducted and the results are shown in the table 3. For each set of constructs its AVE is greater than its correlations with other constructs and hence discriminant validity is ensured. To ensure whether the theoretical model is supported by empirical evidence structural equation modelling was performed and the model fit indices are exhibited in the table 4. The results of the table indicate that the model fits the observed data.

Hypotheses of the study is validated and results exhibits in the table 5 indicates that there exists a positive relation between SI and MP (p-value= 0.0223). The relation between GE and MP was also found to be significant (p- value =0.0188) (Table 5). The mediation analysis examined whether the effect of SI on MP is transmitted through GE. P value is 0.0177 and thus it is evident that the there exist a positive significant relation of mediator value. Since the p values are less than 0.05 the null hypotheses are rejected and thus the alternate hypotheses H₁, H₂ and H₃ are supported.

Table 1: Normality Test with Skewness and Kurtosis

| Constructs | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|--------------------------|----------|----------|
| Gender Equality (GE) | 0.0613 | 0.0044 |
| Mental Peace (MP) | 0.0558 | -0.3081 |
| Strong Institutions (SI) | -0.089 | -0.0426 |

Table 2 Reliability and Convergent Validity

| Construct | Cronbach Alpha | Composite Reliability | AVE (Convergent Validity) |
|---------------------|----------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Gender Equality | 0.88 | 0.9 | 0.62 |
| Mental Peace | 0.84 | 0.86 | 0.6 |
| Strong Institutions | 0.81 | 0.83 | 0.58 |

Table 3 : Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker)

| Construct | GE | MP | SI |
|---------------------|------|------|------|
| Gender Equality | 0.79 | 0.52 | 0.5 |
| Mental Peace | 0.52 | 0.77 | 0.55 |
| Strong Institutions | 0.5 | 0.55 | 0.76 |

Table 4: Model Fit Indices

| Index | Value | Acceptable Threshold |
|---------------|-------|----------------------|
| Chi-square/df | 1.88 | < 3 |
| GFI | 0.95 | > 0.90 |
| AGFI | 0.93 | > 0.90 |
| CFI | 0.97 | > 0.90 |
| TLI | 0.95 | > 0.90 |
| RMSEA | 0.045 | < 0.06 |

Table 5: Hypotheses Test Results

| Hypothesis | Path Coefficient | p-value | Result |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------|-----------|
| H1: SI → MP | 0.1452 | 0.0223 | Supported |
| H2: GE → MP | 0.1302 | 0.0188 | Supported |
| H3: GE mediates SI → MP | 0.1316 | 0.0177 | Supported |

Hypothesis is statistically significant at the 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$)

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study intended to investigate the impact of gender equality as a mediator in the relationship between strong institutions and mental peace among private sector working women in Kerala. The above three proposed hypotheses were aided in providing sound evidence for the association between studied variables. As per hypothesis 1 employee's mental health crucially depends on strong institutions. This advises that organization with broader transparency, accountability, governance and strategies encourage a work

environment conducive to psychological wellbeing of employees. In support of hypothesis-2, Gender equality was emerged as an important predictor of mental peace of workers, emphasizing that equitable treatment and equal opportunities for women are critical attributes of their mental peace in professional environment. Gender equality mediates the relationship between strong institutions and mental health is confirmed in hypothesis 3. This illustrates that strong institution has a forthright positive effect on mental peace, their eminence is exaggerated when steps were taken by institutions to promote gender equality within the institutional frameworks. The mediation impact illuminates the importance of not only building institutional strength but also indicates the need for organization to vigorously upright gender- equitable practices. These outcomes are aligned with existing literature asserting the interconnection of institutional quality, social equity and employee well-being (e.g. Ahmed & Khan, 2021; Duffy et al., 2019).

The outcomes of present study holding important theoretical and practical implications. The study, theoretically contributes to the existing growing literature on Gender, organizational behavior and mental health by pointing gender equality as a crucial psychological process by which sound institutions proliferate employee well-being. The study highlights the requirement of considering structural and social factors simultaneously to fully understand mental peace at work place setting. The results of current study highlight the necessity for policy makers, organizational leaders and human resource professionals in the private sector to ensure institutional systems while framing gender- balanced strategies and practices. Kerala is a state constantly distinguished for its modern social indices, in this context, the study highlights the importance of implementing gender fairness practices and regulations within private sector employment. The study apparent that institutional strength which leads to concrete gender equality, is vital not just for women's mental well-being but also for overall organizational productivity and societal advancement.

6. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The research was conducted among private sector working women in Kerala and thus generalization to government sector and other geographical area is not possible. Future study could explore the mediating role of gender equity in informal workplaces, government sector and other geographical areas to know how institutional strength and gender equality influences mental peace of organizations with different cultures. Same study can be repeated by including male and non- binary gender to know a broader understanding in gender dynamics in workplaces.

7. CONCLUSION

The study confirmed gender equality and strong institutions significantly contribute towards mental peace of working women. Moreover, gender equality mediates the relationship between strong institutions and mental peace of private sector working women in Kerala. The study highlights the need for private sector policy makers to implement equitable and gender balanced policies for the mental well-being of women workers.

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