Coping with Harassment at Workplace: Case of Divorced Women

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Abstract

The aim of this exploratory study is to understand how divorced women – as a minority and vulnerable employee category - cope with harassment they experience at work within a culture of stigma and prejudice. Employing qualitative research methodology, in-depth interviews were carried out with 12 divorced working women. Findings indicated three main coping strategies and nine specific coping behaviours thereof, that the participants have employed in the face of harassment; a) avoidance (by ignoring and being silent; feigning ignorance and evading the work context), b) reactive (by being assertive; confronting the perpetrator and seeking social support) c) proactive (by hiding the divorced status; demonstrating a tougher self; and socially withdrawing). These externally focused and personal coping behaviours were nuanced attempts, at not only avoiding and preventing current and future harassment, but also current and future stigma and prejudice. The findings also draw attention to the ways these coping behaviours manifest the participants' attempts at hiding their divorced status and their struggles at avoiding harassment and stigma, while attempting to project a more independent, strong and hardened self. All in all, these coping strategies of participants can complicate the settlement of harassment, indicating the need for well though-after interventions by organizations.

***Keywords.** Harassment, Divorced women, Coping strategies*

1. Introduction

Workplace harassment is said to be widespread, gaining much research interest over the last two decades (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013). Researched and discoursed under different terms such as injustice (J. Y. Min, Park, Kim, & Min, 2014; Okechukwu, Souza, Davis, & de Castro, 2014), incivility (Di Marco, Hoel, Arenas, & Mundante, 2015), bullying (Hannabuss, 1998; Einarsen, 2000), abuse (Lopez, Hodson, & Roscigno, 2009), violence and aggression (Neuman & Baron, 1998), harassment is generally understood to mean „interpersonal behavior aimed at intentionally harming another employee in the workplace" (Bowling & Beehr, 2006, p. 998).

Yet, much needs to be still clarified in this intricate workplace phenomenon (Branch et al., 2013). According to D'Cruz and Noronha, (2010), empirical studies on how targets cope with bullying are limited. According to prior research, individual characteristics such as gender, type of contract (Moreno-Jimenez, Munoz, Salin, & Benadero, 2007), ethnicity (Schneider, Hitlan, & Radhakrishnan, 2000), religion, age, and sexual orientation can be triggers of harassment. Similarly, various personal factors are found to affect victim responses to harassment such as gender and organizational position (Cortina & Magley, 2009; Malamu & Offermann, 2001). However, more detailed exploration into these as well as other less studied personal

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factors, in relation to coping of harassment is needed to properly understand this intricate issue.

At the same time, even though not detailed, studies have indicated how divorced women are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and other forms of harassment at work (Khubchandani & Price, 2014; Kung, Hung, & Chan, 2004; Newton-Levinson, Winskell, Abdela, Rubardt, & Stephenson, 2014). Yet, little is known about how they cope with these encounters of harassment at work within a context of stigma and prejudice surrounding divorced women. In the Sri Lankan context, divorce is considered a break away from the accepted social norms, with the blame for divorce generally been placed on the woman. Divorced women are seen to also negate social gender expectations such as subordination, respectability and chastity. This in turn leads to social stigma, social isolation and lower social status which influence the manner in which they react to social situations. Hence, as Salin, Tenhiälä, Roberge, and Berdahl (2014) highlight, being in a vulnerable and stigmatized minority would influence the manner in which a harassing behavior is appraised and handled. On one hand, divorced women will perceive their experiences in light of the stigma attached to them and hence react to them in particular ways. For instance, it is said that stigmatized individuals may react in ways to avoid further stigmatization (Link, Mirotznik, & Cullen, 1991) or in a manner that conforms their deviance (Scimecca, 1977). On the other hand, loss or lack of self-value and self-esteem will also influence their reaction to particular experiences and instances.

