Chapter 6

Love at Work Site: Work, Relationships and Aspirations

The women respondents were participating in the study as they were part of the workforce and the primary reason for their presence in the city was work. Work constituted a major part of their lives which we discover in the narratives as we progress through this chapter.

6.1 Paid Work – Opportunities and Challenges

The women who were interviewed showed extensive and multiple approaches, with respect to family, to exercise agency in day to day affairs. While discussing their lives, it was apparent that irrespective of the value they attach to ‘what they do for living’, working for an assured sum of money along with other economic benefits had an impact on their lives. The underlying principle was that without their respective jobs life wouldn’t have been the same. Work was acknowledged to be the source of economic independence and thus bestows them with other freedoms.

‘...in college I used to see some of my friends who had started taking up work assignments, they always had money in hand to go out and spend without their parent’s permission...it feels great now because it’s my money and I can spend it the way I want...’ (Gitah, Customer care executive, 24 years)

‘I remember there was a time when I wanted to pierce my navel and I told my mom dad. Dad said when you start earning you pierce whatever you wish to, but till then no nonsense (laughs). Now that I earn I do whatever I wish and when they try and ask me, I tell him what he had said...’ (Arti, HR executive, 25 years)

Economic freedom and no dependence on family monetarily give them the experience of not just earning but also freedom of spending the way they like. The experience of making decisions vis-à-vis expenditure and saving helps them to improve their decision making skills. This also is an
opportunity for them to assert themselves within a structure which gives prime importance to wage earning and defined gender and intergenerational hierarchy.

‘...till I started working I also used to feel that I can’t spend my parent’s money... I had to listen to them...everyone in our family used to keep accounts of their pocket money and give it to dad whenever asked for, now it’s different...earlier I also had to give an account of every penny I spent...but now I think even they understand, they don’t really say anything’ (Snigdha, Team Leader, 28 years)

‘...last time when I went home as usual everyone was after my life, ‘get married’ was their agenda...I told them I’m not prepared and they were like you will never be...just get married, you will adjust...finally I said now that I earn I don’t think I’m a burden on you...’ (Nikita, Editor, 28 years)

Both Snigdha and Nikita view their jobs as a window to challenge the established structures within the family. The level of importance which they associate with their current jobs as a career although differs. The women who are working in designations which force them to work graveyard shifts or require considerable investment of time for upward mobility like call centre executives, PR executives, producers do not consider their current job as a career, and rather it is seen as an opportunity to advancing their aspirations. These are jobs that neither require higher education nor do they offer mobility within the organisation. Women engaged in these jobs referred to them as a means of ‘having good life’, ‘timepass’, ‘pocket money’ or ‘financial support for family’.

‘I finished my air hostess training course, but couldn’t get a job for a few months. I was told in one of the interviews that my English is not up to the mark. A friend of mine who did the same course suggested that joining a call centre will improve my English...it made absolute sense...I’m still aiming to get an airline job...’ (Githa, Customer Care Executive, 24 years)

‘I was very shy and couldn’t even talk to boys since I studied in a girls’ school. I was very conscious initially, I used to get butterflies in my stomach... infact initially I would almost run away if someone came up to me and started talking... by my luck all my colleagues were guys... I was left alone... gradually I became more confident and started mixing with guys.... there’s no real reason to be scared of talking to men...now I feel they make such good friends.’ (Shabana, Writer, 25 years)
'...I had never lived alone and initially I didn’t want to take up a job, but then I had to because of my family problems...now when I look back I feel whatever happened was for my good...I’ve changed so much as a person...I feel more confident, I know how to deal with problems, how to tackle my fears...only because I had a chance to live on my own, learn and discover...’ (Saira, Customer care executive, 23 years)

While talking to these women, the conception of opportunities was vis-à-vis an aspiration, a gain or freedom which they didn’t have. The meaning which women attach to their jobs is not just limited to work, money or career. The meaning that it could attain varies for each one based on their ‘beings and doings’. Several women in these conversations talked about how they see their current job as an opportunity to gain new skills, make shift arrangement before they either get married or build corpus for marriage or pursue future career. In some cases women just wanted to enjoy a fun and lavish lifestyle, the type they could only imagine in TV soaps – full of glamour, fun with friends - male and female, which is seen as a departure from their lives back at home.

