Waitresses in an Emerging City of North East India:

Status, Challenges and Perceptions

Daisy Rani Hazarika, Biman Lahkar
Assistant Professor, Centre for Studies in Geography, Dibrugarh University.

Abstract

Restaurant business has been an integral part of any urban economy. Like in any other sector, women form a major portion of the workforce in this business also. Although women’s participation in restaurant business is not quite a recent phenomenon, yet the many facets of issues and challenges that women face in their workplaces still remains a problem that demands immediate solution. These issues and challenges however take various forms and may vary depending upon the variability of the place, culture or nature. Using various qualitative techniques, this paper attempts to explore the status and challenges women table servers experience in restaurants that are located in an emerging city. Dibrugarh, in the state of Assam, is an emerging city located in the North East of India. Added to the intricacies of an emerging city, Dibrugarh also has its own uniqueness of nature, culture and society, which adds to the complexities of a city in formation. In such a scenario, it also becomes pertinent to examine the perception of the people of the city on women table servers who are on a mission to be independent and self reliant. This paper finds that women, braving many issues and challenges, are slowly but steadily curving a niche for themselves in restaurant business in this part of the country.

Keywords: Waitress, restaurants, emerging city, Dibrugarh, status and challenges, perceptions, qualitative methods.
Introduction

Restaurants have been an integral part of human culture. They are essentially public spaces and are the institutions in the society that provide space for food, talk, get-together and also various celebrations. However, restaurants are an urban concept. Relationship between the city and the restaurant has been old and popular. Cities and restaurants (food) have always shared an important relationship with one another (Scott, C. 2017). In fact, restaurants form one of the distinctive features of urban cultural landscape. With the expansion of urban areas, growth of restaurants is also on the rise. Catering to the taste buds of the dinners, restaurants over time have been witnessing a steady flow of customers and their demands have never been diminishing. Such being the popularity of the restaurants, pressure to serve their best is the common phenomena amongst the restaurateurs. This being the case, restaurateurs often bring gender diversity in their workplace so as to tap on to the talents of both the sexes.

Both men and women together form the human resource in any business organization. The staff working at various levels in a business set up collectively forms the human resource. Like in any other business, importance of human resource in restaurant business also cannot be denied. The success or failure of the organization is directly related to the management and performance of the human resource (Hayes & Ninemeier 2009).

Although men have a longer history of serving in the restaurants, women’s participation in restaurant business is also quite considerable. Today, women form a major portion of the workforce in restaurant business (Mishra, R, Mishra, N & Singh, M.K. 2017). However, although the workplace remains the same for both the sexes, yet the experiences and the perceptions of women working in such
environments may yield varied results. As such, this paper attempts to study the various issues and challenges that exist in the workplace of women table servers or ‘waitresses’ in restaurant business. It also attempts to study the status of the waitresses as well as the perceptions of the people frequenting these spaces towards the job of waitress.

**Study Area**

The study area of this research is Dibrugarh, an emerging city of the state of Assam in the north-eastern region of India. Dibrugarh is one of the major cities of Assam and is often called the communication and industrial hub of north-east India. It also forms a major educational city with a number of schools and colleges, a university – Dibrugarh University, a medical college-the Assam Medical College, law college, polytechnique college and the like. Besides, Dibrugarh also manages to locate itself in the map of medical tourism. Dibrugarh has many tea gardens along with some of the oldest tea factories of the country. As such, Dibrugarh has rightly earned the sobriquet for herself as the ‘tea city of India’.

With some of the major industrial setups like the OIL, BCPL and also with many important administrative offices and transport junctions like the airport, bus terminus and also the two railway stations that are located in the heart of the city, Dibrugarh, by every parameter is a fast evolving city.

As restaurants and urbanization share a positive correlation, the cityscape of Dibrugarh has been endorsing many restaurants and eateries of late. In addition to this, most of these restaurants have been employing women as table servers or waitresses instead of men or along with men. As such, Dibrugarh, as an emerging city with many restaurants provides for the most appropriate study area for this research.
Literature Review

According to Mumford (1961), in the past, cities grew around farmlands where population lived in clusters. It was around these places of food production that cities grew as a result of the agrarian lifestyle. With the progress in science and technology modes of production shifted. This shift in the modes of production not only increased the production of food but also brought a boom in population growth. With this the growth and expansion of cities were inevitable.