However, these unique circumstances and characteristics of individuals that influence coping of harassment have not been sufficiently studied. Indeed, studies have not explored divorced women‟s responses to harassment taking into consideration their marginalized and stigmatized status. More specifically, research related to stigma and divorce is said to be dormant for the last two decades (Konstam, Karwin, Curran, Lyons, & Celen-Demirtas, 2016). In this backdrop, studying how divorced women respond and cope with harassment they face at workplace in a culture of stigma and prejudice, will add to existing knowledge, by emphasizing a rarely studied individual characteristic (divorced status) of the victim. Hence, the aim of this exploratory study is to identify how divorced women respond to or cope with harassment they face at work, within a patriarchal culture where stigma and prejudices about divorced women are widespread.

In addition to the contribution to harassment coping research, an area needing more empirical studies (D‟Cruz & Noronha, 2010), findings of this study will inform and further refine the existing literature on stigma, divorced women, and labeling. Moreover, it is important for organizations to identify how employees react to harassment for them to plan organizational responses and to develop successful mechanisms to prevent and handle harassment at workplaces. Additionally, as victim reactions can create a vicious circle of events (Branch et al., 2013), understanding victims coping strategies will inform organizations on ways to resolve harassment successfully, by identifying points of intervention in this vicious circle of events.

Before proceeding further, it is important to delineate the parameters of the current paper. In exploring how the divorced women responded to harassment, I do not attempt to identify the emotional and psychological reactions of the respondents. Neither do I investigate the comprehensive cognitive process of coping from a victim

experiencing harassment to appraising the situation and to handling it. The emphasis of this paper is on different reaction/coping mechanisms respondents/victims employ. Coping is identified as a „cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction" (Folkman cited in D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010, p. 508).

In what follows, I first present the literature related to coping and responding to harassment. After this, I provide a brief outline of divorced women, with special attention to divorced women in Sri Lanka. Next, I report the methodology followed in carrying out the study and present a summary of the background of the participants with the different types of harassment they have faced at work, with the aim of providing a contextual understanding of the participants" responses to harassment. After presenting the findings of the study, I conclude with a discussion and conclusion, followed by implications for management.

2. Literature Review
Research on coping and responses to harassment has explored various aspects such as different strategies of coping, methods of responding, process of coping and successful and unsuccessful methods, as well as most common methods. Researchers have attempted to categorize different coping strategies in numerous ways. One such categorization is internally focused (endurance, denial, detachment, reattribution, and illusory control) or externally focused (avoidance, appeasement, assertion, seeking institutional or organizational relief, and seeking social support) strategies (Fitzgerald, 1990). In another attempt, responses to harassment is clustered as assertive response, seeking help, avoidance and doing nothing, which in a much broader level can be identified as passive and active responses (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004).

D'Cruz and Noronha, (2010) providing a more holistic picture explains the four stages of a coping process as experiencing confusion, engaging organizational options, moving inwards and exiting the organization. Wasti and Cortina (2002) initially offered a five-type structure which include a) denial, (b) avoidance, (c) negotiation, (d) social coping, and (e) advocacy-seeking behaviors and later on, presented 3 coping profiles/strategies as a) detached, (b) avoidant negotiating, and (c) support seeking (Cortina & Wasti, 2005). It is also important to note how these various coping strategies can actually vary and take place for the same harassing behavior (Cortina & Wasti, 2005). Under these various categorizations, specific responses to harassment such as endurance, denial, avoidance, appeasement, social support, direct request to stop, confrontation, seeking institutional organizational relief can be identified (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995).

A common finding related to coping and responding to harassment is that victims commonly resort to passive forms of responses or social coping such as avoidance and denial and active strategies such as confronting and advocacy seeking is found to be rare (Salin et al., 2014). Victims tend to resort to these passive responses when the harassment is subtle, hard to prove or perceive a risk of reporting (Salin et al., 2014).

