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ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCE POLICIES IN ENSURING WOMEN'S SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

Abstract

This paper aims to assess how human resource (HR) management policies affect women's workplace safety. In addition, this study analyzes the degree to which measures have been taken to ensure that working women have a safe environment. Responses from 208 women working in Saudi Arabia's small and medium-sized private businesses were gathered. The paper employed a survey questionnaire using snowball sampling technique. Thus, critical HR practices that have an impact on workplace safety for women are highlighted. As women frequently face these difficulties, the findings suggested that HR policies should tailor working women's needs in maternity, health, transportation, childcare, and a safe workplace. Moreover, support for divorced and widowed workers would significantly increase women's safety at work. Compared to other HR policies, there is a stronger correlation between medical and maternity leave. This paper supports research on women's safety and HR management in the Saudi context and has significant practical implications for practitioners.

Keywords workplace safety, HR policies, workplace harassment,

women's issues, workplace security

JEL Classification J24, M54, O15, J88

INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years, Saudi Arabian private sector companies have hired much more women than in the past, and some even operate without separating male and female personnel. However, it has been noted that these organizations have generally not shown much interest in women's safety at work. This study vividly underlines the need to respect the code of conduct to prevent unfair acts and improve the working conditions for women. It also highlights the importance of HR policies in defining workplace safety. In the past, there have been cases of exploiting working women's rights and safety in the private sector in various parts of the world. For example, one company declined to file a complaint after a woman complained about a co-worker even though they fired her from her position (Deshpande, 2013). In addition, Sharma (2010) discovered that 88% of women in the information technology (IT), knowledge management offshore, and business processing sectors encounter harassment and that many other women in other industries lack essential logistical and HR support.

Conversely, women today face many safety-related challenges and feel less comfortable at work. Even in this modern age, women's security remains a significant concern. Sexual harassment, work-place harassment, gender discrimination, gender wage gap, and other forms of discrimination affect women in a variety of settings, including at work and even at home. Sexual harassment has been

recognized as one of the unwelcomed conducts of sexual nature producing various interferes with employees' job performance. Hostile behavior, like unwanted pressure for sexual favors, unwanted looks or gestures, pinching, telephone calls, or leaning over, results in an intimidating and offensive work environment (Sahgal & Dang, 2017). Women are recognized as the core victim of workplace harassment. In addition, they suffer from various physical assaults that mainly include molestation, intentional physical conduct, rape, sexual battery, sexual verbal communication, and much more. These issues adversely impact employees' mental, physical, and psychological well-being (Friborg et al., 2017). Moreover, the ill-treatment of women in the organization reveals that a firm does not have a sufficient organizational culture for women and they do not have good policies that could be used to address such issues. Therefore, HR is liable to address the harassment issues seriously and develop different priorities by which prompt action can be taken for such ill-treatment. In addition, sufficient means can be induced accordingly to develop a friendly environment (Sheppard et al., 2020). Furthermore, Brennan and Rajan (2020) highlighted that the HR department must develop open communication with their employees. Moreover, a robust monitoring system should be induced accordingly, resulting in a healthy workplace environment.

In Arabic culture, women working outside the home is a relatively new idea. In fact, as foreign labor became increasingly prevalent due to the oil discoveries in various Arab nations, women began to leave the labor force in large numbers. After getting married, many women who could afford it gave up their jobs. Furthermore, they rarely return to paid jobs after leaving them. However, during the past few years, Arab women have made a more noticeable impact on the job market. Their position has expanded significantly, and they are now taking on entrepreneurial projects. As a result, women have begun to return to labor in several Arab nations, primarily as business owners or government employees. Nevertheless, notwithstanding these developments, there are still some significant obstacles. Zhu et al. (2019) defined the HR department's role in addressing different workplace issues. HR plays a critical role where they are liable to develop different policies that could be used to develop a sufficient organizational culture by which the issues associated with the workplace environment can be mitigated in the desired manner. On the other hand, HR is required to develop different policies by which the issues associated with biasedness can be mitigated, and HR can easily focus on their employee behavior to analyze the issues of workplace harassment and mitigate them timely. Moreover, HR also plays a vital role where different provisions should be introduced by which gender discrimination resulting in workplace harassment can be mitigated accordingly. However, there are different factors like gender inequalities and conflicts among coworkers causing different issues in understanding the role of HR policies to mitigate the workplace environment issues for women.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Workplace safety is determined as one of the core aspects by which various risks, illnesses, or injuries can be mitigated among employees. Workplace safety is considered one of the vital aspects by which their most valuable assets (i.e., employees) are protected (Obedgiu, 2017). However, workplace safety can be achieved through a variety of approaches that mainly include policies, procedures related to sexual harassment, internal complaints system, creating awareness among employees, the role of HR, and other organizational

