CHAPTER 3
KERALA STATE ELECTRICITY BOARD: AN INTRODUCTION

This chapter attempts to present the organisational hierarchy and distribution of engineers in the Kerala State Electricity Board (K.S.E.B.). K.S.E.B. is the counterpart of the Electricity Boards in various states of India. Poor power quality, power shortages and worsening financial situation are the major problems faced by the State Electricity Boards (SEBs) in India. Reforms in the power sector in India were initiated with the aim to ‘overcome the immediate crisis of low tariff and theft/T and D loss’¹ and thus to improve the financial condition of SEBs but are not aimed to ‘ensure effective social control or efficiency of the power sector in the long term’ through transparency and public accountability (Dixit, Sant and Wagle, 1998:944).

The Indian Electricity Supply Act (1948) clearly mentions that the SEBs are to be treated as semi-autonomous bodies, quasi-commercial in their functioning. SEBs are required to earn a 3 per cent rate of return on net fixed assets and State governments are given the power to make appointments to the senior management positions. In effect SEBs are under the direct ownership, control and regulation of state governments for their performance as generators, transmitters and distributors of electricity. Central Electricity Authority (CEA) and Power Finance Corporation (PFC) are the other two authorities with the power to enforce tariff policies.

Kerala State Electricity Board (K.S.E.B.) is a statutory body set up as per section 5(1) of the Electricity (Supply) Act 1948 on 1st April 1957 as successor to the Electricity Department of Kerala State. K.S.E.B. involves itself in activities connected with (1) Power Generation (2) Transmission of power and (3) Distribution of electricity. This task is carried out through the two technical wings under it-the electrical wing and the civil wing. Headquarter of the K.S.E.B. is VydyuthiBhavan, Pattom, Thiruvananthapuram. K.S.E.B’ functions are organized under three technical divisions namely, Generation Profit Centre, Transmission Centre and Distribution

¹ T and D loss refers to the loss of the electricity in the process of transmission and distribution. Substantial part of it is estimated to be the result of illegal connections.
Centre, after the reforms were initiated in 1998. K.S.E.B. has been partially restructured as per the World Bank prompted reforms as in the case of other SEBs. However, implementation of the privatization has been selective and mainly in the creation of new departments like that of reforms and privatization of some power projects.

Organisational Hierarchy

K.S.E.B. has two types of staff—technical and support staff. Technical staff consists mainly of engineers and lower level field employees. Graduate and diploma holders are the engineers. Clerical employees and Class-4 workers constitute the support staff. Approximate number of employees working in K.S.E.B is 26,000 of which 2,465 are engineers (Table 3.1).

Figure-3.1 Organisational Hierarchy of Graduate Engineers.

Chairman

↑

Members

Chief Engineers (11)\#

Deputy Chief Engineers (46)

Executive Engineers (178)

Assistant Executive Engineers (652)

Assistant Engineers (1578)

# Numbers in the parentheses refer to the number of engineers in each designation.

2 Technical details about the functioning of K.S.E.B. are given in Appendix 2.
Figure 3.1 represents the hierarchy of engineers in the organisation. It is in the shape of a pyramid with a swelling bottom and a sharp top. Assistant Engineers (A.E.) are at the bottom of the hierarchy of the graduate engineers. A.E are promoted to the position of Assistant Executive Engineers (A.E.E.) after considering the total number of vacancies at the level of A.E.E. The same policy is followed till the post of C.E except in the case of SC/ST candidates. Generally only seniority gained through the merit list at the entry level is considered for the appointments. Members of the Board are selected from the Chief Engineers after considering the experience and ability of the person. There are three posts of Technical Members, one each for Generation, Transmission and Distribution Profit Centres.

It is the A.E. who is in direct control of the field staff in all the three centres and her/his office is called the ‘Section’ within K.S.E.B. A.E.E. is above the ‘section’ office and this office is called ‘Major Section’. E.E.'s office comes in the supervising capacity and is known as ‘Division’ office. D.C.E controls the higher position next to it and the office is known as ‘Circle’. In the corporate office the staff does not get classified like this but are given tasks according to their designations.