It has also been found out that victims who have successfully coped with their experiences have been absent less and are better at recognizing and avoiding escalating behaviour (Zapf & Gross, 2001). Unsuccessful victims, on the other hand, are found to escalate bullying by fighting for justice (Zapf & Gross, 2001). It was

further identified how victims start to cope with their experience through constructive conflict resolving mechanisms (Zapf & Gross, 2001) or active coping strategies (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004) at the initial stages of harassment and then move on to other mechanisms when the harassment continues and then finally leave the organization (Zapf & Gross, 2001). At the same time, increased bullying is associated with the use of avoidance and passive responses (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson, 2004). On one hand, how victims can be subjected to retribution when they act more assertively by confronting the harasser or by seeking organizational or social support has been documented (Salin et al., 2014). On the other hand, how harassment can increase when the victim act passively is also indicated (Cortina & Magley, 2003).

Researchers have also explored various factors that influence different types of responses or coping mechanisms. Harlos (2010) discusses that the determinants of victims‟ use voice (communication to organizational authorities for remedy) against mistreatment has identified how gender, work self-esteem, and relative hierarchical power impact the use of voice. Cortina and Wasti (2005), exploring coping with sexual harassment, indicate that older women tend to „detach or disengage from harassing situations‟ (p. 190) as they might have more at stake and hence would not want to risk their jobs by employing coping mechanisms that would not put their jobs at jeopardy. They also explain how severity and culture can impact coping profiles.

3. Divorced Women

Even though negative perceptions and attitudes about divorced women are not as strong as they were in the past, especially in the West, divorced women are still identified to be one of the most improvised and socially marginalized groups in the world (Newton-Levinson et al., 2014). According to Gerstel (1987), censure, devaluation, and blame attached to certain circumstances related to divorce, rather than a categorical censure or devaluation of divorce per se, still exist.

Perceptions that divorced women are „uncontrollable‟ and „unpredictable‟ and sexually available (Newton-Levinson et al., 2014) has led to stigma and prejudices, making them becoming a source of suspicion for other women and an attraction for other men in the society (Newton-Levinson et al., 2014). This in turn had led to divorced women facing various negative consequences such as harassment.

The c*rude divorce rate* (the number of divorces per 1,000 populations) for Sri Lanka is estimated at 0.15. It has further been identified that in the year 2012, 4.8% of Women and 0.8% of Men are divorced/separated. Being a strongly patriarchal culture, in Sri Lanka marriage is seen as an indicator of a person‟s (especially a woman‟s) prosperity, where divorce lead to public derision, prejudices, and stereotypes (Abeyasekera, 2013). In the Sri Lankan culture, marriage is still considered very secret and divorce rare. In this setting, the existence and persistence of stigma and sanctions towards divorcees in Sri Lanka cannot be avoided.

4. Methodology

Employing the qualitative research methodology, in-depth interviews were carried out with 12 divorced working women. The participants were selected through purposive sampling technique (Robinson, 2014) by looking at the time duration of their divorce (those who have been divorced for more than 1 year) and their willingness to share experiences and ideas. Possible participants were first identified through personal

contacts. They were then contacted over the phone or email and the intentions of the research and their role in it was clearly explained (Robinson, 2014). They were also assured of anonymity of any information they shared. From these possible participants, only 12 provided their informed consent to participate in the study. The interviews were then carried out with the 12 participants face-to-face or through telephone. In order to make the participants more comfortable and to get rich information, interviews were conducted as conversations, with the use of open ended questions posed at the participants.

The data gathered were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by focusing on specific coping behaviours the participants employed, while also being mindful as to how the specific cultural ethos and edifices, as well as labeling, played themselves out across the data. The 6 phases advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006) was carried out in identifying the initial codes, themes and then writing up the analysis. The initial codes identified were mainly various coping behaviours such as telling the mother, telling a friend, scolding the perpetrator, and keeping silent. These initial codes were then collated and categorized into second order themes (telling a friend, telling the parents, getting support from colleagues were categorized into the theme social support). With the labeling theory and social cultural contexts in mind, these categories and themes were further analyzed to explain how and when these behaviours occur. For example, in what instances are social support not obtained by respondents and why were analyzed and explained. Then, these second order themes were collated into more broader themes (social support, assertive responses, and confrontational behaviour were themed under reactive strategies). Subsequently, three main themes and nine sub themes emerged from the analysis. These main themes and sub themes were defined and compared against each other throughout the process of analysis. The underlying assumptions and ideologies (such as socio-cultural structures and the resultant stereotypes and prejudices about women and marriage) that shape the participants reactions - at the latent level (Braun & Clark, 2006) were captured in order to understand and present the complicated story of how divorced women coped with harassment.