Most women feel that although job and money gives them freedom to act in their own interest that does not necessarily make them careless and hedonistic, unlike the popular sentiment. They expressed their resentment against the generation of their parents who have a narrow vision of women and felt that they should work to contribute to the family. The annoyance and anger is with the popular sentiment and representation of women who are working and are independent. Although they articulate their disagreement with the conservative portrait and do not necessarily agree with that, it’s also interesting that they somewhere either empathize their standpoint or at least do not completely denounce the views.

‘...I met this aunt (dad’s cousin) after several years and she started off...why do you need to work, get her married and let her take care of family, when girls start working they become self-centered, that’s why one sees so many families breaking up, girls these days don’t want to
adjust...I was so annoyed...but then I have also seen cases where the girl just doesn’t want to and then because of a handful like those everyone gets tainted’ (Ashwini, Creative and Production Assistant, 23 years)

‘One of our neighbour’s son (back at home) got married to his colleague and after about 6 months they filed for divorce...everyone was like girls these days don’t want to adjust just because they are earning, they think they can do whatever they wish to and bring shame to their family...I mean I understand that girls are no less...but the point is anything goes wrong and the girl is blamed for not adjusting because she is independent...’(Anupama, HR executive, 27 years)

‘My dad was saying one day that girls have become irresponsible and selfish. They are only concerned about their pleasure and comfort...all this just because I wanted to go out with my friends for a movie and refused to go with them to one of our relative’s place...I lost it when he said just because you are earning doesn’t mean that you can boss around...worst is as kids they would not let you go out with your friends because we can’t afford and now that we can afford they feel we are being selfish...they want all their relatives to know that even after living away and earning their daughter is obedient and perfect marriage material ...I guess from their perspective that’s important...’(Snigdha, Team leader, 28 years)

In their attempt to understand the older generations’ reservations and concerns, they accept that view point as valid in some respects and therefore, tend to reproduce gendered sentiments. The language used in expressing their empathy to their parent’s or community’s viewpoint is also apparently an attempt to portray that although they are working and are independent, they are not the ones who would ‘not adjust’, ‘bring shame to their family’ or ‘not understand their a family’s viewpoint’.

In a scenario where women are worried about being represented as ‘too independent’ or ‘non adjusting’, working the night shift in their respective jobs I assume will create more of similar concerns of representation. The proposition of working at night raised a range of emotions among girls when they first took up their job. Some found it exciting and adventurous; some were fearful, skeptical and uncomfortable; and some were just indifferent. The emotions were
defined by their conception of the city, their work, exposure to conceivable norms, assessment of
their own capacity and also the need to work.

‘...in fact I knew that a BPO job means night shifts, a friend of mine had taken up a job in
Gurgaon and he used to tell me stories of all the fun they have in office and also after that... he
used to say Bombay, Bangalore are better (to work the night shift)... isn’t it exciting to be out at
night... empty roads, cool breeze... I always thought it will be fun’ (Pooja, Customer care
executive, 23 years)

‘... how does it matter, a job is a job... if you want to work then you have to work according to the
needs of the job... I’m fine till I get my 8 hours to sleep...’ (Punita, Associate Producer, 29 years)

‘... when I joined I didn’t realize that late nights is an everyday affair, once in a while I thought is
fine... although I know the city is safe, but still I don’t like this night shift business... it takes a toll
on health, my body clock has gone for a toss... but like my boss says... when you have to you have
got to do it... no real choice...’ (Namita, PR Manager, 30 years)

Whether these women like it or not their job entails them to work at night and they also find
themselves dealing with the social conception of night and women in nightscapes. Many women
faced objections, dirty looks and even bans on accommodation in housing societies.

‘... every morning when I would be dropped back, a group of young men used to be enjoying their
morning tea at the chai tapri next to my PG. They would constantly stare and jeer at me and say
something in Marathi, which I could sense was derogatory... it made me so conscious that I
stopped wearing western outfits and while coming back I would always ensure that my I card
was visible and also I would try and say anything to the driver and mention office in some
ways... it was very difficult... finally I moved to a better locality...’ (Snigdha, Team Leader, 28
years)

‘this old uncle who lives next to my flat used to see me coming when he was back from his
mornin[g] walk... he was sweet but would always looked suspiciously... then one day he asked me
what I do... I told him I work with a MNC so he said what kind of work is it and how many hours
do they make you work... he was basically trying to hint at my odd timings, then I explained to
him and he was amazed...’ (Hetal, Customer Care Supervisor, 25 years)