Table 3.1 presents the distribution of engineers across designations in the year 2000. Assistant Engineer (A.E), Assistant executive Engineer (A.E.E), Executive Engineer (E.E), Deputy Chief Engineer (D.C.E) and Chief Engineer (C.E), in the ascending order, are the designations of Graduate Engineers in K.S.E.B. There are 1578 A.Es of whom 1228 are men and 350 are women. This is the designation which has the highest number of engineers employed. Highest number of women (350) is employed in this category. As one goes up the hierarchy, number of positions decreases and the structure of hierarchy appear like a pyramid. In the designation as A.E.E, a total of 652 engineers are employed. 531 of them are men and 121 are women.

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1 This was the latest data available with the Management Information Systems (MIS), K.S.E.B.
As can be seen in table 3.1, majority of women engineers (71 per cent) are in the junior most designation of Assistant Engineers. There are very few women in the middle level designation of Executive Engineers. There was only one woman Chief Engineer. There were 5 women Deputy Chief Engineers. Representation is better (25 per cent) at the Assistant Executive Engineers level in comparison to the designations of E.E., D.C.E. and C.E.

Table 3.1 Distribution of Engineers across Designations#.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office Category</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>C.E</th>
<th>D.C.E</th>
<th>E.E</th>
<th>A.E.E</th>
<th>*A.E</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Office</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in Active Service</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmission</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>785</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>1228</td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>1578</td>
<td>2465</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Management Information Systems (MIS), K.S.E.B.

*A.E.E (N.C.) is also taken as part of A.E.

# The numbers given above are according to the designations in 2000.
$ This category constitutes those who are on medical or extra-ordinary leave. Those who are under suspension or under vigilance inquiry also are included in this group.

An analysis of the distribution of engineers in K.S.E.B. across office categories shows that a substantial proportion of women are in corporate office which is housed in the headquarter at Thiruvananthapuram. This is the largest concentration of women in one single office. An important feature, as observed during the study, of the employment of women engineers in K.S.E.B. is their presence in the offices in large numbers. As a result, there are very few women who are in the field$^9$(interview, personnel officers: 2001)$^9$. This distribution of women across offices and field on the one hand and offices of various profit centres is done informally. The disproportionate distribution across offices of the various office categories is the result of women being appointed less in the rural areas. Representatives of management as well as some of the engineers in the study explain this as the result of women’s reluctance to serve in the rural, remote areas. Some engineers are critical that the management is not ready to employ women in the field (interview, engineers: 2001). Whatever the reasons, it is very clear that there has always been an informal policy followed by K.S.E.B. that women are not sent to the field (interview, engineers:2001;2003; personnel officers: 2001; 2003).

While headquarter is overcrowded with engineers many posts in remote areas (e.g: Idukki generation office) are vacant (interview, engineers: 2001). As this does not affect the promotions there is no formal assessment of skills one acquires due to the work in the field. Moreover an informal hierarchy exists among the posts at the horizontal level depending upon the ‘perceived’ dependence of the organization on the tasks of every post. Thus Chief Engineer (C.E.) (Reforms) may be considered as less important than C.E. (Tariff). A detailed discussion on these aspects of women’s skill formation and utilization and ‘horizontal hierarchies’ are given in Chapter-6.

The three Technical Members are also Graduate Engineers. All the three are men. The post of Technical Member requires expertise on technical knowledge and administrative ability. Since s/he is the highest authority of a profit centre, s/he often

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$^9$ The researcher also observed this before the interview took place with the personnel officers.

$^9$ Please see Appendix 1 for details of referencing.
represents the profit centre in government meetings. However there were incidents when non-technical, administrative personnel were made members of the centres. At present, all the three members are engineers. Chairmanship is also a selection post and s/he is the ultimate authority. Often an administrator from the state service is appointed as chairman though engineers also became chairman in the past. At present, an IAS officer heads the board. It is a matter of complaint too. Most of the engineers whom the researcher interviewed feel that an engineer is the ideal person to become the chairman of the board. They resent what they consider as government's 'over interference' in the functioning of the Board.

It is very unfortunate though interesting for a researcher on gender that no woman has ever become the Member or Chairperson of the Board. There was a very striking case where a woman C.E. was not chosen for the post of Member but a male colleague who was in the same C.E. post was appointed. In another instance, five seniors were ignored and sixth person (junior most of all the six persons) was appointed as Member. Only one of the five seniors was a woman.

