

Exploring Gendered Effect of Perceived Organization Support on Self-efficacy

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Abstract: To compete in an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing marketplace, organizations are attempting to bring in varied perspectives and experiences to every management challenge by ensuring diverse representation at all levels of management. Women however continue to be under-represented in managerial positions. Recent studies have suggest that Perceived Organization Support (POS) enhances psychological empowerment amongst employees that helps them to grow in their careers. Self efficacy, a correlate of psychological empowerment that involves one's professional competence, is thus likely to play a significant role in career advancement of qualified women in organizations. Following Joan Acker (1990)'s Theory of Gendered Organizations, this research explores whether and how gender bias may still be embedded within organizational support practices like POS with respect to their impact on self efficacy amongst the managerial employees. Employing a sequential mixed methodology, data was collected in two waves. In the first phase of the study data was obtained using quantitative methods from a sample of managers (N = 294), followed by a qualitative study using in-depth interviews with 19 women professionals. The quantitative study reveals that POS impacts self efficacy of men and women in significantly different ways. Findings from the qualitative analyses draws interconnections among the intrinsic as well as socially constructed factors to make the internal mechanisms more explicit. It suggests that POS when filtered through the lens of gender identity leads to unintended effects on self efficacy and thereby lowers the sense of empowerment amongst female managerial employees. Implications of the research for both theory as well as practice are discussed.

Keywords: Perceived Organization Support, Self Efficacy, Gender Identity, Managerial Employees

1. Introduction

Diverse representation is seen to have a positive impact on society in meaningful ways and taps customer bases that were previously ignored leading to market expansion as well as a greater circle of influence (Ali M & Konrad A, 2017). Gender is one of the most visible yet largely under-represented strand of diversity that requires attention and thus organisations are under increasing pressure to enhance gender diversity in their managerial levels (Gallego & Gutierrez, 2018). Evidence is accumulating that women remain vastly underrepresented in management and major institutions in business in every country (World Economic Forum, 2015; Kossek, Su & Wu, 2017).

Studies have examined societal, family, organizational and individual characteristics as predictors of women's workforce participation and career advancement (Datta & Aggarwal, 2017; Pas et al., 2014). However, with varying theoretical explanations for these empirical findings, they have been the subject of much academic and public debate which have mostly neglected the inherently multi-layered nature of social identity involving psychological attributes (Pas et al., 2014). Recent literature review covering 28 studies revealed self-efficacy as a key personal characteristic that women professionals exhibited in their pursuit of STEM careers (Makarem & Wang, 2020).

Self-efficacy is "people's judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura 1986, p. 391). In other words, it can be defined as the perception of one's capability to use skills and knowledge to achieve goals (Heslin et al. 2017; Downes et al. 2021). Some recent studies reported a positive relationship between self-efficacy and psychological empowerment (Ruiz-Fernández et al. 2022; Azizifar et al. 2020). In particular, Ruiz-Fernández et al.'s study found a strong correlation between self-efficacy and the competence dimension of psychological empowerment. For instance, a recent study by Kumar et al. (2022) found that employee empowerment improves extra-role behaviors, such as taking charge, under conditions of high organizational support. Perceived Organization Support (POS) has long been studied as a key antecedent for self-achievement, hygiene, psychological empowerment, self-efficacy, prestige, and career satisfaction (Dose et al., 2019; Tahira et al., 2022). Drawing from Gendered Organization Theory which postulates a complex view of gender as an ongoing social construction (Acker1992), it is not clear how POS plays out for women. There is increasing evidence to suggest that women and men respond differently to POS (Thompson et al., 2020).

It therefore calls for an inquiry into the role of POS in empowering women professionals for self-achievement and therefore their self-efficacy. The present research has two main aims viz. In what way does gender play a role in the perceived organization support – self-efficacy relationship to perpetuate gender based empowerment? And how does organization support get gendered if at all, with respect to empowerment?