‘... late hours is very usual in my work and I used to inform my PG... one day when I reached at
1 am they didn’t open the door... I got so scared, I didn’t even know anyone... then I called up my
sister who called up one of her acquaintance and he reluctantly agreed to keep me for the night,
but told me I’ll have to leave by 7 am... when I went back to my PG they asked me to leave
because they felt I was bringing bad reputation to the PG... I fought with them... finally they gave
in, but then I decided to leave...’ (Monica, Online news producer, 27 years)
Their work at night was always seen with suspicion till a few years back when these jobs were still not so common and acceptable. When some of these women started their careers about 7-8 years back in these jobs found it difficult to gain acceptability. However, a gradual shift has been observed by them over a period when they find more women in the sector and the questions asked are much lesser. The suspicion and misconceptions have rather given way to newer opportunities, but even today when any case of violence against women is reported, the questions raised are concerned with the presence of women in nightscape and the need for them to venture out at an unearthly hour which is also linked to their dressing style. The women chose to delve into the opportunities these jobs have opened up for them. The opportunities may range from economic independence to social sanctions.

Although working in BPO and media industry gives them immense opportunities, they all admit that in everyday life they have to answer questions raised because of their being single and working in close proximity with men through the night (quite often). It is quite evident that the anxieties related to the women’s conduct and their chastity are not just matters of concern for the family or society, but also women find themselves dealing with their own anxieties of having to establish that they are chaste respectable women and their proximity with men should not be misconstrued as being loose.

‘...I have male friends with whom I go out, but then one has to draw a line...they think we are pally, we go to pubs and clubbing together...but then they all know I’ve a steady boyfriend...so at least they don’t see me as someone who is available’ (Saloni, Medical transcriber, 24 years)

The life which they all consider cool and happening does not necessarily translate into acceptance of these norms irrespective of gender. They are always conscious of how as women, they are perceived by their male colleagues and friends. The norms vis-à-vis late night ventures,
parties and outings with men might have been relaxed, but the women accept that they are conscious of their image. Their own perception of how others view them seems like arriving at a middle ground between stricter norms of their family and native society and their exposure to comparatively relaxed norms of the destination city. This is not to say that the social norms in Mumbai are not gendered. These women find themselves in conflicting situations where the need to ‘be in’ is high and therefore they want to be perceived as cool, but they tread a thin line between being cool and being loose. They find it useful to drop perceptual cues for self-representation.

‘...you know how guys think, if you hang out with them they think you are interested...so even when I go out I just try and ensure that there is at least one more female colleague...that takes the attention off you’ (Poonam, Script consultant, 26 years)

As part of the work culture, young workforce is encouraged to mingle and have good team relations. This also gives some of them the opportunity to experiment with their sexuality without censures. Like Rani (Personnel Manager, 28 years) talked about how she has been through several relationships, which definitely has a negative connotation back at home, and how people in small towns find it difficult to understand that to find someone compatible, it’s alright to go through this process. They also admit that this is only possible because of their work which allows them to meet and interact with the other sex in an environment which is conducive and accepting to mixing of the sexes. The teams are send for regular breaks ‘on the house’ usually after accomplishing a task, sales target or achieving a deliverable; to high end resorts, restaurants, pubs and lounges, in the name of team building. But even then these relations are closely monitored by the organisation and even orchestrated at times.

‘...we have regular retreats and team building outings...last we went to Goa for 4 nights, a long weekend...it was fun and people would start drinking since morning...I think most of us were just drinking and dancing through the day, Goa is perfect for it...when we came back, 3 of our
...I have learned my lesson...never share anything with anyone and try and keep it under wraps as much possible...I started going around with my team leader and obviously my team mates knew it...so at the time of appraisal they were all like you don’t have to worry about performance, you will get a hike and a promotion like that...and obviously that appraisal I couldn’t get a promotion because his manager also knew about it’ (Sagarika, Training Manager, 29 years)

This is in contrast to the belief that global workplace like BPOs and media house is professional and no one really cares what you do, till the work gets done. It’s remarkable how beliefs and practices are diverse and the view these women tend to hold about their workplace is surprising as most of them at some point agree that office space has high surveillance and is highly regulated. The surveillance within these organisations is difficult to miss out or ignore, but the impression in practice it gives to the employees with an ‘open environment’ within the fortified office is what seemingly stays with them, till it is questioned in case of a mishap or incident.