practices (Vaiagae, 2020). Several procedures and policies are developed based on the overall management of a firm where different administrative processes are designed, and different means of workplace safety are integrated within the organization. However, significant issues regarding women's safety have been highlighted in the past decade and different issues on women's safety are observed (Spalluto et al., 2018). In the current decade, women have progressively earned higher standards in the corporate world. A noticeable increase in women's independence is observed, and they become more independent and are hired for reputable positions in the global corporate sector.

It has been analyzed that women have suffered from workplace harassment that results in severe issues for them (Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2020). On the other hand, the issues are not limited to harassment among women. However, significant issues like gender discrimination have also been observed that harm women in organizations (Roscigno, 2019).

Moreover, Shaw et al. (2018) defined that workplace harassment produces a negative impact on employee productivity. It has been evaluated that workplaces have toxic environments because of different issues like sexual harassment, which not only results in job disengagement and dissatisfaction but also negatively impacts employee productivity. This also results in different issues connected to women's mental health because they experience lower physical and psychological well-being (Au et al., 2021). The consequences of workplace harassment do not harm employees, but it also results in severe issues for the organization. Employees, specifically women suffering from workplace harassment, leave the firm and look for different employment opportunities in the respective market. Employees withdraw their employment from the firm where harassment arises, and such firms also suffer because they have to look for different resources to fulfill the required designation (Hudson, 2017; Ramzy et al., 2018).

Mainiero and Jones (2013) examined different aspects of workplace safety issues for women. The key concept was based on the work environment and harassment issues in firms among women. This study evaluated the use of social media in which harassment has been examined in the workplace. It further examined the role of human resource management in addressing these issues in the internet era. Secondary research data were used with an extensive literature review. However, the findings define that the HR department is liable for which different policies as they should be devised accordingly to provide a secure workplace environment for women. Marín et al. (2021) also examined different issues associated with workplace harassment and vulnerabilities among Hispanic women. This study was based on the primary research data; one-on-one structured interviews were conducted. The findings define that

the most common issue is workplace sexual harassment. The study findings further highlight that the women hired temporarily are more affected because of sexual harassment and a noticeable lack of organizational policies by which the issues associated with sexual harassment among women are not addressed to an expected level. Kabir et al. (2018) also evaluated various vulnerabilities of women in the workplace. This study was conducted using a secondary approach in which the case of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh was examined. The research findings determined significant issues that result in women's vulnerability; they also suffer from different issues and are not privileged with their rights.

Several studies have been reviewed, defining workplace harassment and working environment among women as the most common issue in all occupations and industries. It has been evaluated that women are found vulnerable and it has been the most unreported incident in the world (Sadruddin, 2013; Mellgren et al., 2018). The most common barriers in the reporting process are those women who fear getting fired from their job. Women do not have sufficient information regarding the processes by which actions can be taken accordingly. Furthermore, there are different issues when women face different threats from their harasser and thus resist reporting such incidents (Quick & McFadyen, 2017; Thurston et al., 2019). On the other hand, several studies also concluded that female workers hired in low-income jobs are more exposed to various occupational and safety hazards. This issue exists among women because organizations do not cater to their needs. Therefore, women have to suffer from various workplace safety issues to fulfill their financial needs. Besides, various occupational variables like physical differences, long working hours, occupational stereotypes, and social variables like race and ethnicity, gender pay gap, and sexual harassment are also present. Therefore, they result in different issues for women's safety in the workplace (Fitzgerald, 2017; Williams, 2018; Keplinger et al., 2019).

