

Narrative of Challenges faced by Women Taxi Drivers in Thimphu City¹

Author	Abstract
<p>Kinley Choden, 2023 Bachelors of Arts in Development Studies Alumnus of Norbuling Rigter College, Royal University of Bhutan.</p> <p>Key words:</p> <p>Discrimination, Gender inequality, Taxi drivers, Women, transport</p>	<p>This study explores the challenges faced by women taxi drivers in a male dominated industry. The study is conducted in Thimphu City using a qualitative method and purposive sampling.</p> <p>The study findings revealed that women taxi drivers in Thimphu face significant challenges in work-life as mothers. Discrimination in the form of verbal abuse was found to be prevalent within the profession. The study recommends implementation of targeted policies that promotes a culture of respect to create a conducive working environment for women taxi drivers in a male-dominated industry.</p>

Introduction

Societies have been male-dominated since ancient times owing mainly to physical and physiological strength as compared to female counterpart. The evolution brought key differences suited for male to adapt to the environment which required physical strength, for example to hunt and to go to war (Allanana, 2013). Similarly, Eagly (2013) adds that the development of male-dominated societies with male holding leadership positions in the community is the result of their physical advantage. The concept of gender roles and expectations is one of the main causes of a male-dominated culture. Men are supposed to be powerful, competitive, and assertive according to traditional gender norms whereas women are supposed to be nurturing, caring, and submissive (Connell, 2011). Gender stereotypes and the marginalisation of women are the results of these profoundly ingrained expectations in society.

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Bhutan is also a male-dominated society. The employment scenario demonstrates that more male are employed as compared to female. The Labour Force Survey Report (2022) show that the male employment rate is 55.7%, while that of female is 44.3%. This is reflection of traditional gender roles in Bhutan, where women are expected to take care of household chores and raise children.

However, with efforts of government to advocate and promote gender equality in the workforce of Bhutan has seen women embracing new professions. For example, women have started to take up profession of taxi driving which is a predominately male-dominated industry. However, male taxi drivers earn more than female taxi drivers (Deki, 2018) because they often face stigma and discrimination making it challenging for them to earn like their male counterpart.

Problem statement

The transportation sector is typically male-dominated, and females have been underrepresented in the industry. The situation is no different in Bhutan, where female taxi drivers in Bhutan face several challenges that impede their participation in the transportation sector, despite a strong government push to promote gender equality in the workforce. International Labour Organization (ILO) (2016) found out that female taxi drivers in South Africa faced discrimination from their male counterparts and passengers due to gender stereotypes, leading to lower earnings. This also discourages female and makes it difficult for them to take up job in transportation sector. Bhutan also shares the same scenario. Women who are new entrants in the profession continue to face various challenges that hinder their ability to operate efficiently and safely (Phuntsho, 2019). Against this backdrop, this paper will study challenges faced by female taxi drivers in Thimphu.

Research question, significance and limitations

This study is grounded on the key question which is “What are the challenges faced by female taxi drivers in Thimphu city?”

The study is important as it will inform policy makers and relevant public on the challenges faced by female taxi drivers and opportunities to support and empower them. Further, understanding the challenges faced by female taxi drivers will facilitate in identifying strategies to create a safer working condition for them. This will eventually enhance safer environment for female passengers. The findings of this study will also raise awareness of the gender inequalities that persist in the male-dominated transportation industry.

There is limited literature on this subject, particularly in Bhutanese context. This has led to limited literature review. Further, exclusion of male taxi drivers as respondents of this study has resulted in this study not having balanced views. This study is from a female lens.

Literature review

According to Tsoka (2013), the sociocultural role of female defines a female as a loving person and one who handles domestic responsibilities, which diminishes the belief in females' intent to establish a business structure. Females are viewed as possessing the characteristics of nurturing and males are characterised as possessing the roles of expected leaders and decision-makers. Due to these stereotyped roles, African females have been facing challenges working in male-dominated industries. Similarly, language is a component of culture and it is a tool to communicate and also reflects the part of the culture. Due to cross-cultural communication Thai taxi drivers faced communication problems and challenges interacting with passengers (Thadphoothon, 2017).