Restaurants have been an integral part of towns and cities. They are the cultural production of space and experience. However, the term ‘restaurant’ actually referred to a dish which is a broth offered by the owner of the restaurant to its customers (Symons, M. 2013). The foremost feature of a restaurant is ‘selling individualized meals’ (ibid). Hence, over time, restaurants came to be known as those places that served individualized meals to its customers. Preferences for a postmodern life style have increasingly and essentially propelled the ‘food thought’ in the everyday lives of the urban folks (Scott,C. 2017). Due to the growth of ‘experience economy’ in the urban areas (Landry, 2008) and the ever increasing appetite of the urban dwellers for the consumption of culture (Zukin, 1995), recent decades have seen a proliferation of restaurants in the urban landscape.

According to Whitaker,J (2015), during the 19th century, restaurant businesses basically employed women to work out of sight in the backgrounds and in the kitchen. Whereas men dominated the more public spaces of the restaurants- ‘the front of the house’ and were mostly engaged with its management. Over time, women were employed in a range of restaurant roles – from table servers to dish washers (ibid). Whitaker,J (2015) further states that women’s involvement in restaurant business became more prominent during the 1920s.
Women today form a considerable portion in the global workforce. Contributing their skill and labor in almost all spheres of the economy, women hold various positions in a range of economic activities. However in all the organizations gender plays a crucial role. According to Feldberg and Glenn (1983) and Bielby and Baron (1987), structuring of gender relations in work organization is done by employing male and female workers in different positions. This gendered division of labor has not only helped in building stereotypes but has also been successful in creating gendered meanings of work performances (Hall, E.T. 1993). As such certain jobs like nursing and serving table are essentially considered as ‘feminine’. However, certain specific workplaces like an integrated restaurant with both male and female table servers produce a more complex picture (ibid).

With both male and female workers existing in a common workplace, various challenges have often been reported that hampers the equal growth of both men and women in their profession. One of the foremost challenges that female workers face in work organization is sexual harassment. According to Gelfand et al (1995) and O’Connell and Korabik (2000), sexual harassment not only affects an individual at the personal level, but also adversely affects the organization concerned and the society at large. While sexual harassment can be of various types ranging from physical, verbal and behavioral, its meaning can also differ based on caste, creed, race, color, age and sex (Uggen and Blackstone, 2004). Literature is abundant with the fact that socially, women had to face discrimination throughout history in both formal as well as informal organizations (Korabik, 1993; Can, 1995; Shaffer et al., 2000). However, women still face discrimination of various kinds in every sphere of life including both organized and unorganized sectors of economic organizations (Sahgal and Dang, 2017). Work culture and work nature plays an important role in the incidences of cases of sexual
harassment. Further they are found to be deeply imbedded within various organizational practices (Chamberline et al, 2008).

As is evident that incidences of sexual harassment have the potential to not only disrupt the social harmony and create unnecessary social anguish, it becomes important to analyze the cause of such incidences. As an attempt, understanding the perceptions of people working in various organizations on women workers may lead to a better understanding of the underlying issues. Customers today feel entitled to receive the best service (Hart and Casserly, 1985). As such, providing the best of restaurant experience to its customers has been the prime objective of the restaurateurs. Fischer et al (1997) studied on the gender preference of customers in a restaurant. Their study found that customers did not exhibit “server stereotypes” and did not have any gender preferences of table servers. However, as sexual harassment is a real issue that demands real solutions, it becomes pertinent to explore what constitutes the perceptions of the people sharing workspaces with those of female workers.

Objectives

This research is based on the following specific objectives:

- To analyze the present status of the waitresses employed in the selected restaurants of Dibrugarh.
- To know the challenges faced by the waitresses in their job.
- To understand the perception of the people towards the job of waitresses.
Methodology

This research primarily employs qualitative methodologies. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, focused group discussions and also both formal and informal interviews, data has been collected using purposive sampling. 11 restaurants employing waitresses were selected from which the respondents were drawn from. These restaurants were also selected using purposive sampling technique. Data from a total of 40 waitresses were collected to study about the status and challenges. In addition to this, to understand the perceptions of the people, data from 110 customers frequenting these restaurants were collected and analyzed. Further, along with the restaurateurs, data from 25 male coworkers from the selected restaurants have also been collected to gain a better understanding of not only the perceptions of the people around the waitress’ job, but also to gain an in depth knowledge about the issues and challenges of gendered workspaces.

