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Juggling, Surviving, and Winning: Women in Asia's Largest Rail Network

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Abstract

This study employs a qualitative approach to investigate the challenges and coping strategies of women employed in the Indian Railways, a field traditionally dominated by men. Through forty-four in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the research gathered rich qualitative data, which were analyzed using thematic analysis. These challenges stem primarily from a male-dominated organizational culture, queen-bee behaviour, and systemic gender biases embedded within organizational structures, systems, and policies, rather than solely from job demands and workload. Consequently, women employed four prominent coping strategies, including adopting masculine characteristics, acknowledging gender differences, proving their worth, and outweighing advantages over disadvantages to address the challenges of working in the railway industry. Given India's comparatively low female labour force participation rate relative to countries with similar levels of development (World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, 2025), these findings underscore a critical need for gender-sensitive policies aimed at reducing the challenges faced by women in non-traditional occupations. Employment relations can be improved over time by enhancing women's representation and making their voices heard, thereby increasing productivity, job satisfaction, and retention. This research significantly contributes to the gender and human resource management literature, leading to successful organizational change and productivity. The study calls for future research to determine whether the observed occupational gender segregation is an inherent characteristic of the occupation itself or a self-reinforcing cycle perpetuated by systemic and institutional barriers.

Keywords: challenges; coping strategies; male dominated occupations; railways; women employees