A sequential explanatory mixed-method research design best serves such aims. Accordingly, the first phase of this research uses quantitative methods to examine the role of gender in the relationship between perceived organization support and career motivation. In the second phase, a qualitative study explores the nature, causes and social processes that shape perceived organizational support of women managers as well as its effect on their career motivation. Lastly, through triangulation of data analysis from the two phases, a model of un-gendered organization support for nurturing empowered women managers is proposed.

2. Theoretical Overview and Hypotheses

2.1 POS and Self-efficacy

Perceived organization support (POS) can be defined as employees' general beliefs that their organization values their continued membership, is committed to provide favourable working conditions, and by signalling that the organization is concerned about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986). From the viewpoint of employees, POS mirrors the organization's respect and care for them and appreciation of their contributions (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). POS can be said to be a positive construct that give motivation to employee to work confidently and bring new and creative ideas. POS creates psychological empowerment amongst employees and motivates them to take a broader view towards the organization; that helps in enhancing employee's self-confidence as well as generate positive benefits for the organization (Tahira et al., 2022). Employees who perceive supportive work environment are intrinsically motivated and self-efficacious. Self-efficacy is the belief one has in one's capability to exercise control over events to achieve desired goals. The concept of self-efficacy is rooted in the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) which argues that the goals held by individuals are one of the primary determinants of motivation for behaviour. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy are said to be more likely to take up challenging assignments and take responsibility for personal development (Bandura, 1982). Backed by the organization, they have strong belief in their abilities to do the job effectively. They therefore choose challenging tasks and achieve them successfully. (Nikhil & Arthi, 2018). We thus hypothesize that:

Hypotheses 1: Perceived Organization Support is expected to be significantly positively related to self-efficacy.

2.2 Gender and Self-efficacy

Although men and women may show the same performance levels, they may estimate their capabilities differently (Bandura, 1997). With regard to self-efficacy, many studies have shown that this is lower for women (Sieverding & Koch, 2009; West et al., 2002), but some evidence supports that women have higher self-efficacy (Tsai & Lin, 2004). Furthermore, men and women may differ in their development of self-efficacy (Artistico et al., 2003; Chyung, 2007). Such mixed findings indicate that gender can affect self-efficacy but the relationships may be rather complex (Bausch et al., 2014). Buse et al. (2013) identified self-efficacy as one of the distinct individual factors that separated the persistent women engineers from others who opted out of the engineering workforce. In their study, women with self-efficacy were better prepared to find new assignments, deal with difficult situations, tackle tough problems, manage conflicts, and enact changes in their day-to-day work (Buse et al., 2013). Considering the fact that a large proportion of women drop out from white collared jobs by the time they reach higher levels of management, its important to understand the role that gender may be playing in terms of self-efficacy. In other words:

Hypothesis 2: Gender is expected to play an important role in formation of self-efficacy such that female managers report significantly different self-efficacy than male managers.

2.3 POS, Self-efficacy, and the Moderating Role of Gender

The research on POS mostly assumes that the felt obligation as an outcome of perceived support drives motivation, achievement and work behaviour similarly for men and women. However recent studies reveal that there is a gender difference in the effect produced by POS on work and career related outcomes (Kurtessis et al., 2015). One possible explanation on why POS seems to have a stronger impact on career and work outcomes

for men than for women is that POS assumes reciprocity and women are known to display more communal traits in fulfilling their job expectations, perhaps due to social expectations and not because of contracted obligation (Thompson et al., 2020). In other words women are expected to be communal in behaviour, without a reason while men are expected to feel obligated to reciprocate when done a favour eg. quid pro quo.