Findings

This exploratory research finds the following results:

Unskilled: Through interviews, this research finds that 100% of the respondents (waitresses) are unskilled in restaurant business. They do not posses any formal degree or training required for their job. However, it was found that they are given a brief orientation on the first day of their joining the job. Semi-structured open ended interviews revealed that most of the intricacies of the job are basically learnt over time through trial and error method.

Remuneration: During the focused group discussions with the respondents, it was brought to light that although the salary was the same for both male and female table servers, yet male counterparts enjoy certain fringe benefits which the waitresses do not enjoy. However, both male and female table servers revealed that
their salary was very low and that it isn’t quite enough to run a settled family life. Informal interviews with these informants also brought to light the fact that the restaurant owners mostly preferred unmarried young staff so as to avoid frequent leaves. As such they are paid less so that only young people would seek these jobs.

**Job preference:** Interviews with the respondents also revealed that they do not see their present job as a long term career choice. As most of the respondents are students, enrolled in various college courses across the city, they consider their job as only a means to an end, the end being the successful completion of their college course. For the other lot of the respondents who are not presently enrolled in any college courses, are the ones who are either planning to join college in the near future or are on the look for better job opportunities. Hence, interviews with these respondents revealed that they see their present job as a transitional phase, preparing themselves for a better long term career.

**Gendered Workplaces, Gendered Practices and Gender Equality:** Participant observation in the selected restaurants showed that although the workplaces were mostly gender neutral, yet certain practices were more skewed towards male counterparts. Both male and female staff endorsed the same uniform which is mostly a formal trouser and either a formal shirt or a polo-shirt. They also had the same work nature and there were no preferences of either the dish that is being served or the customers who are being served. Both waiters and waitresses served the customers equally without any ritual like waitresses serving only female customers and waiters serving only male customers. However, in all the restaurants it was found that the hearth of the kitchen was essentially a possession of a male cook or cooks. This indicates the fact that culinary practices in a professional setting like a restaurant are essentially gendered. Contrary to the fact that women
in homes occupied the hearth, this study found that in a professional kitchen women are not employed as cooks.

Participant observation showed that while the waiters could also take the charge of a cashier in the absence of the cashier, the waitresses however were never entrusted with such responsibility. Interviews with the managers and the owners brought to light that they consider women to be poor with calculations and as such couldn’t be entrusted with such responsibility. With men waiters enjoying the perks of higher responsibility, they often are placed at higher positions than the waitresses. Hence informal interviews with the waitresses revealed that their male counterparts did enjoy a greater scope of growth in restaurant business than themselves.

**Job Satisfaction:** Focused group discussions and informal interviews revealed that the respondents did not enjoy job security as there was limited scope for growth. However, they were also of the view that as freshers without skills in restaurant business, they consider waiting table as the most convenient of all the jobs that were readily available for them. With the opening of the Bogibeel Bridge, lot of young people from the nearby district of Dhemaji has come to the city in search of better life opportunities. Dhemaji, being a flood hit area, is one of the infrastructurally and economically backward districts of Assam. With more and easy availability of labor due to the influx from the nearby district, the restaurateurs could hire staff with lower wages. As such, it was further revealed through informal interviews with the waitresses that due to the low wages offered to them, they do not prefer waiting table as a long term career choice.

**Sexual Harassment:** Enquiries regarding sexual harassment at workplace were made on three aspects. These were physical, verbal and behavioral. Physical
harassment (or rape) included inappropriate touch against the victim’s will. Verbal harassment on the other hand meant verbal abuse including comments of a sexual nature. While behavioral harassment included all the gestures and behaviors that are sexual in nature. This research found that while 100% of the respondents reported to various sorts of verbal harassment, at least 4% have experienced physical harassment and 10% have reported to have been subjected to various kinds of behavioral harassment. In depth interviews with the respondents found that all the respondents who have experienced physical harassment have always ended in shifting their work places. As job opening for serving in a restaurant spread through the word of mouth, sometimes it was easier to find a job immediately and at other times these respondents had to go months without any job. On the other hand, out of the 10% of the respondents who have experienced any kind of behavioral harassment, 3% have also shifted their workplaces. However, it was learnt that all the respondents have either adjusted to the verbal harassments or have internalized any such abuse or comments. It was found from respondents who have shifted multiple workplaces, either due to any kind of sexual harassment or due to any other reason other than sexual harassment, that verbal harassment is the common and constant sexual harassment that waitresses experience everyday in their workplaces.