Fenech et al. (2019) evaluated the role of human resource management in addressing organizational issues. This study has examined the changes in the role of human resource management explicitly

focusing on the digital era. Moreover, this study was conducted in the United Arab Emirates, based on the primary research data with interviews. The findings suggest that HR plays a crucial role in addressing organizational issues by which various policies and a good environment should be developed to mitigate organizational issues in the required manner. Mom et al. (2019) defined organizational ambidexterity as one of the core aspects by which different exploitative activities are initiated within the organization. This study was based on secondary research data in which HR practices and their influence were examined accordingly. The findings define that HR practices are influential in inducing effective practices, achieving vital results, and mitigating issues to an anticipated level. Several studies define HR as vital in addressing various organizational issues. For example, the literature suggests that different issues associated with harassment or work safety for women are observed, resulting in different issues for the organization. It also has an intense impact on organizational competitiveness. However, it has been determined that HR has to play its role in such a manner where neutral policies should be developed and beneficial practices should be induced to have effective decision-making (Harrison & Bazzy, 2017; De Stefano et al., 2018).

Research on women in Arab corporate settings showed that they continue to experience discrimination. Several obstacles women face in the workplace were discovered, such as systems of oppression, racial biases, social norms, unsubtle and subtle hostility, and challenges with work-life balance (Chatty, 2000; Omair, 2008). According to Jamali et al. (2005), there is a selection bias against working women in Lebanon, particularly those in executive positions, because it is perceived that their gender and specific job criteria are incompatible. In addition, women's lack of access to professional and financial networks, inability to obtain adequate start-up financing, and lack of business education have all been problems for female entrepreneurs (Dechant & Lamky, 2005; Itani et al., 2011; McElwee & Al-Riyami, 2003). Although others claim that modernization would likely lessen conventional ideas about women's responsibilities, there are still negative sentiments against women's labor in many nations (Abdalla, 1996; Elamin & Omair, 2010; Sidani & Gardner, 2000; Mostafa, 2005). It is rapidly becoming more common for them to have managerial positions, but they continue to face obstacles due to a perceived conflict between their new leadership roles and their roles as parents (Al-Lamky, 2007; Metcalfe, 2006). Additionally, prospects for international management become limited due to cultural expectations, a lack of organizational response, and occasionally women's own preferences (Hutchings et al., 2010).

As per Saudi Arabia's 2030 vision, the Saudi government's new HR policies and regulations for working women are amended and ensured, as demonstrated on the national platform of the Saudi government portal. These policies are extended to a wide range of women's safety issues at work. Concerning Islamic law and gender equality, both men and women are given complementary equality considering the characteristics of their gender. Therefore, many transformations were committed to promoting women's engagement in economic development. However, the HR policies emphasized on few policies pertained to women, viz., equality in the workplace, remuneration, learning, training, transportation, maternity and healthcare, support for the widow and divorced working women, etc. In addition, Saudi companies prohibit employing females in hazardous and detrimental industries like petrochemical production, construction, and heavy machinery manufacturing to safeguard the working women and maintain ergonomics.

Similarly, women are not employed in night shift jobs. Working women are provided with adequate medical care and allowed for maternity leave four weeks before and six weeks after childbirth. Women are free from any kind of threats that will dismiss them from their job. Moreover, they can take a one-hour break during the work to breastfeed their young ones. As per the Saudi law on segregation of gender at work, women have a different working environment, office entrances, and restrooms and are also facilitated with caregivers and daycare (Qurrah Program) for their children below six years old. However, such facilities are limited to companies that have more than fifty working women. In addition, a woman whose husband is deceased can avail of not less than fifteen days of paid leave. Such widowed and divorced women are supported by the government to fulfill

their housing, socio-economic, and employment needs, as well as guaranteed pension services, association, and consultation services.

Furthermore, all the working women are given transportation (Wusool) facilities to commute to work. Tamheer program is a training program to advance the skills of women workers. This program also supports women in finding new jobs and obtaining training certificates (National Platform). Intending to improve employee well-being and a friendly work environment, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role of HR in ensuring the safety of women in the workplace in Saudi Arabia. Based on the above theoretical background, the study formulates these hypotheses:

- H1: Enabling a safe working environment will significantly positively affect women's work-place safety.
- H2: Provision of maternity leave will significantly positively affect women's workplace safety.
- H3: Provision of medical care will significantly positively affect women's workplace safety.
- H4: Provision of caregivers and daycare will significantly positively affect women's workplace safety.
- H5: Provision of transportation will significantly positively affect women's workplace safety.
- H6: Securing safety for widows and divorced women will significantly positively affect women's workplace safety.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Sample and data collection

The data collection was done with the use of both close-ended and open-ended questions. The study used the snowball sampling technique. According to Parker et al. (2019), snowball sampling is significant because it is easy to target the research population and identify the other potential topics of the research area. Therefore, a total of 208 women in

different firms were recruited, and both open and close-ended questions were used regarding the role of HR in ensuring workplace safety for women. The study aimed to reach at least 30 companies in the Riyadh region of Saudi Arabia. However, only 18 firms accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Sampled companies include four educational, two financial and banking, six information technology and infrastructure solutions, three real estate, two retail, and two automobile companies.

This paper employed a quantitative research approach. Hence, primary data were collected from various Saudi Arabian organizations with women working groups. According to Clark and Vealé (2018), primary data collection is significant because it allows for the integration of rationalized and real-time information by which the identified phenomena can be addressed. In this paper, the provisions of primary data collection were significant because the real-time factors were examined accordingly, and the implications of HR policies to ensure women's workplace safety were investigated. Another benefit of using the primary research method is defined by Mazhar et al. (2021). The experiences of the employed respondents can be evaluated accordingly based on the identified phenomena, and the findings can be presented in a preferred manner. The primary data collection method was significant because it provided sufficient grounds to examine different perceptions of women regarding workplace safety and the implications of HR policies.

In this paper, the data were analyzed using two different techniques. It has been stated that two different sorts of questions (i.e., open-ended and close-ended) were used to collect the data. However, the statistical analysis for the close-ended questionnaire was performed using two different techniques (frequency analysis and correlations). The application of frequency analysis provides a sufficient measure to determine the extent to which the implications of HR policies are sufficient for ensuring women's workplace safety.

On the other hand, the correlation test has been applied to determine the relationship between HR policies and women's satisfaction level based

on workplace safety. Moreover, thematic analysis techniques were used to examine the open-ended questionnaire. The questions were segregated into different themes based on the identified phenomena. The findings are presented accordingly to examine the perceptions of HR individuals regarding policies to ensure women's workplace safety. The survey questionnaire was developed in English on a five-point Likert scale (5 as strongly agree, 4 as agree, 3 as neutral, 2 as disagree, and 1 as strongly disagree). It was administered online and distributed only to working women. The demographic analysis shows that 71.63% are in the age group of 21 to 40 years, 18.26% are between 41-50, and 10.11% are between 51-60. Among them, 14.90% hold vocational and training courses, a majority (60.57%) hold Bachelor's degrees, 18.26% Master's degrees, and 6.25% hold Ph.D. In addition, 26.92% are single, 52.88% are married, 11.53% are divorced, and 8.65% are widows.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Source: Primary data analysis.

Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)				
Age (A)						
21 to 30 years	60	28.85%				
31 to 40 years	89	42.78%				
41 to 50 years	38	18.26%				
51 to 60 years	21	10.11%				
	Education					
Vocational	31	14.90%				
Bachelor's	126	60.57%				
Master's	38	18.26%				
Ph.D.	13	6.25%				
	Marital status	;				
Single	56	26.92%				
Married	110	52.88%				
Divorced	24	11.53%				
Widow	18	8.65%				

2.2. Development of measures

The measures were developed based on the identified constructs from the literature and the HR policies of the Saudi government. Safety working environment was measured with nine items; maternity leave was measured with four items; the medical facility was measured with three items; caregiver opportunity was measured with three items; transportation facility was measured with

three items; safety for the widow and divorced was measured with three items. All the items were developed on a five-point Likert scale.