Risk of violence is another challenge faced by female taxi drivers. This is highlighted in the study by Ngubane, Mkhize and Olofinbiyi (2020) in South Africa which underscores that taxi violence is still a significant problem for the South African minibus taxi business. Further, the study also reports that cab violence continues to be a major problem and that the majority of those responsible for it are taxi drivers who are fighting over lucrative route ownership to increase their daily earnings. Similarly, study by Claire (2000) informs that violence is a common experience for taxi drivers in Australia. The study findings also show that taxi drivers are victims of passengers since they work alone and are unprotected. Similarly, a study conducted by Roman (2020), highlighted fear of crime among female who work in the public transportation industry. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank Group also found that Uber's female drivers' have fear of theft, pickpocketing and road safety.

Studies (Shashikant, 2017 and Monteagudo and Colleoni, 2021) report lack of support for female taxi drivers. The study by Shashikant (2017) discusses She Taxi project started by Kerala's Gender Park which debuted with help from the state government and in collaboration with several businesses. The She taxi Project is operated exclusively by women to carry women passengers safely. The study findings show the need of more support for She Taxi drivers by banks and other organisations that provide loans for vehicle purchases. The study also reports absence of designated taxi stand to make easier for the female passengers to find the She taxi drivers. The She taxi drivers also encountered obstacles caused by male taxi drivers such as use of abusive languages. Shashikant (2017) also mention the lack of social support since family members discouraged and even stopped their female members from working as taxi drivers. Monteagudo and Colleoni (2021) reports that female are generally underrepresented in some technical fields and it is visible in the taxi industry, leading to gender gap. Further, this study highlighted prevalence of misunderstandings between male and female taxi drivers in the Spanish taxi sector where female taxi drivers are most often disadvantaged. The unconducive working environment make it difficult for female taxi drivers to meet the start-up

cost. The negative impact is that this discourages female to take up profession of taxi driving.

Verbal, physical abuse and even sexual harassment are other challenges faced by female taxi drivers. In addition, female taxi drivers also face security threats encountered by male drivers in Northeastern England. While both male and female drivers reported experiencing comparable amounts of verbal and physical abuse, females were noticeably more likely to experience sexual harassment and they think about quitting their employment due to workplace violence. For instance, compared to male drivers, female drivers reported physical assaults to the police at a considerably higher rate (Westmarland and Anderson, 2001). Similarly, the study conducted by Gurbuz (2021) states that since driving is generally a male-dominated profession, female drivers in taxi services also face comparable gender-based challenges. The study found that females do not share the same confidence as males and are vulnerable to sexual harassment. Therefore, fewer females take up this profession.

Study by Maclin, Bustamante, Wild and Patel (2022) also mention harassment experienced by women taxi drivers from men taxi drivers. The study found that male taxi drivers' perceived ownership of taxi driving profession discouraged them to take up this profession. Female taxi drivers are also harassed by older passengers. Study by Hiramatsu (2021) underscores that female drivers for taxis and ride-hailing services are in high demand in Mexican towns due to an increased need for safety.

Unfortunately, the challenges of working as taxi driver in patriarchal institutions and the vulnerability of female drivers to gender-based violence have received little focus.

Methods

The study was conducted in Thimphu City using a qualitative method. Purposive sampling was used to reach appropriate respondent who can provide valuable information to foster efficient use of limited resources.

Sampling size: There were thirty female taxi drivers in Thimphu who are registered with (Bhutan Taxi Association). This study took the entire population as a sample.

Data collection method: Primary data for the study was collected through a semi-structured interview. Open-ended questions were used to collect inclusive responses from the interviewees.

Secondary data was also collected on gender equality concepts and challenges faced by women taxi drivers by referring to relevant reports, documents and articles.

Data analysis: Thematic analysis was used to examine the data to identify common themes, ideas and topics. After the data collection, the data was transcribed into a written format and coded. Themes were interpreted which looked into how themes are related to the study problem. The finding was then presented and drawn directly from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Results and discussions

The results of this study are presented thematically. Some of the themes are further discussed as sub-themes.

Theme 1: Role Conflict

Most of the female taxi drivers are elderly individuals in the age range of 30 to 50 years. This indicates that younger female do not seek career as taxi driver. Many of the respondents work only for 10 hours a day, between 8 am to 5 pm. The female taxi drivers indicated that they do not get time to work longer duration like their male counterparts since they have shoulder the primary responsibility of household chores and taking care of children. Most of the respondents were divorced, which accounts for 14 respondents out of 30 while 11 respondents were married and 5 respondents stated that they were re-married. All the female taxi drivers mentioned that their divorce was caused mainly by role conflict and non-acceptance of them working as taxi driver by their husband and family members. One of the respondents also highlighted that “It is not easy to work as a taxi driver to earn livelihood due to lack of support and acceptance of my husband and family”. The female taxi drivers also cannot go for long tours as they have to attend to household chores.