When asked whether being a woman is a barrier in their career path in both these industries – BPO and media, the spontaneous response was to deny it and reinforce that it doesn’t matter whether you are a male or female, if you are good at your work that’s recognised. However, while talking about their own or some colleagues’ trajectories, some of them articulated the preference which male colleagues get over female colleagues. Women attribute this preference to the male bonding beyond work hours. This should be viewed in the context that social mixing of sexes is not restricted to workplace and also there is a considerable amount of time which they spend with their colleagues outside work in informal spaces like pubs and clubs.
‘No, in our office it doesn’t matter who you are, if you are good at what you do everyone appreciates and you do get what you deserve... my friend and this other guy in my team, both were being considered for team leader position, finally the guy got it, he was quite close to the manager...I mean everyone promotes whom they are close to...’ (Shuchi, Call centre executive, 22 years)

On probing a little more on why did she think the manager liked her male colleague more than her friend, Shuchi elaborated on a different side of the story.

‘...my friend is very sweet. Actually my manager was interested in her and had been after her since she has joined...but she comes from a very conservative family, in fact her family is already looking for a guy for her...so she, actually even she likes him, but she always said no to him whenever he has asked her out...so obviously why would he promote her...’

This is not a one off narrative, but apparently most young women find themselves to be the object of male attention at work place. Most of the women talked about their experiences and also their friends’ experience. This raised the question of whether women who are single and staying alone in the city are targeted more as compared to their friends who live with their families. It is interesting to observe that women do not think that they are targeted, rather some of them think ‘this is how men are’ and others didn’t even think that it was anything to really ponder over.

‘...you know how it is...most men are like this...one nice girl and all of them go gaga after her...this is very common in office...it has nothing to do with me staying alone...I think everyone wants to keep their options open...’ (Neha, Customer care executive, 24 years)

‘...see the number of girls and boys is almost equal...everyone finds one for themselves (wink followed by laughter)...great opportunity for both...no but seriously...everyone wants someone to hang out with...it starts with a big group and then as time passes the group becomes smaller and then at the end of three four months only couples are left...’ (Hetal, Customer Care Supervisor, 25 years)

In both the narratives what is striking is the inevitability of heterosexual couples within the office space. Women as much as men make deliberate attempts to seek partners who they might consider as casual or serious partners. However, unlike men who target women actively to show
their interest by asking them out or showering them with praise and gifts, women seek to calibrate this through the groups which they choose to be part of. The act of being available or interested is revealed within the group dynamics where other group members may act actively or in clandestine ways to promote the interests of the individual and also ensure that she is able to perform being the good Indian girl who is shy and respectable. Women find it easier to traverse the boundaries of being a ‘good girl’ within a group situation where the group acts as a support system. The group dynamics can also give rise to stressful situations in case of contestation on the object of interest.

Women having been socialised in a patriarchal society which perceive women in strong binaries of good chaste women on one hand and bad vicious scheming women on the other, also fall in the trap of judging their counterparts by the patriarchal standards.

‘...in a way it’s good to have male friends, not a boyfriend alone, but buddies...it’s safe and boys have a better bonding and network than girls...so if you get along with one, you become part of his group...it’s a big support...girls usually don’t get along’ (Tishya, Call centre executive, 24years)

‘I mean...I’m quite fun loving, happy go lucky, my friends call me tomboy because I usually hang out with boys...honestly I don’t like being part of the girlie group, they are so bitchy and mean...boys are much more fun...they don’t have hang-ups...’ (Nikita, Editor, 28 years)

But what is interesting to note is that women who do not like the ‘bad vicious mean girls’ and find them difficult to deal with also do not necessarily want to fall in the category of ‘good girl’. The variety of connotations which ‘bad girl’ has as contrast to ‘good girl’ gives them the leeway to define it the way they wish to. The emphasis usually is on defining themselves as progressive and usually their narratives indicate towards being self-centric and progressive – both intellectually and sexually.
‘I have this T-shirt which says ‘I tried being good but it was boring’, isn’t it true? I mean I don’t mind being nice, but then I prefer being myself rather than pleasing everyone…I know there are men in my workplace who think I’m bad because I wear nice deep necks and low waists…but these are the idiots who also desperately want to party with me…’ (Tishya, Call centre executive, 24 years)

