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Workplace Distress: Productivity and Stigma

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Abstract

The prevalence of mental distress in the workplace is a conveniently neglected reality. Indian workplaces are no exception to this, which leads to employees suffering from mental health issues being stigmatised and ostracised. With added elements of excessive workload, lack of standard mental health policies, and high-stress environments of a rising economy, mental health issues are at the forefront of problems faced by employees. This paper aims to explore the underlying causes of this industry-wide problem by employing both primary and secondary methods of data collection. Findings from the primary study establish that problems pertaining to nature, and quantity of work that employees are expected to perform, paired with the compensation they receive for it and the relationships they have with colleagues and superiors, form the basis of their workplace distress. Secondary literature suggests that nearly half of all Indian employees suffer from workplace distress or neuroses, that can be attributed to the variables studied in the primary research. These findings shed light on a very real and widespread issue which calls for urgent action.

Keywords: *workplace, distress, productivity, stigma, toxic, employee, mental health, neuroses, workload, ostracisation*

1.0 Introduction

Health has always been talked about in the context of physically being in a satisfactory state with no or minimum maladies. It was not until much later that our mind was included under the ambit of health, and the concept of being mentally healthy started gaining attention. Good mental health, a lot of times, is dubbed as just not having neurotic and/or psychotic tendencies. This notion is harmful because by definition, then, it reduces the scope of our well-being. To have good mental health is to grow, flourish, and reach one's full potential in terms of functionality and happiness.

The workplace is an undeniably significant part of one's life. This paper emphasizes mental health in the context of one's workplace. Here, 'workplace' refers to when a company hires an employee under an established working agreement that includes, salary or wages, health benefits, and defined work hours and workdays. When it comes to the workplace, many factors influence a person's mental health. Factors like monotonous work, shift work, unclear roles, negative moods, and daily hassles, due to these factors people develop mental health problems such as negative affect, depression, and psychological distress. While workplace stress, stigma, and attitudes towards employees suffering from stress or mental illness have been researched and interventions developed to address them better, globally, it remains an oft-neglected aspect across different industries and countries, including India, and only a few of the learnings are actually implemented (Maulik, 2017). A WHO study has estimated that the global economy will lose approximately \$1.03 trillion by loss of productivity due to employees suffering from mental health issues. This issue is relevant in the Indian workplace too as a study by HR tech startup Hush found that as many as 22% (Verma, 2019) of respondents to their 'India Employee Survey' felt that their productivity is low due to overwork and stress and a staggering 42.5% of employees in the private sector suffer from some form of depression or anxiety disorder. Mental health issues are still taboo and largely stigmatized in Indian society and the same is reflected in the work culture of the country.

This paper aims to understand the underlying causes and social structures that affect the mental health of persons employed in formal workplaces. It seeks to establish what constitutes a 'toxic' work environment and focuses on mental distress and neuroses that arise due to toxic workplaces. The research has employed methods of primary data collection and analysis, paired with supplementary literature, to holistically understand the elements that contribute to mental distress in the workplace, how it affects employee productivity and the role of stigma in the context of mental health in the workplace.

2.0 Mental Distress in the Context of Workplace

An employed individual spends a considerable amount of time in their workplace. It forms the basis of social identity, confidence, and well being. A person's place of work inevitably affects their mental health. Correspondingly, a workplace is affected by the mental health of its employees. Workplace stress is defined by the World Health Organization as 'the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope', and elaborated that it can be caused 'by poor work organization (the way we design jobs and work systems, and the way we manage them), by poor work design (*e.g.*, lack of control over work processes), poor management, unsatisfactory working conditions and lack of support from colleagues and supervisors'. When engaging in this discourse, it is important to understand the circumstances that form the setting for mental health problems to arise in/due to the workplace.

2.1 Content of Work

The nature of work one is expected to perform has a huge impact on the person's health and well being. People who are engaged in professions that complement their interests and aptitudes, usually face a much lower degree of work-related stress. On the other hand, persons expected to perform monotonous, aversive, or unpleasant tasks are much more likely to develop or suffer from mental distress. The amount of work an employee is expected to perform combined with the resources available to them and how fairly they are compensated for it makes up the workload of an employee. Excessive workload results in high levels of stress in individuals which may result in deterioration of mental health in employees. Furthermore, an employee's control over the kind of and amount of work they are expected to do is an important

factor in workplace satisfaction. The kind of participation one has in decision making in the work setting also contributes to this.