Table 1 below indicates the background of participants together with the types of harassment they have faced, which will facilitate the understanding of the context within which the participants employed various coping mechanisms.

Table 1
Participants' Socio Demographic information

Pseudonym	Age	Divorced duration	Organizational position	Organization/industry	Type of harassment faced	Source of harassment
Sameera	34	5 years	Senior Lecturer	Government University	3. Rumour-mongering 4. Unwanted remarks/derogating remarks Ostracization and social exclusion 5. Denial of promotions and positions 6. Dismissing of achievements	Senior Colleagues
Malini	37	3 years	Teacher	Government school	7. Sexual propositions 8. Unpleasant flirtation 9. Unwanted remarks/derogating remarks Ostracization and social exclusion	Colleagues of same school; Superiors; Colleagues from other schools
Jeevani	36	6 years	Manager	Telecommunication industry	10. Rumour- mongering	Colleagues
Irosha	37	4 years	Assistant to the owner	Book shop	11. Denial of promotions and positions	Superiors
Achini	52	17 years	Teacher	International school	12. Unpleasant flirtation 13. Belittling 14. Sexual propositions	Colleagues
Barni	42	10 years	Senior executive	Financial institution	15. Denial of promotions/positions 16. Unpleasant flirtation 17. Rumour mongering	Superiors & Colleagues

Table 1 *Participants' Socio Demographic information* (continued).

Pseudonym	Age	Divorced duration	Organizational position	Organization/ industry	Type of harassment faced	Source of harassment
Chamari	57	25 years	Senior executive	Private sector	18. Sexual propositions 19. Unpleasant flirtation 20. Unwanted remarks/derogating remarks	Colleagues
Dasuni	43	6 years	IT professional	IT company	21. Unpleasant flirtation	Colleagues
Erangi	39	1 year	Manager	Telecommunic ation industry	22. Unpleasant flirtation 23. Rumour mongering 24. Ostracization and social exclusion	Colleagues
Flora	42	8 years	Counsellor	Free lance	-	-
Gena	55	20 years	Manager	Financial institute	25. Denial of promotion /rumour mongering	Superior
Rani	35	1 year	Manager	Supermarket chain	-	-

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate the numerous ways in which divorced women cope with their experiences of harassment at workplace. While prior studies report how victims use organizational options in coping with bullying and harassment (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010), the participants of the study have not considered this as an avenue or option to use in coping with their experiences. Participants have mainly relied on their personal resources and in certain instances on social support in dealing with harassment by being more externally focused. The main themes that emerged can be categorized as reactive strategies, proactive strategies, and endurance/avoidance strategies. These main categories and the specific responses under them are explained in more detail below.

5.1 Reactive Strategies

Participants appear to react to their experiences in different ways such as by seeking social support, confrontation, or assertive responses.

5.1.1 Seeking Social Support

Social support is a commonly discussed coping mechanism in harassment research (McDonald, 2012), in research on divorced women (Newton-Levinson et al., 2014), and related to other stigmatized individuals (Glass, Mowbray, Link, Kristjansson, & Buchoiz, 2013). There were a number of participants who have sought social support from others such as parents, peers, and friends. While for few participants parents have been their sole source of support in handling and coping with harassment at work through the support they provided indirectly and directly, few others stated how they were reluctant to confide in their parents as it would indicate that they are still vulnerable, worrying the parents or leading to unwanted interventions in their lives (problematizing the independence they have gained after the divorce).