‘see if someone thinks that I’ll listen to their nonsense, then I’m sorry I’m quite straightforward…many people don’t like this and they think I’m mean but then that’s ok…anyway it doesn’t matter to me what others think…I like Americans - straightforward and don’t give a damn to others opinions…my boyfriend is 3 years younger to me and there was a lot of gossip around it…but who cares’ (Vanessa, Casting Director, 27 years)

It’s also fascinating to hear that although workplace is highly regulated, it does allow space to the employees for relationships to develop. But the relationships which develop are typically romantic in nature. This was not a surprise finding, but it was interesting to note that these relationships were acceptable within the workplace and were not necessarily serious in nature. The prevalence and acceptance of casual romantic liaisons was somewhere also linked to their exposure to English sitcoms like ‘Friends’, ‘Ally Mcbeal’ and ‘How I Met Your Mother’ which are popular among this populace. These sitcoms are a benchmark for a generation which aspires to have American lifestyle and relationships without ‘strings attached’

‘…most people in my office are two by two (laughs)...basically everyone’s a couple...I mean when I joined in I was shocked, but gradually realized that’s the way of life...it can be very lonely...it’s not that girls aren’t friends, but...and if you have a boy with you it’s safe and more fun... ’ (Arti, HR executive, 25 years)

‘...it’s a matter of choice...no one forces you, but I guess these young kids think it’s cool to have a boyfriend...girls are very smart...this one girl she came in and started dating her manager, he was married, there was so much gossip...she also got promoted within an year to being a team lead which is very rare...she was not the brightest or the most beautiful...infact when that guy left and joined another company, this girl started dating the guy who became her boss...we were amazed by her clarity and ambition...but then girls anyway are smart and clear about what they want in life.’ (Priya, HR Manager, 31 years)

The narratives around sexuality at workplace are an interesting shift from the way sexuality was to be protected and femininity was to be discarded to be part of the workforce as explored in
daughters of independence’. Sexuality and femininity is not alone accepted but used as active tools by individuals in work places which are hetero-normative and depend on harnessing the emotional energies of individuals. The workplaces also allow for emotional involvement of the employees and view this as an opportunity to ensure greater involvement of the work force.

‘...no one really minds it...formally the company has guidelines around issues like these... and it does come up for discussion once in a while when some big issue comes...but usually no one bothers...infact my manager one day jokingly said that we should encourage more couples to keep them in workplace.’ (Snigdha, Team Leader, 28 years)

Like one of the call centre employee pointed out while talking about emotional involvement at workplace.

‘...it’s such a drab job, you really need something more stimulating than parties and drinks...dealing with customers can be emotionally draining and on top of it you stay alone...you really need a shoulder to cry on, someone who understands what you are stressed about, someone who can also help you if you are in trouble...my boyfriend helped me a lot in maintaining my call quality without the manager knowing about it...’ (Githa, Customer Care Executive, 24 years)

The need to have a safety net within the workplace is another reason why people choose to get into relationships. In a workplace with throat cutting competition for bonus, salary increment and promotions women find themselves often at the receiving end if they do not have well maintained social networks within the workplace. The need of having ‘someone to watch your back’ is immense in absence of any formal policies for the workforce to claim their rights or address their grievances.

Although the reasons could be many, what is revealed of their social life in the city is interesting. Women often do not end up forging relationships beyond workplace, and some restrict it between the place of residence and workplace. This in some ways also explains their integration
within the destination city and also how and why do they stand out. The respondents largely talked about personal relations vis-à-vis their workplace or their residence if it is shared, even when some of them do have relatives in the city; they gradually wean away from them and start creating their own social circle. The social circle revolves largely around work and workplace as is evident even while analysing workplace related data.

The romantic liaisons and friendships which develop are largely within the context of workplace, as they find it easier to connect and also explore possibilities of a relationship in a place where they spend almost half of their day. The opportunity of finding someone in a work environment where peer pressure is high, there is a need for social support and engagement with emotional labour could lead to emotional pressures and lack of a social net, is quite high. As one of the respondents said

‘...I never thought I’ll have a boyfriend because I never felt the need...but here I felt so lost...I think that was the time when I got hooked up with my guy coz he was able to support me during that phase’ (Monica, Online news producer, 27 years)

They also believe that there exists a huge divide between those who are married and those who are not and seem to reiterate that they are not able to relate to them and therefore develop meaningful relations with married counterparts. Somewhere most respondents talked about situations where they found themselves lonely in an unfamiliar environment and a sense of alienation crepted in, thus making them feel vulnerable and also ‘emotionally bankrupt’.