The content of work is what one is directly responsible for in the workplace on a daily basis. When this becomes a source of distress, it may lay the foundation for the development of various mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, forgetfulness, diminished cognitive ability, etc.

2.2 Context of Work

One's 'profile' or 'role' refers to their positions and responsibilities in the workplace. Role conflict occurs when an incongruence between what one's superiors and what their colleagues expect of them in present. Role ambiguity occurs when one is unsure of their responsibilities. Both of these are significant contributors to workplace distress. The 'reward' or the sense of power or 'status' an individual gains from the job they have also contributes to the amount of stress they experience. This is influenced by factors like social support in the workplace and the motivation to perform. The lack of appreciation or support for one's work, unsupportive supervision, solitary workspace, a strained relationship with colleagues, inadequate or poor work environment, and irregular working hours, all combine to make a workplace 'toxic'. Such an environment is referred to as 'toxic' because it not only deters individual growth but actively worsens mental health and well being. In such a workspace, employees are at significant risk of developing physiological and psychological disorders that can lead to increased absenteeism, organizational dysfunction, and decreased work productivity.

3.0 Workplace Distress and Productivity

Productivity here refers to both, presenteeism at work and the amount of work done by an employee. When a company hires its employees, their main motive is to employ human resources in exchange for monetary compensation. The human resource is required to be adept at the skills required for the job and is expected to achieve a certain degree of completion of tasks regularly. Optimal utilization of work time is only possible when employees are present for work and are in good health. However, a toxic or dysfunctional work environment inevitably contributes negatively to the mental health, and hence, the productivity of employees. Employee

health and productivity are directly proportional, that is, good health amounts to better levels of productivity.

Absenteeism is more often seen in cases of physical illness. This may be the case because having a mental disorder or being distressed, even severely, are not yet considered good enough reasons to take leaves from work. In many developed countries, 35–45% of absenteeism from work is due to mental health problems (World Health Organization, 2005). This statistic only talks for the reported cases of absenteeism due to mental health problems in developed countries. In developing and underdeveloped countries, additional stigma is attached to such issues. This results in a high number of unreported cases of absenteeism due to mental health problems and distress.

Productivity in terms of the amount of work done by employees is a factor that is usually highly scrutinized and penalized by employers. Even if an employee is not absent from work, mental health problems can cause a substantial reduction in productivity. Psychological distress adversely affects cognitive abilities such as attention and concentration, memory, problem-solving, decision making, logic and reasoning, and even visual and auditory processing. Such distress causes problems in the workplace in terms of making presentations, taking decisions, meeting deadlines, carrying out responsibilities, etc, consequently negatively affecting the productivity of employees. This often becomes a vicious cycle wherein mental distress lowers employee productivity and this in turn results in worry and stress for the individual.

It is worth noting that this productivity problem, a lot of times, stems from toxic work environments. Persons employed in places wherein the environment is detrimental to their health often notice a loss in productivity. This problem is worth engaging with not only for the sake of persons working in toxic environments but also for the benefit of persons and organizations who may be facing this problem despite a healthy and nourishing workplace. Loss of productivity is detrimental on a personal as well as an organizational level. Systems have to be developed to address such issues in a constructive, non-confrontational manner.

4.0 Mental Health Stigma in the Workplace

A stigma is a set of negative opinions about a specific person or group of persons due to their mental health, physical health, or other characteristics such as race or religion. One such stigma exists related to mental health issues in formal workplaces across India and all over the world. Such stigmas arising from misconceptions generally result in discrimination against the affected parties.

As studies have shown many employees struggle with mental distress and neuroses such as depression and anxiety at work due to various factors that may or may not be compounded due to their work environment. Due to a lack of understanding of mental health issues and policies, a lot of workplaces lack the tools to help their employees from dealing with such issues. This fosters a culture where employees are not comfortable with seeking help for mental health issues that they might be experiencing. Furthermore, if they do so they might be viewed as weak and incompetent for not being to deal with their issues on their own.