Moreover, women are said to be less ambitious and agentic than men when progressing in their chosen career, as they are typically more interested in balancing work/family domains than men (Spagnoli et al., 2020). Supportive practices at work may not support women to grow in their careers in the way they impact male managers. In other words POS might produce different effect on female managers than on male managers with respect to their empowerment and consequent career advancement. Thus, the relationship between POS and self-efficacy should be stronger among men than among women. Thus, we hypothesise a moderation model, where the relationship between POS and self-efficacy is moderated by gender. We propose that:

Hypothesis 3: Gender moderates the positive relationship between POS and Self-efficacy, such that the relationship is weaker for women than for men

3. Method

3.1 Research Context

With India emerging as an economic superpower, discussions on gender equality have assumed significant importance in recent times (Donnelly, 2015; Rath, Mohanty & Pradhan, 2016). With a population of more than 1.3 billion people, an average age of 29 years and being one of the fastest growing economies in the world, motivating, developing and retaining diverse talent in India is a complex challenge (Datta et al., 2021). The last decade or more in India has witnessed more women entering the organized labor market (Das, 2003; Haq, 2012; Jhabvala and Sinha, 2002;). However, the proportion of women leaving their job between junior to middle level is highest for India at 48 per cent, as compared to other major Asian countries (Community Business, 2011). This evidence calls for a deeper level of understanding about the impact of the support practices on career continuity and advancement of qualified women in corporate India.

Gender role theory posits that men and women face societal pressures to behave in ways consistent with their gender roles and this expectation leads both genders to adopt gender-appropriate behaviors (Kidder, 2002). Studies suggest that the paradox of family identity and career identity faced by Indian women managers at certain life-stages is a manifestation of the societal structures in India that associates women primarily with familial roles (Blake-beard, 2015). Based in this cultural reasoning, certain dimensions of culture might be more pertinent to womens' gender identity presenting an interesting context to examine the factors that have an effect on the career aspirations and advancement of Indian women managers.

3.2 Research Design

We conducted our study in two waves. In the first wave, the study sample was obtained from six large companies which were either an Indian subsidiary of an MNC or were Indian MNCs. The seven companies represented a wide array of products and services drawn from manufacturing and technology based companies which constitute a significant portion of the industry sectors in India, Altogether 294 respondents were drawn from managerial population spread across various levels of management and representing broadly all functions including sales, operations, accounts, finance and human resources. Managerial population defined those employees who had minimum bachelors degree or professional qualifications and were working in managerial roles. Originally, 300 questionnaires were distributed to respondents across the selected organizations out of which only 294 responses were usable which have been incorporated for testing the research model.

In the second wave, we interviewed 19 female managers across junior, middle and senior management levels, drawn from similar industry sectors for a better interpretation of our findings. Seven focus group discussions covering altogether 25 senior organizational leaders from the same organizations across functions and businesses, were also conducted.

3.3 Method – First Wave

3.3.1 Measures

Demographic Variables. Data on gender, age and marital status were obtained. Gender being a variable under study was coded as 1. No hypotheses have been formulated with respect to age and marital status.

Perceived Organization Support

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Moorman, Blakely, & Niehoff, 1998), we used the shortened nine-item version of Eisenberger et al.'s (1986) POS scale, which measures employee perceptions of the extent to which an organization cares about employees and values their contributions (Sample item: "Help is available from the organization when I have a problem").

3.3.2 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy was measured using an eight items scale of general self-efficacy by Chen, Gully & Eden (2001). The items were scaled from 1 is 'strongly disagree' to 5 is 'strongly agree'. Sample items were 'I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself' and 'I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges'. Alpha coefficient obtained for this scale was .86.

3.4 Results – First Wave

Data has been analysed using several statistical techniques including descriptive statistics, bi-variate correlation, t-test, hierarchical regression modelling. All the statistical techniques have been applied using SPSS 21.0 and PROCESS macros for SPSS. The total data (n = 294) was first subjected to descriptive statistics as well as correlation analysis. Descriptive statistics and results of bi-variate correlations among the study variables have been presented in **Table 1**. Composite scores of all the independent measures have been considered for this analysis. As evident from the table, there is sufficient variability in the responses on all the measures thus ruling out any concerns on social desirability.