‘...there came a time when I had no one whom I could connect with...all my female friends at work were hooked up so they’ll be hanging with their boyfriends, and most guys were taken...I was fighting a battle with my family for not pushing me to marry early...one day I fell in the office, it felt like I broke my arm...so obviously my TL took me to hospital at the end of shift. I don’t know what happened to me when he asked me how are you feeling, I started crying, I just felt like there was no one who cares, but then the way he asked was so overwhelming...then we
started connecting and within a week I agreed to go out with him’ (Pooja, Customer Care Executive, 23 years)

Although single women flaunt their freedom and autonomy, it seems that most often freedom from day to day family obligations and enhanced mobility and greater options to choose from is what they flaunt. When I discovered their mechanisms and strategies which they employ to cope up with everyday life, it seemed that they overrate the freedom which they enjoy. Sample this:

‘I have a boyfriend, he was my team leader...he is from Mumbai, so he has a big group of friends...every weekend we used to go to his place or his friends’ place and they would just drink...I never liked all this, but to give him company even I had to...many times my parents would call up and I would lie to them and tell them that we have an office party or we have a training and we are having some games (they get suspicious, because of the noise)...I really feel guilty but then... I don’t want them to feel bad...if they get to know they will be mad at me...they would never understand’ (Githa, Customer Care Executive, 24 years)

Most women seem to be as tied up with the notions of ‘pleasing my man’, and try and ensure that their guy continues to remain interested in them, within a competitive unsecured environment. The primacy and priority which these relationships assume is often the same as in case of married women. However, at the same time most of them are also able to view these relations as temporary arrangements or at least not necessarily permanent giving them the space to come out of it if required.

‘...I was in a relationship and this guy was really nice...but somehow he was not able to commit...that’s when I thought what’s the point of wasting my time with him...it’s not easy to break up but then it will be foolish to continue in a relation which has no future...’ (Kiran, Data Analyst, 28 years)

‘...this guy I was with till 2 years back was so possessive that he had to know everything I do, where I am...at times I would get annoyed coz I’ll even have to tell him that I’m peeing and he won’t believe me...would decide what I wear, which party I go to...after a point I started saying I don’t like this, but that would make him mad...we had huge fights and there were times when he hit me also...it took me almost an year to call it quits...I didn’t want to lose him, it’s not easy...I used to feel what will people think...I talked about it to a friend and she made a very valid point. She said how many people even know that you are in a relationship, what’s the point of being in
The scope of moving out of these relationships also gives these women a respite. The silence which these relationships are usually shrouded in makes it anonymous and therefore becomes easier for women to negotiate with these relations without the fear of being branded as essentially a bad woman who first gets into a relationship at her own will and then discard it if it doesn’t work out which again is treated as a taboo. Although anonymity of the big city adds to stress in some cases, in this scenario acts a safety net for them.

Silence emerges as another strategy for women to deal with issues that are a cultural taboo and do not have acceptability. Women use this silence to avoid any confrontation in matters which they consider as sensitive. A few respondents like Saira, Anita, Poonam, Nikita shared that I was the first interviewer who knows all aspects their life. Poonam said that no one other than her boyfriend knows her past. Similarly Saira and Nikita claimed that I was the first person who knew about their boyfriend. Silence was also a way of maintaining segmentalised lives which they feel should not get entangled with each other.

Most women were silent or talked about sexual harassment at workplace in hushed tones. It’s interesting how none of the respondents mentioned it without prompting. In fact even after prompting and probing what came were the stories of friends or colleagues with a word of caution that ‘no one really knows what happened’. They all admit with pride that they work with companies which have redressal mechanisms, but in most cases it is difficult to get justice and
therefore it’s better to not complain and look for alternatives – like a new job or use informal networks and mechanisms.