This research found that while physical harassment have been encountered mostly from peers or the male owner or the manager, verbal and behavioral harassment have been encountered from all quarters i.e. peers, owners and as well as customers.

While many incidences of resistances have also been reported, yet these cases of sexual harassment, in the words of a respondent, “…are mostly ignored and instead try to adjust with the situation as it is found in every organization”. Further
queries revealed that due to the financial burden and lack of opportunities for unskilled labors like them, they cannot but go back or stick to the job of waitress.

**Perceptions:** Study on the perceptions of the people on the job of waitress was done at three levels. At the first level, interviews were conducted with the owners of the restaurant, second level constituted interviews with the male co-workers and at the third level interviews with the customers frequenting these restaurants were conducted.

This research found that the owners of the selected restaurants were all males. Furthermore, it was found that of the 11 restaurants selected for the study, 88% of them had the owners themselves as managers. On the other hand, 12% of these restaurants had a person employed as manager by the owner. In either case, it was found that these restaurants did not have a female owner or manager. Interviews with the owners revealed that gender was not a concern for them in selecting their staff as their main concern was providing better service to the customers. These participants did not have any gender preference or gender biasness in selecting the staff for waiting tables. However, they preferred unmarried young women to married women, as, in the words of an owner, “...the unmarried women are more versatile and do not have any family obligations like childcare...” However, it was found that this was not the case in selecting the male table servers. In depth queries found that young men tend to be “more mobile” and often shifted workplaces seeking better opportunities. This, to the owners incurred loss to the restaurants.

However, interviews with the managers of these selected restaurants revealed that they prefer waiters to waitresses. In depth interviews revealed that in order to avoid cases of sexual harassment and fear of false accusations in such cases, they found it easier and convenient to deal with male staff. It is pertinent to underline that
neither the owner nor the managers were aware of the definition of sexual harassment and what constituted sexual harassment at the first place.  

Participant observation and content analysis of the workplaces showed that the male co workers were mostly older in age than the waitresses. Out of the 25 participants, 60% of them were married and 40% of the other is unmarried. It was found that 30% of the married male co workers preferred waiters to waitresses as they find waiters to be more efficient in their job than the waitresses. However, 70% of the married male co workers and 100% of the unmarried male co workers did not have problem working with waitresses in the restaurants. Nevertheless, it was found that of the 25 participants, none were aware of the definition of sexual harassment or what constituted sexual harassment.  

A total of 10 customers from each restaurant were selected to participate in a one to one interview. Convenient sampling technique was used in selecting the customers. Yet care was also taken to select customers from both the sexes. In addition to this, at least one all men’s group of customers and one all women’s group of customers, along with a family constituting the husband, wife and their child or children was also selected to examine the perception of the customers on the job of waitresses. Using semi structured interview it was found that none of the participants had any gender biasness or gender preference towards the table servers. The customers were found to be gender neutral and their prime concern was prompt and good service.  

**Conclusion**  

In an emerging city like Dibrugarh where the population is on the constant rise, various economic businesses are also on the rise. Providing better opportunities and many career options, Dibrugarh as a city has been attracting many people from
its nearby places. With better connectivity and many economic opportunities, Dibrugarh indeed is one of the emerging cities in the north east of India. Amongst the many businesses, restaurant business is one of the various successful businesses of Dibrugarh. This study found that like in any other business, women are also involved in the restaurant business of Dibrugarh. Women’s participation in this business is rather a recent phenomenon in this city. However, it was found that women’s participation in restaurant business was limited to waiting tables only. Nevertheless, this study attempts to throw light on the fact that women are slowly yet steadily creating a niche for themselves in this particular business. Like in many other organizations, women face many issues and challenges in restaurant business also. Mitigating these issues and challenges, workplaces and work nature of the waitresses can be made much pleasurable. For this, a better awareness on sexual harassment of women at workplaces is a must. This would not only include in making the entire staff gender sensitized but should also include awareness on what constitutes sexual harassment besides explaining what is sexual harassment and its various forms.

References:


