

The Growing Difficulties in Pre and Post-Pandemic Environments for Indian Female Lawyers

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DESCRIPTION

The increasing participation of women in full-time profession has brought out the importance of work-life balance. However, the gender role expectations pose a challenge to the issue. Work-life challenges hinder the progress of women lawyers. This challenge escalated during the Pandemic in 2020. The present study creates a comparative analysis of the work-life challenges faced by the women lawyers in the pre and during pandemic scenarios by interviewing fifty respondents based in Kolkata (India). Before the pandemic the women lawyers struggled to maintain their position within the profession; the pandemic prioritized home over work pulling the women lawyers towards their traditional roles and posing as a further threat to their professional existence. The representation of women within the legal profession is inadequate, putting them at a disadvantage. Since it is a profession based on authority, autonomy and establishment of a clientele it strikes a contradictory image than the one with which women are traditionally attached. This unbalances the work and family domain of the women legal professionals. The pandemic had increased the domestic work and pushed the work-life balance towards further conflict resulting in marginalizing the position of women lawyers. The UN Policy Brief (2020) had stated that the economic impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on women would be different from men since they have greater care demands to attend at home.

The work and family conflict scenario before and during the pandemic has been conversed through various themes. Due to the nation-wide lockdown owing to the COVID 19 the legal system operated digitally restricting its function towards the dismissal of only urgent cases. As a consequence the professional life of the women lawyers was limited since many of them did not handle urgent cases. Before the pandemic the respondents juggled to maintain their professional and domestic roles. The pandemic reduced the professional life which was accompanied by an amplification of domestic work. The women lawyers' professional existence was further challenged as their private space and professional space came under the same roof. The pandemic not only imposed a challenge to the role of the women legal professionals but it also confronted the issue of time. Time

management is an essential factor for maintaining work and family balance. Before the pandemic, women lawyers spent longer hours in their professional life, which included the court hours, chamber time, meetings with clients and professional socialization.

Work beyond the court hours was difficult for the respondents as they had care demands to meet at home. This left very little space for self-time, which was important for the professional's work-life maintenance. During the pandemic the loss of the work hours was replaced by the hours spent in doing household chores which contributed towards the unpaid labour. This created the problem of integration in the professional domain which was required for validation into the profession. The pandemic, on the other hand, restricted the time being spent at work and increased the time given to household. Within the court premises very little work-life policies and supportive elements were present to help maintain the balance. The presence of supportive family helped the respondents balance the household and the workplace. There were many respondents from the nuclear family who felt that the household chores were not shared equally thus, burdening them further. During the pandemic as women lawyers spent more time in the household they shared the burden of the chores and the childcare. The limited availability of the paid services led to the larger participation of women in the unpaid labour. The women lawyers felt that a change in the perception of the family members and stakeholders within the workplace could change the situation for the women. However, due to the limited support the women lawyers could not be properly integrated with the professional domain. As the pandemic brought the work space within the household space it further destroyed the idea of work-life balance. Thus the legal system had very little supportive structures for the inclusion of the women lawyers.

CONCLUSION

In the pre-pandemic scenario the women lawyers were marginalized within their professional ambit. The pandemic had made the matter worse. It threatened to engulf the professional

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Received: 01-Jul-2024, Manuscript No. JER-24-30440; **Editor assigned:** 03-Jul-2024, PreQC No. JER-24-30440 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 17-Jul-2024, QC No. JER-24-30440; **Revised:** 24-Jul-2024, Manuscript No. JER-24-30440 (R); **Published:** 31-Jul-2024, DOI: 10.35248/2165-7556-24.14.397

Citation: Bhattacharyya A (2024) The Growing Difficulties in Preand Post-Pandemic Environments for Indian Female Lawyers. J Ergonomics. 14:397.

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identity of the women and forced them to further quit the profession. It was evident that the integration of the women in the domain of their profession was difficult due to the demands from the family. In India women continue to be the primary

providers at home. The COVID 19 reduced the professional work and time of the women lawyers and increased their availability for unpaid domestic work leading to a crisis of existence within the profession.