Barni voiced this concern when she reported;

> Of course, I get their (parents) support... But if you go to tell them everything, they would start thinking that „she cannot do things on her own". That can mentally put you down.

On the contrary, Sameera had shared her experiences with her parents and had sought support from them.

> I tell everything to my mother, crying. And father too. It was the support of the two of them that helped me. I did not have very many friends too… My father would cite similar situations at his workplace and say, not to worry about these things. … But they gave me a tremendous emotional support. … That is what made me strong. It was an enormous support they gave.

Achini stated how her son had been her saviour where he would not isolate her when the harasser visited her home in pretense of friendship.

> But my son was like my guardian.

Few others stated how they confided in their friends and sought their support in the form of advice to handle their experiences. As Chamari mentioned;

> I will just talk to my friend and just handle it. No parents.

Achini also reported seeking help from a male friend when a husband of a colleague had started calling her and engaging in unwanted conversation of sexual nature.

> So I discussed this with my best friend‟s husband, who is also a very good friend of mine. I didn‟t want to tell my best friend, she gets really angry. She loves me very much. So she will get worked up and definitely call that man and scold. Her husband is a little but calm person. So I asked for his help. So I told him that so and so‟s husband is trying to be funny over the phone. And he said you can‟t just be nice to him. Next time he tried to tell you something, be harsh and tell him something and keep the phone. Be rude to him.

Sameera told of the support she received from few female friends when she was isolated at work due to her divorced status.

> Some junior girls were scared to talk to me or be seen with me…to walk with me somewhere. They scared that they too will get subjected to tales because of their association with me. Knowing that there were four friends of mine, who were my parallels, joined the staff with me as temporary lecturers. They would come searching for me and take me for tea. They were always with me in the faculty.

Other than for Sameera, none of the other participants indicated seeking support from colleagues at work. The participants specifically pointed out how they keep away from others at office and only interacted closely with friends from outside-office. This is not surprising as many participants had experienced harassment from other colleagues at work and hence would not trust others at office to provide the support. Moreover, the fact that the participants tend to hide their divorced status at office, also indicate how they will be reluctant to seek support from others at work, as it would lead to exposure of their marital status.

All in all, it was seen how the participants have carefully deliberated if and from whom they should seek support. Participants did not report of any negative consequences of seeking social support contrary to what some prior studies report (Konstam et al., 2016) and indicated how social support had helped them in dealing with the harassment, and in very rare instance (Achini) in stopping the harassment.

5.1.2 Being Assertive
Assertive responses to harassment have been found to be rare, yet more effective in handling harassment (Salin et al., 2014). Similarly, being assertive in the face of harassment was rare among the participants in the present study. However, in the few instances, they were assertive, they have been more indirect in their assertiveness. For example, Chamari stated of her reaction when a superior (the Editor of a newspaper to which she contributed on a part time basis) invited her to go out with him

> And I told him very gently, „no, we are friends, but I don‟t want anything beyond that”.

Similarly, Achini stated how she handled an unwanted flirtation of a colleague once;

> He once asked me if I can invite him to my place for a drink. Then I said, „you better come with your wife and son, my kids too will love to meet your family".

In both these instances, the unwanted behaviour has stopped with the said reactions. Yet, it is clear, how even in these assertive instances, participants have been careful so as not to offend the perpetrators and have not directly asked them to stop their behaviour. The fact that the perpetrators were either superiors (for Chamari) or colleagues (for Achini) would have led to this reaction, where Chamari and Achini would have been careful not to disrupt the working relationship or to ensure that no retaliation takes place. It is said that employees who voice and confront perpetrators are often subject to retaliation from other organizational members (Salin et al., 2014).

5.1.3 Being Confrontational
Similar to assertive responses, confrontational response to harassment is also found to be rare (Salin et al., 2014). However, there were very few participants who reported acting aggressive or confrontational towards the perpetrators. This has especially been when the perpetrators were young colleagues at subordinate positions. Barni stated how she reacted to unwanted flirtation by younger colleagues at work;

> I am tough and can be rude. So I will directly tell them, „brother" and tell them off and then they will be put in their place. And they are scared.