**Recruitment and Promotions**

Engineers are recruited to the post of Assistant Engineer through Kerala Public Service Commission (K.P.S.C). This is in accordance with the state government rules. Based on the number of vacancies in the post of Assistant Engineers the advertisement is given in the newspapers. There are two stages in the selection procedure. Appointments to A.E. are made from the final rank list prepared by K.P.S.C. based on a written test and interview. Candidates who are short-listed on the basis of the marks of the written test are called for an interview. It was after 1967 that K.S.E.B. started its selection procedure through KPSC. Prior to that there were no tests but the candidates who passed out from the Engineering Colleges every year

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6 At present, it is to the post of Assistant Engineer that the appointment is made, except in the cases of Special Recruitments for S-Cs and S-Ts. It was known as the office of Junior Engineer that has been renamed A.E. after 1978.
were asked to report to the K.S.E.B. headquarter. After a nominal interview by Board Management, they were given appointment without much delay.

In accordance with the existing policy, posts are reserved in the case of K.S.E.B. recruitments too. S.C., S.T., O.B.C. and sports persons are the groups that benefit from the reservation policy. Apart from the entry-level reservations for S.C. (15 percent), S.T. (7.5 percent) and O.B.C. (27.5 percent) categories, there is special direct recruitment to the posts reserved for S.C. and S.T. If the required number of vacancies in A.E., A.E.E., E.E or D.C.E is not filled, K.P.S.C. advertises for special recruitment. If eligible candidates are found from among these communities, recruitments are made. Special recruitment drive is possible till the level of Deputy Chief Engineer. Thus, a person (SC/ST) can apply directly for any of the reserved posts advertised by the K.P.S.C. without coming through the regular promotions as in the case of general candidates, provided s/he fulfills all other requirements. There is no special policy of recruitment for women engineers. Women from SC, ST and OBC are recruited against their respective reservation of seats.

Promotions of engineers to higher positions depend on the vacancies available in the senior posts. The major criterion for the promotion is seniority in K.S.E.B. that is based on rank at the entry level. According to the rule ‘Confidential Report’ (C.R.) given by the immediate superior officer is to be taken into account before promotions are granted. This C.R. along with seniority decides the promotions. However in actual practice C.R. is only a formality (interview, engineers: 2001). “It is like the ‘con duct certificate’ one gets from the school” (Susanna D.C.E/W-04). At present seniority is the sole criterion based on which the promotions are made. All the respondents in my study agreed that the present system of evaluation is not good, as it does not take into account performance. Representatives of the management also voiced the same view (interview, personnel officers: 2001).

“...many of the officers... holding offices of D.C.E., C.E and...why... even member would not have been there if performance was evaluated for promotions. At the same time... there is this danger that performance

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7 Recently there have been cases when the final list of candidates was cancelled after appointments of a few candidates. Some of these cases will be mentioned in the interviews with the respondents.
evaluation is very subjective... In the present political climate...this is the best... superior officers who have to do the performance evaluation may use it (for settling personal scores)... Since nobody could give a foolproof alternative ... the present evaluation with all its flaws is the best suitable method considering the political and social values of the system.” (Lakshmidevi Rtd.D.C.E/W-27).

However, majority of the respondents do not approve of a change in the existing selection procedure for various reasons like fear of favouritism, political interference and so on.

“(Since) seniority list cannot be manipulated... women are able to get better ranks ...they are not discriminated against men... Lack of experience of women engineers in generation and distribution ... will give an excuse for the management and male colleagues to label (women) as less committed and less efficient workers...” (Susanna D.C.E/W-04).

One lady engineer who is politically very active said that there is an ideological side to the above question which, she said, is not an issue in her party at the moment.

“... Performance evaluation is not ... (just) a matter of superior discriminating his/her immediate subordinate... rather it's the weapon of the capitalists which they use against their employees. It is operating in the Multi National Companies at present to exploit the workers... it is not acceptable to my party and me.” (Saranakumari A.E.E/W-30).

However she says if the present system changes and when workers also have a say in their promotions, performance based promotion can be considered.

Gender Concerns

Women like other engineers too are members of unions and professional organizations. However, participation of women is very nominal in union and organization activities (interviews, engineers:2001; chief personnel officer:2001). Problems of transfer and other such concerns are remedied through the unions, though formally unions do not have any role in the redress of grievances in K.S.E.B.

KSEB Working Women’s Coordination Committee (KSEBWWCC) under the broad leadership and guidance of All India Coordination Committee of Working Women used to act like an agency for the redress of women’s problems in KSEB. KSEBWWCC used to help the victim to lodge complaints to the higher authorities.
There was limitation in its functions as the redress mechanism was purely a process within the organisation.

A Complaint Committee in the Board to deal with complaints of sexual harassment was set up as per the direction of Kerala Government. This was in compliance with the Supreme Court Judgment in 1997. This committee came to existence as per the order of the Board on 27.02.2001. Delay in the constitution of such a Committee even after Supreme Court Judgment appears to show the lack of urgency in the matter of both the State Government and the KSEB (interview, engineers: 2001). This Complaints Committee as it is called has five members; four of them including the chairperson in the present committee are women. Three of them are engineers and two are members of non-technical staff. It is to be noted that the order of the Board on the constitution of the committee does not contain the definition of sexual harassment and the power of the committee.

When the interviews for this study had started, there was no chairperson as the first chairperson of the committee retired. Even after repeated requests from the other members the next chairperson was appointed only on 30.06.2001. The Board constituted the committee and no definite criterion of selection was described. However all the members were known as active, articulate and vocal and in general there were no complaints about the efficiency of the members.

Interviews with the Committee members and Chairperson made it clear that many of them do not expect much to come out of the committee. However it is only the Chairperson who explicitly expressed her disappointment over such procedures. She said she did not believe in any of these committees. Reasons for her such an attitude as given by her are (1) There is no political freedom. Everything gets influenced politically in Kerala and (2) “All these bad things happen to some women due to their lack of faith in God. When you come out of your home everyday in the morning, you should pray (a) that you should not be in any kind of problems, (b) that you should not be subjected to any kind of experiments and temptations” (Aleyamma C.E/W-42).8

8 She resents the fact that she was ignored earlier when the Board appointed the first Chairperson.
While all women engineers said that there are cases of unwelcome behaviour within KSEB they were unanimous in their opinion that it never amounts to a serious sexual harassment incident within the organisation. All agreed that the issue is very serious in public places and buses. Even middle-aged women with strong physique are molested in the buses during their everyday journey to workplaces. It was very clear that subtle cases of harassment are taken as ‘normal’ affair and in a resigned manner (interview, engineers: 2001; 2003). That is probably the reason why sexually abusive phone calls even to senior women engineers are dismissed by them and others as “the handiwork of some ‘pervert’ men”. One of the members herself had an experience of the same in the office and she had heard about such incidents from some senior women in K.S.E.B.

“What is done …at the most… in such situations is to discuss the problem with… (some) women colleagues… and then forget it …(or) pretend to have forgotten about it.” (Susanna Koshy D.C.E/W-04)

Women do not consider it necessary to complain about these incidents due to two reasons as emerged from the interviews with the respondents. Most importantly, the fear of reputation that can be caused by the publicity in the event of them filing a complaint makes them withdraw. Secondly almost all of them believe that there will not be any result coming out of such a complaint. All of them have some precedence to quote to strengthen their argument.

Conclusions

As is seen in this chapter, K.S.E.B. is a workplace where recruitments and promotions base themselves on contemporary industrial laws and principles of equal opportunity, with room for positive discrimination. K.S.E.B. as a part of the Indian power sector and the sole organization responsible for the production and supply of electricity is involved in a number of complex technical activities. To facilitate its functioning through effective operation of tasks, a number of offices exist across Kerala. The technical tasks are under the execution and supervision of engineers who are posted in the field offices of K.S.E.B. Those who are not in direct contact with the field staff and customers are mainly in charge of the administrative matters. There is
an informal hierarchy even at the horizontal level depending on the perceived importance of one’s designation in K.S.E.B.

As we have seen, women are concentrated mainly in the corporate office in headquarter and the offices that are engaged in administrative functions and do not involve in tasks that require engineering skills and technical know-how. Women are seen to be clustered in the offices, especially in headquarter. Informally K.S.E.B has been following a policy that results in uneven participation of women engineers in the field. Interviews with employers suggested that women are seen as ‘unable to handle the pressures of field jobs’ due to their traditional roles as wives and mothers and social limitations of mobility. This would be explored in detail in a subsequent section. The discussion in the next chapter introduces the sample and analyses their socio-economic background in brief.