3. RESULTS

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) method with principal component analysis (PCA) under varimax rotation was used to determine the underlying dimensions. The analysis revealed the acceptable condition of all the factor loadings, above the required cutoff values of 0.60, illustrating acceptable reliability (Table 2). In addition, the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) is in a tolerable range of above 0.7 verifying the reliability condition (Nunnally, 1978). The factorability conditions were also confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.837 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity (p < 0.001). The factor loadings of EFA are from 0.779 to 0.925, with an alpha value of 0.861 for SWE. ML factor has loadings from 0.749 to 0.892, with an alpha value of 0.823. MF factor has loadings from 0.764 to 0.886, with an alpha value of 0.803. CGDC factor has loadings from 0.785 to 0.869, with an alpha value of 0.766. TF factor has loadings from 0.768 to 0.888, with an alpha value of 0.834. Finally, SWD factor has loadings from 0.721 to 0.811, with an alpha value of 0.742.

The correlational matrix (Table 3) also showed a significant positive correlation among all the constructs. The MF and ML were observed to have a robust and positive association with WWS, with values of 0.681 and 0.664, respectively. On the other hand, the CGDC was found to have the least positive significant effect on WWS among all the variables, with a value of 0.168. Moreover, the correlation between HR policies and workplace safety has also been examined to determine the relationships between various HR policies and workplace safety. Table 3 defines the correlation results based on the obtained data. It has been determined that all the HR policy variables are positively correlated with women's workplace safety. This confirms that HR policies play a positive role in addressing workplace safety issues among women in various organizations. Correlation coefficients using the Pearson approach were conducted to test the research hy-

Table 2. Mean, factor loadings, and Cronbach's alpha

Constructs	Measures	Mean	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Safe Working Environment (SWE)	In my company, women are prohibited from being employed in dangerous/ harmful working environment		0.865	
	My company does not allow night shifts for women		0.925	
	We have a separate rest area for women during working hours		0.832	
	My company ensures various significant training programs for women's safety at work There are sufficient active anti-harassment policies in my company		0.779	
			0.798	
	HR is liable to develop transparent communication policies with women to address their safety issues at work	4.58	0.854	0.861
	My company's HR develops different policies to monitor employee behavior to mitigate harassment issues and ensure workplace safety for women		0.836	
	In my opinion, successful regulation of workplace harassment policy ensures mental health and well-being among women		0.844	
	In my opinion, HR should implement different safety programs to ensure women's safety in workplaces		0.795	
	My company provides women with fair maternity leave with full pay		0.861	0.823
	My company provides medical facilities during childbirth		0.892	
Maternity Leave (ML)	My company accepts women to extend their maternity leave without pay for a year	3.64	0.837	
	I do not feel there is a threat of job dismissal for pregnant or women during maternity leave		0.749	
(MF)	There are sufficient and necessary medical facilities for women if any accidents at work		0.886	0.803
	My company provides reasonable sick and emergency leave for working women	3.56	0.764	
	My organization provides full or partial medical insurance for women and their family		0.813	
Caregiver /	My company has daycare center facility to keep children below six years during the work time		0.785	0.766
Daycare Facility (CGDC)	My company provides me with one hour break for breastfeeding	3.82	0.869	
(CGDC)	The daycare and caregiver facility needs improvements		0.854	
	My company has a separate transportation facility or transportation allowance for working women		0.825	0.834
Transportation Facility (TF)	The transportation program (Wusool) for working women needs to be improved appropriately	4.26	0.768	
	My company has sufficient car parking space for women		0.888	
Safety for	My company facilitates paid leave for women whose husband was deceased for not less than the first fifteen days		0.811	0.742
Widowed/ Divorced (SWD)	My company supports widowed and divorced women with women empowerment and housing facility	3.26	0.746	
,	My company offers pensions for widowed and divorced women		0.721	

Table 3. Correlation matrix

Source: Author's elaboration.