Confrontation can indicate the power play (Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997) between the participants at a senior position and harassers at the equal or junior position, with clearly more power with the participants. In earlier instances, the participants have acted assertively in a way so as not to offend the perpetrators when they were superiors and colleagues because they have more or equal power. Yet, with subordinates, the victims will not see a need to be cautious with their responses, with more power they have over the perpetrators, and hence would have acted confrontational.

It was interesting to note that none of the participants - all of whom cited numerous instances of being harassed at work - had reported their experiences to higher authorities. They tended to see themselves as isolated and a source of injustice, and hence appeared to not believe that justice will be served in the organization and also they did not want to get noticed in the organization further by complaining.

5.2 Avoidance Strategies
Similar to previous findings (Salin et al., 2014), a very common coping mechanism of participants was to avoid the harassing behaviour by ignoring the behaviour, avoiding the context or the perpetrator, feigning ignorance and keeping away from work.

5.2.1 Ignoring the Behaviour
Many participants had resorted to ignoring the harassing behaviour as a means of coping with their experiences, even though prior research indicates how ineffective ignorance is in stopping harassment. Chamari"s response to the rumor that was spread about her at the office (that she was trying to attract and tempt boys in the office) when she bought a new sports car, was a clear demonstration of how participants have ignored harassing behaviour.

I just ignored it. I didn"t want to. …. It was not that it doesn"t affect me. But over the years I have become different...I have become tough….when you come out of a situation as I have (in the divorce), where I was asked to leave my home overnight, cast aside just like that, without any income…..you realize you need to be tough to survive.

In a similar vein, sameera also stated how she ignored harassment she experience

Sometimes, certain positions are given to my juniors and nothing was given to me. I didn"t go to argue in any way in those instances. I never asked, why I am not given that position as I am more senior than her. I never asked.

In many instances, the participants tend to see their passive responses as a means of demonstrating their toughness or patience. Yet, ignoring a harassing behaviour will not stop the harassment and continuation of harassment can bring further negative consequences to the participants.

5.2.2 Feigning Ignorance

Few of the participants have also engaged in feigning ignorance in the face of harassment in coping with their experiences. This has been especially the case when the perpetrator was a customer or a superior. As Barnie shared her experiences;

At that instances, with I smile I just slip through that situation. You cannot fight with customers. The best way to handle this is to show that you didn"t understand what they are coming to".

Malini had feigned ignorance when a senior colleague engaged in unwanted flirtation with her;

He came to the exam hall I was on duty (he was in another hall) and said „I saw you in my dreams yesterday" and things like that. Then, again, the next day too he would say, „I saw you in my dreams yesterday night too". He expected me to ask him what he saw… So I didn"t ask. I will just smile and say „oh is that so sir" and I didn"t encourage him. I didn"t go to inquire. So then he didn"t have anything to proceed with.

It was clear that the participants have yet again acted in a manner so as not to offend the perpetrator.

5.2.3 Keeping Away from Work

In an extreme case of avoidance, Sameera shared being absent from work and isolating herself to avoid being harassed.

I can"t go to people individually and say I am not at fault. So I stopped coming to University (office) regularly, I became very isolated and stayed at home. I suffered a lot. I got scared to talk to people. Even for friendship, I got scared to talk to anybody, because it will end up with a tale.

She also stated how she contemplated resigning to put an end to harassment, but later on decided to bear everything and stay. Her father had gone to the extent of exploring other job opportunities (vacancies) in other universities for Sameera.

Malini reflected about the transfer she requested to avoid harassment from a particular principal and colleague. Other than for Sameera, none of the other participants declared of evading work contexts or existing workplaces (resignations) as an option they considered, which can again be linked to their financial vulnerability as single mothers and financially independent individuals. Prior research affirms this, where it is said that financial or positional vulnerability can lead to silence among victims of sexual harassment (Chamberlain, Crowley, Tope & Hodson, 2008; Salin et al., 2014).