Disclosure of mental health issues in the workplace can also lead to discriminatory behaviour from managers and colleagues such as micro-management, lack of opportunities for advancement, over-inferring of mistakes to illness, gossip, and social exclusion (Brohan, 2010) It is a widely documented phenomenon that people with mental health issues face extra scrutiny while looking for a new job as companies view them as liabilities. If it is known that an employee suffers from mental issues, supervisors are stricter with respect to their leave of absence and absenteeism as it strengthens their stigma of such employees being less productive. People with mental health issues also report inequitable remuneration for their work compared to their peers. Opportunities for career advancement are also affected as they might be frequently overlooked for promotion as companies would prefer a healthier candidate. Therefore affected employees find it very hard to disclose their conditions to their colleagues and management due to self-stigma, shame, and social discrimination associated with mental health problems. The need to conceal a condition from employers and co-workers itself generates work-related stress and anxiety. This leads to a situation where both disclosure and non-disclosure of mental health issues cause a lose-lose situation where the affected party is stuck in a self-perpetuating cycle of stigma.



Figure 1

A lot of companies in India have started to recognize this problem and realized how important it is to invest in the mental healthcare of their employees. Investing in mental healthcare programs, employee insurance that covers mental health, access to professional counsellors, mandated time-off, on-call mental health professionals are some of the steps progressive organizations are taking to combat the issue. As good as it may sound, only a handful of companies are actually implementing these measures as such drastic measures require a lot of upfront capital which reduces the bottom-line of the companies therefore it is an extremely hard change to bring about in the industry. This is an industry-wide problem and the whole culture needs to change to recognize these measures only then meaningful steps can be taken towards combating mental health issues in the workplace.

5.0 Research Method

A survey was constructed with the aim to assess the degree of workplace satisfaction in employed individuals. Workplace satisfaction has been assessed in the context of the nature of work, amount of work, relationship with colleagues and superiors, role ambiguity, monetary compensation for work, and productivity. The opposite of workplace satisfaction is workplace stress, which may give rise to workplace distress in individuals and also may result in the conception of neurotic tendencies or disorders.

A sample group of 50 employed persons has been taken, all of whom are above the age of 18. They were required to fill in no identifying information so that the data generated is not biased due to socially desirable responses or the fear of penalization of any sort. The responses have been analyzed bearing in mind that workplace satisfaction is imperative in terms of employee well-being, the lack of which decreases the quality of life led by the employees in question.

6.0 Results and Discussion

The findings of the survey establish that a very large percentage of employees at formal workplaces face a situation at some point in time that contributes to stress and anxiety, which in turn leads to deteriorating mental health. An overwhelming majority (80%) of participants report facing excessive workload and burden (figure 1).

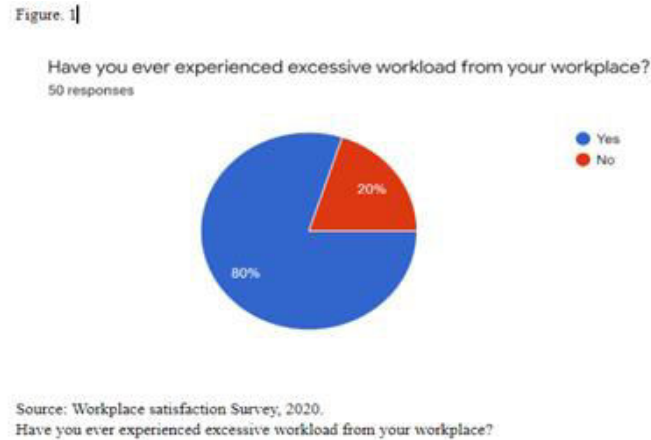


Figure 2

Another question participants were asked was if they had strained relationships with one or more of their colleagues. A majority (58%) of participants replied that they did in fact have strained relationships in the workplace (fig 2). The participants were also asked if they were ever subjected to bullying, harassment or peer pressure from their superior or colleagues, 1 in 3 participants replied that they did (fig 3). This goes on to strengthen the argument that Indian workplaces are not conducive to a friendly and stress-free environment.