Table 1 : Descriptive statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	Std Dev	Gender	POS	SE
Gender	0.209	0.408	-		
POS	4.703	0.722	-0.106	-	
SE	4.095	0.513	-0.025	0.203**	-

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Hierarchical linear regression was conducted on the data (n=294) to predict the dependent variable. The construct of POS was found to be significantly positively related to SE when the demographic variables were controlled for, thus supporting hypotheses 1. POS is positively related to SE ($\beta=.190$, $p<.001$), thus supporting H1.

Thereafter, for testing our hypotheses 2 we did t-test for gender on SE. We have considered two statistics in the t-test. t-test with equal variances assumed and t-test with equal variances not assumed. With respect to SE the results reveal that (significance level at 5 per cent), the t statistics with equality assumed as well as without equality state that the mean scores on this variable are not statistically different for males and females (mean difference of -0.30 on a scale of 1 to 5). Hypothesis H2 is thus rejected indicating that gender does not have any differential effect on SE as reported by the respondents.

Thereafter, using the Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macros for SPSS, the moderation effect of Gender in the relationship between POS and SE of employees was tested. The results suggest that POS has a significant positive impact on SE of employees ($p < 0.001$). Gender significantly moderated the relationship between POS and SE ($p < 0.01$). In line with Aiken *et al.* (1991) guidelines, we plotted the interaction effects of gender. We operationalized Gender as Female = 1 and Male = 0. The plots presented in Figure 1, show that for Males, the POS has a positive impact on SE, while for Females, POS has somewhat negative impact and is not significant. This is further explained when the interaction effect of Male and Female can be seen separately, establishing

that while the interaction effect for male is significant ($\beta = 0.190$, $p < 0.001$), for females, the interaction is not significant ($\beta = -0.061$, $p = 0.537$). The moderational hypothesis, H3 is thus supported.

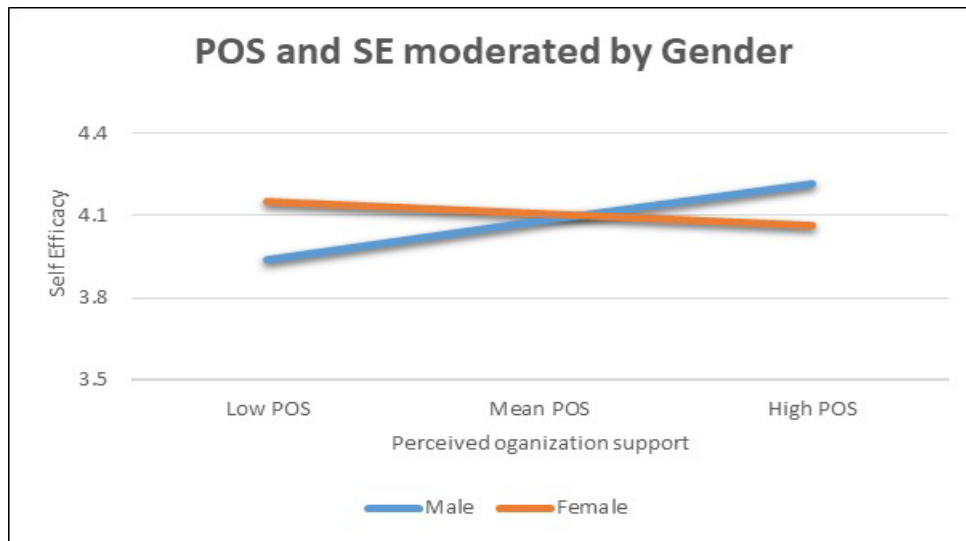


Figure 1: Moderating effect of gender on POS-SE relationship

Results from the data of N=294 managerial employees clearly revealed effect of gender in the relationship between POS and SE. While POS seems to produce career motivation among male managers it seems to have a somewhat negative effect on female managers. This result was surprising and counter-intuitive specially when gender does not play any role in determining one's SE and thereby called for further investigation.