This finding aligns with the study conducted by Tsoka (2013) where the author mentions that the sociocultural role of female defines her as a loving person and one who handles domestic responsibilities which diminishes the belief in their intent to establish a business structure. Tsoka (2013) also mentions the stereotyped roles of females as home maker and male as decision maker and leader has made it challenging for African females to work in male-dominated industry.

Most of the respondents expressed that they were unable to balance their work life resulting from their role conflict. Respondents mentioned that sometimes they are not able to come to work as they have to take care of their children and attend to household chores. Similarly, one of the respondents said that “Being married means having more responsibilities. I have difficulty managing both household chores and my profession. By the time I get to work, it will be noon leading to low income”.

Study conducted by Shashikant (2017), also emphasises that female taxi drivers have limited working time as they have to manage household responsibilities. The study findings also mentions that many people still view domestic work and taking care of children as responsibility of female hindering them to take up the

profession of taxi driver and limiting the opportunity for female taxi drivers to earn like male taxi drivers.

Subtheme 1.1: Social Stereotype

Most of the respondents mentioned that it was difficult for female to take up taxi driving as profession due to social stereotype that women should stay at home in contrast to males. Further, when females take up new profession such as taxi driver, the family members and community look at them negatively. This is also one of the reasons why most of the female taxi drivers were divorced. One of the respondents said, “My family members do not encourage and support me to work as taxi drive. My children also asked me to leave the profession of taxi driver and find another job since they are ashamed when I drive taxi”.

Another respondent added: “My family did not support me. They told me that it is not a good job. They said that it is risky and not meant for woman since female working as taxi driver is seen as woman with bad character”. A study conducted by Shashikant (2017) found that women can be empowered when they have time and space to themselves and start to critically and jointly reexamine their lives. One such effort was the Taxi project operated by females exclusively to ensure safely. However, She Taxi initiative faces social stereotype which discourages females from working as taxi driver. Female taxi drivers in Bhutan and other continue to encounter numerous obstacles caused by society such as lack of social support and restriction from family members. This is evident from the remark by male taxi drivers to female taxi drivers in the evening: “It is time to go home to cook and attend to household chores”.

Subtheme 1.2: Gender Inequality

International trend shows that participation of female in public transport is less as compared to male. This has been caused by traditional segregation of female and male into largely different occupations. Even though gender equality is stressed in the society, it has been challenging in the taxi industry mainly due to gender stereotype. In this regard, one of the respondents said that “There are only few female taxi drivers in Thimphu. If there are more female taxi drivers, the challenges may reduce”. Female taxi drivers face negative perception. One of the respondents said “Even though there is equality of opportunities for females, taxi industry has been a male dominated”.

Most of the respondents underscored the importance and need for society to change their perception and outlook on female taxi drivers. This change will serve as foundation of ensuring gender equality in the taxi industry and facilitate females to work in the positive environment.

Study by Monteagudo and Colleoni (2021) report that Spanish female taxi drivers also face gender inequality. The study also reveals that taxi industry is one where gender disparity is considerably larger. Further, Monteagudo and Colleoni (2021) mention that male taxi drivers have wrong perception that female taxi drivers in the Spanish taxi industry do not have same capacity to work like male taxi drivers.

Theme 2: Harassment

Discrimination faced by women taxi drivers create challenges and make it difficult for them to attend to their profession. Female taxi drivers mention that working in a male-dominated society is not comfortable. The discriminatory attitude undermines their capacity and willingness to work as taxi driver. They also experience discrimination from passengers, particularly from female passengers and male taxi drivers. Some passengers, especially female, are hesitant and do not trust their safety in the hands of female taxi drivers. Passengers view female taxi drivers as learners which is revealed by comment from one of the female taxi drivers who said: “Female passengers refuse to go in my taxi, even though it is my turn to take passengers”.

Most respondents said that passengers perceive male taxi drivers to be reliable and trustworthy in terms of driving safety., Consequently, female taxi drivers face challenges that question their ability to ensure a safe and secure journey. In this regard, one of the female taxi drivers said that “It is demotivating. Passengers often ask me if I can drive well and ensure their safety”. Most of the respondents mentioned that people advised them to leave their job as they do not see this profession fit to be undertaken by females and as a result, they make negative remarks. Male taxi drivers make negative comments such as “I will never allow my wife to work as taxi driver.” Similarly, study conducted by Marcu (2007) found out that female taxi drivers are isolated and females were mostly devalued. The study also reported that female taxi drivers faced gender-based discrimination from their male counterparts.