5.3 Proactive Strategies
It was particularly interesting to note how the participants would go to great extend to avoid being harassed. All the participants had used various strategies to this end, by hiding their divorced status, projecting a tough exterior and keeping a distance with others at work.

5.3.1 Hiding the Divorced Status
Prior research has highlighted how divorcees carefully manage information about their divorce due to shame or guilt (Gerstel, 1987). Impression management and nondisclosure is also discussed by researchers as a means to prevent vulnerability from the consequences of a stigmatized identity such as fear of being judged, (Konstam et al., 2016)

„Gender masking" was a term discussed by Fox & Tang (2016) in research on how women cope with harassment in gaming, to mean how women make decisions, to avoid being identified as a woman as presumably, these masking strategies make women less likely to experience gender specific harassment.

Similarly, participants also appear to hide their divorced status as a means of managing and avoiding harassment. Other than for one participant, all the other participants stated how they hide their divorced status from others at work as much as possible, knowing the possibility of harassment (especially sexual harassment) due to the various stigma and stereotypes associated with divorced women.

As Erangi stated;

> In my earlier workplace, I did not tell anybody. Only my director, to whom I directly reported to, knew about my situation. Others didn"t know.

Similarly, Flora and Rani also stated how they hide their divorced status;

> Nobody at my workplace knows I am divorced. I do not tell them anything. (Flora)

> Only my friends and family know I am separated. I don"t tell anybody of this. (Rani)

Malini stated the reasons for this;

> Every man that I have told this (about the divorce), just turn on a different direction with me as soon as they hear this.

While Chamari is the one participant who said she does not hide her divorced status, she also had reservations about the stigma, stereotypes, and perceptions that exist in the society that keeps many women from revealing their marital status.

> Propositions and insinuations are there when they think that you are available, that you are easy. These presumptions are extensively there. People think that divorced women are lonely and that they need companionship and because they need companionship they are willing to give you anything and that sort of thing.

5.3.2 Demonstrating a Tougher Self

Almost all the participants also stated that they put up a very tough, outspoken, self-confident front so that people would be scared to approach them/harass them. As Chamari stated;

> What I also feel is that guys too would proposition you and harass you and put you down if you are kind of a more timid person…I think the persona of who you are had given the message that I am not to be messed with.

Many of them stated how this is not their normal self, but a facade to protect themselves from unwanted behaviour and harassment from others at work. Barni vouched for this when she said;

> If you are soft you cannot survive. Even though your real character is not that, you try to show a very hard front to the world. Otherwise, you cannot survive.

5.3.3 Social Withdrawal

Moreover, the participants stated that they keep a distance with others at work and would avoid participating in common events such as office parties and get-to-gathers as much as possible, again to protect themselves from harassment. Barnie;

> I do not let them (colleagues) close. At office, it"s all official. I do not associate with people at work at a social level, those are all at the official level. All my social relationships are outside workplace".

She further asserted;

> Generally, I am not very talkative, I don"t go to talk with them much. Because of that, I can survive. I talk less with people, like, I indicate that I am aggressive [sarai]… When you are like that, people don"t come to tell you things… And they had realized that there is no point in hurting me.

Jeevani also shared similar sentiments

> They never got the opportunity to bully me, because I think I am a stronger person. So they were scared of me… Even now, when I work, nobody tries to mess with me. Maybe I give like a strong signal like „don"t mess with me" kind of thing.

Few also stated how they equip themselves with qualifications and independence (financial and otherwise) so that people cannot take advantage of them and they do not have to depend and endure harassment from anybody. Erangi;

> I think we have to alpha women. Like be very strong and well equipped with education and qualifications. I have realized when you are that alpha woman you are safe. You develop that demeanor.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

It is thus seen how divorced women reacted, avoided or acted proactively to their harassing experiences at work. Even though the participants have sought social support from family and friends in certain instances, they have mainly attempted to solve the situations by themselves, never considering seeking formal help or advocacy from their workplaces. According to Fitzgerald"s (1990) categorization, these responses of participants can be identified as externally focused (such as avoidance, appeasement, assertion, and seeking social support) rather than internally focused (endurance, denial, detachment, reattribution, and illusory control).