‘...usually no...but I know in my office there was a girl who had complained against her manager...later she left the company...it’s difficult to know the truth’ (Ashwini, Creative and Production Assistant, 23 years)

‘...my friend wanted to complain against her team lead...he was almost stalking her...we all advised her against it even though in our company one can complain anonymously but anyway everyone gets to know... usually it means that you start looking for a new job...in her case she was lucky because her boyfriend, who used to work in our company earlier, was friends with her manager and then he spoke to the manager and then the manager pulled up this guy over his performance; he used to say you are busy running after girls that’s why you are not able to meet your targets, then one day he (manager) scolded him while he was standing by her work station and was asking her out, he said you are busy flirting with girls, who will manage your team...you know it’s easier to deal with it this way rather than going and complaining’ (Hetal, Customer care supervisor, 25 years)

In a system which thrives on ‘pink labour’ and boasts of being women friendly, women do not necessarily find support in dealing with issues of harassment. It is therefore not surprising to see them falling back on men to support them thus intentionally or unintentionally reinforcing the perception and need of a ‘male saviour’ to help them save their chastity and protect them from unwanted attention. The manager’s intervention in the above narrative was on the premise that the girl being targeted was his friend’s girlfriend, raises the concern for women who do not have such active emergency networks. The system does not enable women with policies which do not view women with suspicion and rather prefers to give benefit of doubt to men. Some women also talked about management protecting the perpetrator if he was economically valued more within the company.

In fact narratives around work place reveal that the policies at work place are not necessarily in favour of its labour force. Although women talked about open environment which encourages
mixing of men and women in social scenarios, it regulates work relations which in any way encourage collaborations or associations that are perceived as anti-company or might give any scope of unionizing or challenging the management.

6.2 Aspirations – Work and Family

The respondents were probed on their job satisfaction; the meaning they attach to their work and aspirations. This was one of the rare aspects of the study which saw a pattern emerging. The intersection of attainment of educational level, type of job and the value which they attach with their work was found to be predictable after a few interviews. The pattern which emerged clearly indicate that most BPO frontline workers do not see this as a career as against the ones who are into relatively more skilled jobs which also require higher educational qualifications.

Sample this narrative of a call centre executive Shuchi who has been in this job for about 2 years after finishing her BA degree in English from a town in Uttar Pradesh

‘I got picked up from campus...at that point a starting salary of fifteen thousand was enormous (grins)...it seemed like an ideal start...now it feels like being in a rut, no real growth except increments and bonuses. My dad said once your life is all around your targets...now I’m thinking of doing MBA...this is absolute time pass...but now I don’t need to ask for money from my parents for my further studies...’ (Shuchi, Call centre executive, 22years)

‘After finishing diploma I was preparing for engineering, my dad was very keen...I wasted 2 years...at one point I almost became suicidal, I was so frustrated...this happened to me just by chance and at that point I just took it up to move out of home....it’s a painful job, it’s like doing donkey’s work, they almost treat you like a maid... I don’t want to continue here, but I don’t really have an option...I’ve been thinking of going in for a professional course...let’s see...’ (Ashwini, Creative and Production Assistant, 23years)

The emphasis, in case of women who are at the entry level positions without Masters or a professional degree find themselves stuck in jobs which they perceive as only source of income
in both BPO and media industry. Although they like ‘cash in hand’ they do not want to continue in jobs which they perceive as repetitive, mechanical in nature and demeaning to their intellectual capacity. Some of them even perceive it just as a stop gap arrangement before they find their calling either for a more established career or find a man for marriage. This is in contrast to women who are relatively more educated and therefore are in areas of work within these industries that have potential for growth. These women see their jobs to be a natural progression of their studies and efforts and are happy that they are working in multinationals in positions which they aspired to. Salary packages and other perks are obvious co benefits but to them it’s the job which they think is crucial for their growth.

‘...after my graduation, I studied very hard to get through to the business school and now I'm here...I’m quite happy to be in a firm which encourages growth of their personnel and also gives space for creativity and decision making from the very beginning...I want to continue here for as long as there is growth prospect...for me right now sky is the limit and I do want to reach my limit atleast... ’ (Arti, HR executive, 25years)

This differential of value attached to work by difference in level of education and type of work problematizes the assumption that some industries are better suited for women as they are more amenable to work that is repetitive and use their emotional labour for servicing the clients. This in some way is tied to the idea of women as the emotional and spiritual being who should sacrifice themselves and service others selflessly and therefore their labour should be used for similar profile of work whether in public or private spaces. The study clearly indicates that women end up being in these kinds of jobs till they do not find options for betterment of their lives and achieving their valued beings and doings. This is not to say that the options they think they have are multiple or the option they choose is necessarily better than the other – in case of choosing marriage as against work. The options could be restricted because of their perception of
what is conceivable or the resources available, but this is not to undermine their capacity to come up with new solutions.