3.5 Method – Second Wave

We employed a qualitative study to 'explain surprising results by providing insights' (Grant & Wall, 2009, p. 679), as it is argued to be helpful in deepening our understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, researchers have argued in favour of differentiating participants based on their roles and experiences (Bou-Llusar, Beltran-Martin, Roca-Puig, & Escrig-Tena, 2016) as female managers from different life and career stages were better able to explain their respective sense of empowerment and self-confidence with respect to the counterintuitive and previously argued hypotheses. Accordingly, we interviewed 19 female managers based on convenience sampling to understand how organizational support was being enacted and impacting career motivations of female managers.

3.6 Findings – Second Wave

The first level concepts, second level themes and the aggregate dimensions that emerged from the data analysis throw light upon how perceived organization support impacted the sense of empowerment of qualified women managers working in corporate India. Based on content analysis of the interviews with women managers, the key themes that emerged have been discussed below, aggregated as *patronising social support*, *gender identity*, *career aspiration*.

3.7 Patronising Social Support

3.7.1 Gender Stereotyping

Women managers in this study talked about presence or lack of social support at the workplace that they believe can serve as facilitators or barriers respectively to their career development. Elements of perceived support at the workplace from organization, co-workers and supervisors that emerged were often related to gender stereotypes. Several women reported being excluded from developmental assignments that would advance their careers because of a strong masculine culture that frequently grooms males for senior managerial roles. In many cases the support came with a patronizing intent when the supervisor took decisions on behalf of the female managers about making career development choices.

'We women suffer from negative perceptions about our abilities to take on revenue generating management positions. Management should not assume that I won't be able to manage such a role. My boss should at least try me out and not assume that I will not accept such a role' (Middle Manager, ITES sector).

Several leaders handling large teams mentioned about not promoting women as they did not want her to fail by virtue of not being able to cope with the demands of the job.

3.7.2 Rights seen as Privileges

The providing of family supports by organizations e.g. flexible scheduling, child and elder care assistance make it easier for women with family responsibilities to hold managerial positions especially in absence of good quality childcare facilities being available in the country. The domain of support for work family balance was a typical category endorsed by 12 out of 31 participants who discussed the importance of equilibrium between work and non-work activities. For example, as reported by one of the respondents:

'Thankfully I have been able to work from home as I have a small child and no childcare support and been able to retain my job (Middle manager, ITES sector)

Flexi-working policies when availed by women after maternity leave was also seen as special privileges by the male colleagues, especially if the co-workers had to take on additional work during certain time periods.

3.8 Gender Identity

3.8.1 Implicit Social Approval

Spousal and family support has been quoted as a significant factor in reinforcing career aspirations. The respondents also shared about the role of immediate family in influencing career decisions and shaping career trajectory. A woman career decisions are mostly influenced by implicit approval from the elders in the family and spouse. One of the respondents said:

'The family I got married into were of very traditional mindsets. My in-laws did not approve of my going out to work specially after my child was born. I have grown up with high ambitions so I had to go against the wishes of my in-laws to pursue my career. My husband of course is supportive of my decision' (Senior manager, ITES sector)

As a patriarchal society, women are eulogized for making sacrifices for their family. Conducting herself in accordance with such social expectations lead to more favourable evaluations for women in Indian society.

3.8.2 Role Conflict

Respondents were unanimous that their early life and work experiences helped them prepare for their career advancement so far. Propelled by desire for freedom and autonomy, the respondents talked about their personal motivations and values that have shaped their career aspirations and the trajectory and at the same time expressed their intra-conflicts about fulfilling familial expectations. The themes of role conflict and intrinsic motivation emerged repeatedly from the data.

'I am very happy with my job and the Company culture. But I often regret that I am not able to spend as much quality time with my family as I would like to. My daughter is still very young and I am thinking whether to take a break and stay at home to be able to give her time and attention' (Middle Manager, Manufacturing sector).

3.9 Empowerment for Career Advancement

3.9.1 Integrating Conflicting Social Identities

Answers to the question 'What does having a career mean to you?' provides interesting insights into the women managers of contemporary India and the meaning they attach to the social roles that they enact.