Participants were either attempting to avoid the harassment or react to it depending on the context and especially the type of the harasser. When they were more powerful than the harassers, they did not hesitate to confront the harasser, whereas, when the harasser had more power (such as a superior or customer), the participants were either silent or feigned ignorance, so as not to offend the harasser. On rare occasions, the participants were also assertive, yet again in a manner not to cause offense to the harasser. The fact that the participants were mostly financially vulnerable - as a result of divorce - too could have contributed to these coping behaviors. Thus, power play, whether it is hierarchical or financial, is clearly evident in these instances (Cortina & Magley, 2009).

None of the participants seeking formal redress, even when organizations had formal avenues such as grievance handling procedures, indicate either participants lack of trust in the system or their reluctance to come forward due to some other reason. However, this indicates important implications for organizations in designing and implanting redress mechanisms.

Stigma and prejudices about divorced women that exist in the society such as that they are sexually promiscuous and available, plays as a foundation for these responses of the participants. They are relentlessly engaged in avoiding and preventing current and future harassment as well as these stigmas and prejudices, by hiding their divorced status, demonstrating a tougher self and socially withdrawing. This is consistent with prior findings (Link et al., 1991) which document the deviants" engagement in numerous efforts to avoid further stigmatization. Konstam et al. (2016) and many other researchers (Kung et al., 2004; Newton-Levinson et al., 2014) discuss

non-disclosure, controlled information sharing and impression management divorced women engage in, as means to prevent being targets of consequences of stigma. Hiding their divorced status was a prominent preventive strategy, which can also be a reason for them to not seek organizational help in dealing with harassment. It is clear to see the underlying attempts of the participants to maintain or reconstitute their self-concept and convey strong, tough, independent women, who are not sexualized- an attempt at defying the socially expected behaviors from divorced women. However, by hiding their divorced status they were attempting to defy the deviant label pasted on them, yet, they were in a way engaged in secondary deviance. Other anti-social behaviors the participants resorted to such as confrontation and isolation also indicate the secondary deviant behavior (Ray & Downs, 1986) of the participants. Moreover, behaviors such as social withdrawal and secrecy can impair social ties and lead to other negative consequences (Link et al., 1991) to these divorced women. Especially, lack of social network and social support at work can exacerbate harassment discrimination and stigma these participants face at work.

Also, while "assaults to personal dignity might spark remedial voice among people who value themselves strongly because of the core belief that the self is important and worthy of respectful working relations" (Harlos, 2010, p. 324), the participants appear to prefer silence even when their personal dignity was challenged. This is noteworthy, especially in a culture where women"s dignity is much valued. Lack of self-esteem stemming from divorce (Gruber & Bjorn, 1982) and passive acceptance of stigma and prejudices (as well as self-stigma) might have led to this silence of participants.

Nevertheless, these passive and avoidance strategies will be ineffective in ending the harassment the participants face (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Salin et al., 2014). These strategies can actually lead to further stigmatization due to certain derogatory judgements formed about the victim (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) such as that the victim had done something to warrant harassment (Einarsen, 1999), the person is promiscuous (in instances of sexual harassment), has psychological issues (in instances of other forms of harassment).

7. Practical Implications

The results demonstrate how divorced women can resort to passive responses to their experiences of harassment, which can conceal the severity of the issue to this vulnerable group of employees. This highlight the need for organizations to formulate mechanisms to prevent and handle harassment divorced women face, despite their silence in the matter. According to Cortina and Magley (2003), those who bear harassment silently can incur worst negative consequences. Advocacy seeking (such as reporting or seeking advice from a superior or union representative) was rarely seen. Hence, organizational help is needed by way of effective grievance handling procedures, policies, counseling, and training for victims to cope with the issue, and for HR personnel and supervisors to prevent and help victims.

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