Constructs	SWE	ML	MF	CGDC	TF	SWD	wws
SWE	1	0.243*	0.436**	0.221*	0.546**	0.327* *	0.561***
ML	-	1	0.735**	0.725**	0.687**	0.185*	0.664***
MF	-	-	1	0.412**	0.312**	0.553**	0.681***
CGDC	-	_	_	1	0.437**	0.513**	0.168*
TF	-	_	-	_	1	0.692**	0.564**
SWD	-	-	-	-	-	1	0.468*
WWS	-	_	_	_	_	-	1

Note: N = 208; *** correlation is highly significant at 0.01; ** correlation is moderately significant at 0.01; * correlation is significant at 0.01.

potheses of the study. Table 4 demonstrates that the data supports all the hypotheses (*H1*, *H2*, *H3*, *H4*, *H5*, and *H6*).

Table 4. Summary of hypotheses testing

Relationships	Coefficient	t-values	Result
SWE \rightarrow WWS (H1)	0.365**	3.268	Supported
ML o WWS (H2)	0.561***	4.184	Supported
$MF \rightarrow WWS (H3)$	0.642***	4.898	Supported
CGDC → WWS (<i>H4</i>)	0.229**	4.575	Supported
TF $ ightarrow$ WWS (<i>H5</i>)	0.284**	3.319	Supported
SWD \rightarrow WWS (<i>H6</i>)	0.464***	4.351	Supported

Note: * *p* < .05; *** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001.

4. DISCUSSION

According to Raj et al. (2020), women's workplace safety has been determined as one of the most highlighted issues, and HR is considered a crucial part of addressing these issues. It has been determined that most of the employed respondents agreed that HR should implement different safety programs to mitigate the issues associated with workplace safety among women. MF and ML showed the most robust association with WWS; most women agreed that any organization must have minimum and sufficient facilities for regular medical check-ups, first aid, and maternity needs as a safety priority in their workplace. Moreover, no organization can ensure women's safety without such basic facilities.

Furthermore, organizations must ensure the safety of widows and divorced. In addition, the HR department is liable if any harassment incident has occurred within the organization. SWE has a significant positive relation with WWS, which means a company must safeguard its women employees by avoiding them working in dangerous workplaces and during night shifts, providing them separate rest areas and flexible working hours, and actively following anti-harassment policies to enhance women's mental health and well-being. These findings were also concurrent with Ferris et al. (2018), who described that HR plays a significant role in mitigating workplace harassment.

The survey findings showed that most respondents agreed that anti-harassment policies should be implemented accordingly. Thus, there should be no such practice of workplace harassment. According to Hemel and Lund (2018), legal frameworks are also significant, and the provisions should be implemented accordingly by which all the factors can be addressed in the HR policies. The results also found a positive attitude toward legal frameworks; proper policies should be developed using these legal frameworks. Furthermore, the HR respondents have also defined that HR should have all the information regarding the legal provisions by which all the policies can be developed accordingly. Moreover, employees should have all the information regarding the legal actions that could be taken against them.

Therefore, the findings of this study are consistent with other research studies associated with women's workplace safety and the respective HR policies. Furthermore, a positive correlation has been determined, which defines that HR policies play a vital role in which the issues associated with childcare and transportation facility for women can mitigate and secure workplace culture within the organizations.

CONCLUSION

With the new HR rules and regulations in Saudi Arabia regarding the working environment, women's safety at the workplace has been determined as one of the vital issues. However, this highlights the role of HR department and its policies in addressing the issues associated with women's safety in the workplace. After analyzing all these aspects, it has been concluded that the HR department should develop different policies based on the legal frameworks by which employees will have all the information regarding the consequences of workplace safety or harassment observed. On the other hand, the HR department is also required to have different training and awareness programs within the organization by which a secure organizational culture and a protected work environment can be provided for women within their workplace. It is recommended that every organization strictly practice these HR policies, which are very specific to women, as they can ensure women's safety in the workplace. It would also en-

courage women to work participation with an improved status in society for developing Arab countries. Finally, it is required in the present scenario for the Saudi nation. This study can contribute to providing implications for many organizations on how to retain women employees.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Sania Khan.
Data curation: Sania Khan.
Methodology: Sania Khan.
Formal analysis: Sania Khan.
Investigation: Sania Khan.
Software: Sania Khan.
Supervision: Sania Khan.
Validation: Sania Khan.
Visualization: Sania Khan.

Writing – original draft: Sania Khan. Writing – review & editing: Sania Khan.

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