The aspirations of single women who have migrated is being treated as an indicator of what might be their desires and aims in life. The idea was to understand if these aims and desires are ready fit into the social expectations or are there differences which could initiate change in gender relations. Also they were asked what changes would they like to see in the society and if they think they will be able to contribute to that change.

The aspiration of career, family and a good comfortable life was something which all the respondents shared and were keen to balance the two for a good comfortable life. They seem to be drawing inspiration from the super woman image who is a perfect working woman, perfect wife, perfect mother, perfect hostess, perfect seductress and perfect Indian woman who is also perfectly modern. Unfortunately the images are so overwhelming that these women are not even able to say which of these multiple women would they prioritise to be or they are. They all feel the need to fit into these moulds, accept that they would have to come up to everyone’s expectations and each of these components are essential to make them a ‘complete woman’.

‘...I mean obviously career is important but then that’s not the only thing in life...I guess in about two three years I’ll get married...probably to someone settled in UK or US...it’s a good quality life there...continue to work but then no compromise on home front...’ (Neha, Customer care executive, 23 years)

‘...I think career is good only till one is able to take care of their family...otherwise there’s so much guilt in not being able to spend time with family...career is important for my own growth as an individual...but also till I’m single I can decide what I want to do, but after that these will be decisions taken by both of us...’ (Hetal, Customer care supervisor, 25 years)
The supremacy of family as a structure is entrenched in the psyche and therefore to not think about it was not even a possibility. These women accept that family is prime and decisions vis-à-vis their choices will be family decision rather an individual decision.

After this I prompted them to talk about what type of a relationship they foresee in their married life. Most women are mentally prepared to take the household responsibility irrespective of their careers. But the difference in expectations from their partners can in some ways again be linked with the priority which they assign to their work and career.

‘...I would love to take care of everything on my own...I don’t mind playing a perfect homemaker who would indulge her husband and kids...I’m sure I’ll be quite hands on... then I’ll decide what I should do with the rest of the time... ’ (Saloni, Medical transcriber, 24 years)

‘...see obviously women have to take the responsibility of the household...I don’t mind that...but then I’ll be working and I would want my husband to contribute in something...I’ve this senior who just got married and I love the way they have divided work, so they have a maid for everything and she supervises her and he takes care of maintenance and financial matters...that’s how I want it... ’ (Sagarika, Training Manager, 29 years)

It is not just the primacy of family which is evident but also the acceptance of division of work based on gender which seems to be still embedded in their psyche. The division of household chores somehow still gets divided between private and public or care and skill. However, it will be a fallacy to assume that these relations are not being challenged by women who have had the opportunity to experience the public life as individuals without any guidance or support. Although they seem to crave for family which in their conception is nuclear and traditional, they do intend to romanticize around their relationship with their partners. It is not surprising because the images which are circulating and setting the public discourse in a metro city like Mumbai is that of a metrosexual male who is soft, caring, loves to cook and pamper his wife. These women tend to think of their ideal partner as a mix of the macho male and the metrosexual male. It’s
interesting how the images of women and men are enmeshed in expectations of perfect beings and lack of even one aspect can raise anxieties. This in some ways is also altering the expectations of women who want a good looking macho male capable of being caring and loving and fusses over his lady love, flaunts her and is possessive about her. Some of the respondents talked about Shahrukh Khan, Saif Ali Khan, Salman Khan, and Ajay Devgan as being the perfect husband material. The suave macho image of all these actors with a tag of being a bad boy with a golden heart is what appeals to women. Perhaps, the shift in focus of expectations from women to men is also something which might act as an equalizer only if women continue to claim their demands and also negotiate for a greater power within the relationship.

The present study is that of women who are educated and move out of patriarchal families for working in organised industry. The exposure to modern western culture has led to increasing consumerist culture and emergence of middle class, which still attaches value to women as family honour, but the honour is bestowed by better education and employment opportunities for their daughters, yet maintaining that they abide families’ choice in major decisions like career and marriage. Education and employment is linked with aspirations which are largely aspirations of a consumer and is seen as a tool for upward mobility. Upward mobility could come with either gaining employment in multi nationals or by marrying a guy who is employed by the multinationals. The aspirations have led to shift in stringent rules around mixing of the sexes, choosing a partner on their own, mobility at night; but this is not to indicate that patriarchal rules do not exist. The emphasis on woman as the guardian of family honour continues but the definition of honour seems to be undergoing a change.