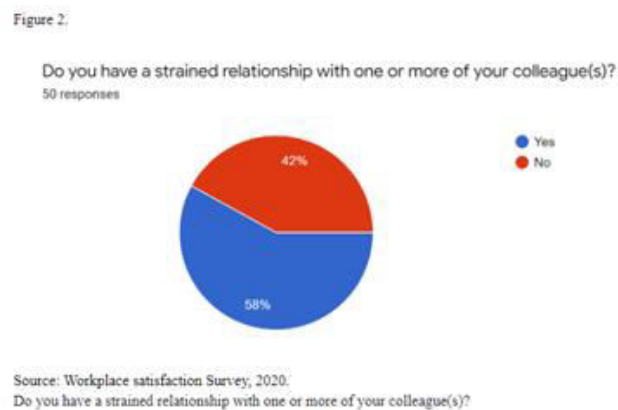


Figure 3

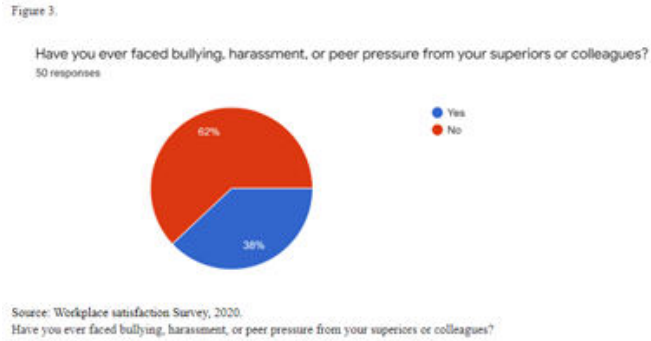


Figure 4

Another interesting result was that 46% of participants experienced confusion regarding their roles and responsibilities in the workplace (fig 4).

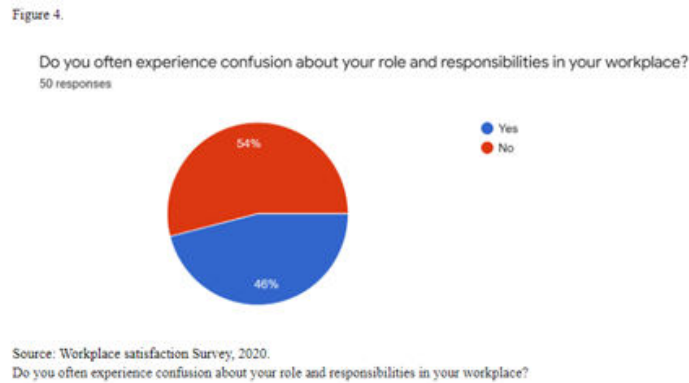


Figure 5

Another important statistic was that 1 in 3 respondents (30%) reported having faced some discrimination relating to their caste, class, gender, or religion (fig 5). This statistic cannot be ignored as such forms of discrimination are deep-rooted in Indian society and cause significant distress in the victims.

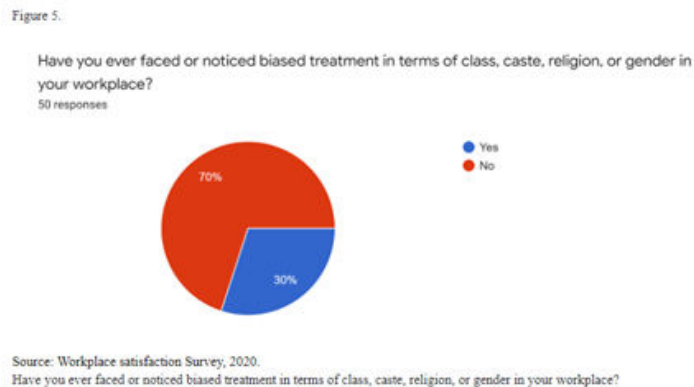


Figure 6

44% of respondents replied that their workplace did not have any form of complaint redressal committee to address the mental health concerns of the employees (fig 6). This puts a dent in efforts to address mental health concerns in the workplace. Other recorded responses were that 46% of participants felt less productive in their workplaces (fig 7) and a staggering 68% of respondents felt the need to skip work due to work-related stress and anxiety (fig 8).