'I like being a mother and I like working. At times, I do question whether I can do justice to both. I try to make the best of it' (Middle Manager, manufacturing sector).

While child and family issues might be viewed by employers as potential liabilities, respondents mentioned that flexibility, family security, family achievement, meaningful work and financial independence were important sources of encouragement, satisfaction and a sense of well-being for them. Typical responses which suggest the above were:

'Working women face family challenges on a daily basis. If women had to choose between flexibility and professional growth, I think they would value flexibility'(Senior manager, ITES sector).

4. Discussion

Gender inequities in managerial careers have often been attributed to women professionals not being ambitious enough about pursuing career advancement. Extensive studies have suggested that women do not feel empowered to make career development choices as they are caught in the paradox of career versus family and they cannot have it all.

The sequential mixed method study of POS and self-efficacy amongst managers reveals interconnections between the intrinsic as well as socially constructed factors that make the internal mechanisms more explicit in the following ways a) with the *patronising social support* a woman manager is primed to be the weaker and less agentic candidate for career advancement b) as she evaluates her conflicting priorities in certain life-stages, she is guided by her *gender identity* as per her life stage than her own aspirations c) and finally her *psychological empowerment for achieving career aspirations* stems from her capacity to integrate her conflicting social identities.

The quantitative study taken up in the first phase revealed surprising and counter-intuitive findings. Although women and men do not differ in terms of their self-efficacy, the perceived organization support affects this intrinsic belief system of men and women differently. In fact, the results indicate that while POS impacts self-efficacy of male managers positively, in case of female managers it has a rather opposite effect. The findings from the qualitative study illuminated the underlying intrinsic as well as socially constructed mechanisms that are at play in producing gendered organization support as well as the intra-conflict experienced by women managers with respect to their self-efficacy for career growth. Further the findings helped in unpacking the construct – self efficacy of women managers, explicating the psychological mechanisms and also identifying contextual factors that can impact their career growth. These three aggregated themes have been labeled as *patronizing social support, gender identity, and empowerment for career advancement*.

Overall, the research elucidates how organization support is gendered in its practice and also intention. Often steeped in culturally driven patronizing social support and filtered through the lens of gender identity, POS produces detrimental effects on competence related psychological empowerment and thus the career aspirations amongst women managers.

5. Implications

Prior research had argued that women at different life stages would have different psychological needs and self-efficacy. However, there is absence of empirical research that has investigated the gendering effect of perceived organization support which is a key predictor of self-efficacy. Based on an empirical study, the present paper provides evidence for the differential influence of POS on self-efficacy and elucidates the underlying psychological mechanisms that are at play. Moreover, the study argues that curated external interventions can go a long way in inspiring competence based psychological empowerment of women managers. Our study clearly demonstrates the moderating effect of gender on the relationships between self-efficacy and its predictor - POS. It argues that organization support needs to be ungendered in order to produce positive effect on this important aspect of psychological empowerment uniformly.

6. Limitations of the Study

The review of literature focused on only theories of gender identity and culture to explain the context of perceived organization support by women managers. Notwithstanding the importance and the originality of the findings reported in this study, it would be interesting to see future studies take into consideration what kind of support would help women professionals to make more empowered to pursue career advancement that would strengthen the women leadership pipeline in corporate India. Despite its patriarchal and collectivist culture, India is often described as a confluence of sub-cultures, an attribute that might question the generalizability across the different parts of the country.

Annexure 1: Interview Guide

Interview Questions asked to the women managers

- Tell us about your background.
- What are your career aspirations and how have they changed over the years of your career till now?
- What do you think causes you to moderate or change your professional aspirations?
- What has supported you in your professional journey?
- What are the constraints you have faced so far in meeting your ambitions?
- What might hinder you in your future growth?
- What is expected from you in your social setting?
- Who has set these expectations?
- If you could wish for one thing in your present environment that would help you realize your potential, what would that be?

Further probing questions were asked to elicit the underlying cognitions for the responses to the above questions

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