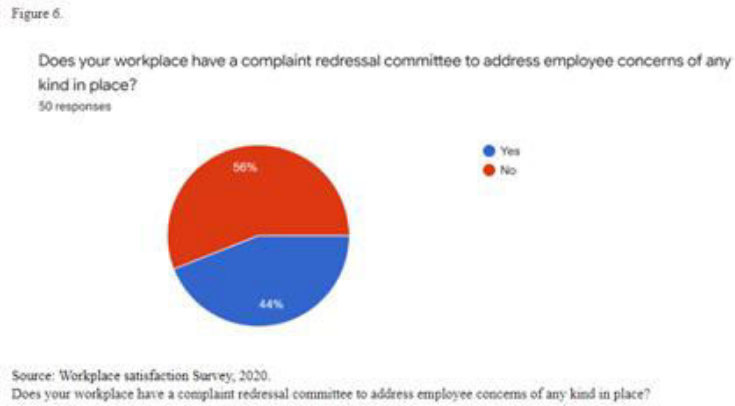


Figure 7

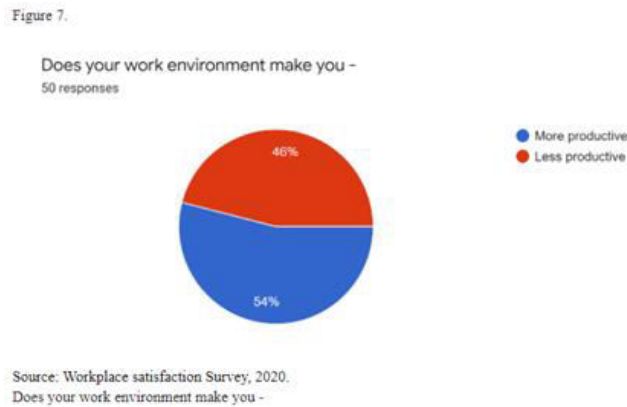
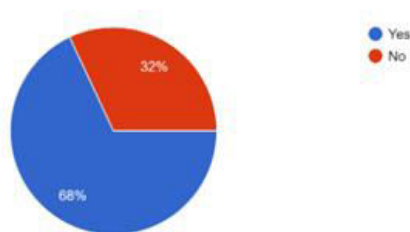


Figure 8

Figure 8.

Have you ever felt the need to skip work because of work-related stress?
50 responses



Source: Workplace satisfaction Survey, 2020.
Have you ever felt the need to skip work because of work-related stress?

Figure 9

All these figures seem to point to the direction that there is a widespread case of work-related stress and neuroses in the Indian formal workplace which is compounded and perpetuated by systemic discrimination and societal stigmas that exist in the country. This ultimately hurts the productivity of the employees and affects their work. Therefore it is in the best interest of the companies to invest in sound policies to help employees suffering from mental health issues.

7.0 Conclusion

According to WHO statistics, 90 million Indians suffer from mental disorders. This statistic only reflects the reported cases, and countless others suffer from mental distress and mild neuroses of some form or the other. It is safe to assume that more than half of this group of people are employed in formal workspaces. A study conducted by ASSOCHAM in 2017 showed that 42.5 per cent of employees in the Indian private sector are afflicted with general anxiety disorder or depression. This is attributed to less pay and more working hours, compared to the rest of the world, which contributes to an atmosphere of constant fatigue. This further leads to stress and frustration, thereby acutely affecting mental health.

The extent of this issue is, simply put, unfathomable. Paired with elements of loss of productivity and the social stigma attached to the discourse of mental health, the workplace mental health crisis demands immediate attention and correction.

Efforts can be made within workplaces to improve the situation for staff persons struggling with mental distress or neuroses. Sensitization workshops help in educating and informing people about mental health problems and contribute to reducing fear, stigma, and

discrimination in the workplace. Fostering a healthy work environment also entails establishing a culture that is conducive to supporting employee's mental health by raising awareness of workplace programs and policies that promote mental and physical health and wellness. Identification of signs and symptoms of mental distress should be made to be an integral part of leadership training so that managers can employ the necessary tools and measures to support their employees. A dialogue and discourse around mental well-being and distress has to be actively encouraged in workplaces to foster an environment of support, comfort, and optimal productivity.

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