Further, one of the respondents said, “Male taxi drivers often tease me and spread rumours about me taking monk passengers with whom I have sensual affair”.

This finding aligns with the study conducted by Khosa (1997) which mentions that women taxi drivers face discrimination from male counterparts and passengers. The study mentions unequal relation of power between females and males in the taxi industry. African female taxi drivers largely felt the differences because of the gender roles and expectations. They also faced verbal comments, unwelcome gestures or even assault by male taxi drivers and passengers.

Subtheme 2.1: Verbal abuse

Verbal abuse is common in the taxi industry. This has negative impact on taxi drivers. It affects their job satisfaction and overall experience in the taxi industry. Most of the respondents mentioned that they faced verbal abuse from male taxi drivers and passengers. One of the respondents said, “Passengers ask me to spend night with them and say they will give more money than I earn in a day.” Male taxi drivers often regarded them as a competitor and pass unpleasant remarks. For instance, one respondent said that “Male taxi drivers talk to me in a harsh manner and say that I do not get fined even when I infringe traffic rules

since male police prefer women taxi driver”. One of the respondents said, that “Male taxi drivers say I would find passengers easily because I am spending night with my male passengers and earning from it”.

Similarly, women taxi drivers in Spain faced verbal abuse from male taxi drivers and passengers. Male counterparts use inappropriate language and male passengers verbally harass them with rude statements in public spaces. The study findings highlighted that male taxi drivers perceived ownership of the taxi driving profession and females were not encouraged to join taxi driving profession. Many male drivers regarded the female drivers as competitors, insulting them and using vulgar language (Maclin, Bustamante, Wild, & Patel, 2022). Sometimes male taxi drivers used offensive language regarding female taxi drivers as a sex promoter in the society. One of the respondents said, “Male taxi driver say that women taxi drivers are the one who promotes sex in the society to earn. Passengers often asked odd questions to the respondents like who helped you in buying the car. One of the respondents said, “Passengers says I would not be able to buy a car on my own.” It is a threat for female taxi drivers to be frank with the passengers and male as they receive comments like “sex promoter” and often try to take advantage.

Subtheme 2.2: Physical abuse

Some female taxi drivers expressed experiencing physical abuse from male taxi driver as well as from passengers. One of the respondents said, “A passenger reserved my taxi and robbed my money”. Similarly, one of the respondents said, “Male taxi drivers and passengers try to touch me”. Most of the respondents said that passengers try to take advantage of them. In this regard, one of the respondents said that “Some people stopped my car and asked for money”.

Physical abuse is not a major problem but studies show that in other countries it is a challenge faced by female taxi drivers.

Theme 3: Safety concern

Most of the respondents said that they have to stay late and for long hours to earn reasonably. This means ferrying passengers who sometimes are abusive. As compared to male, Female taxi drivers face challenges of working in unsafe environments, particularly during night hours. One of the respondents said that “At night most of the male passengers often choose female taxi drivers.” Most of the respondents said that at night male passengers intentionally ask them to drive to places where there is no street light which poses safety concerns for female taxi drivers. Further, one of the respondents said that “At night passengers are either drunk or into drugs and I feel unsafe Similarly, one of the respondents said that “Passengers are more aggressive at night”. Study conducted by Maphumulo (2021) also mentions that working in taxi industry is unsafe for female taxi drivers as they encounter bullying and intimidation. Study also report that there are chances of female taxi drivers being raped.

Theme 4: Unpaid fare

Most of the respondents shared that passengers, particularly female passengers, refuse to pay taxi fare. One of the respondents said that some female passengers do not pay taxi fare and they showed fake screenshots of payment". Majority of the respondents said that they do have any option than attending to passengers who are sometimes drunk or under influence of substance abuse who do not pay their fare. One of the respondents said that "Passengers let me wait for hours and do not turn to make payment".

Another respondent said that "Passengers often tell that they will pay later and if we refuse to accept, they threaten us. They take our mobile number but never call to pay". Most of the respondents expressed that passengers are taking advantage of them.

Conclusions

The challenges encountered by female taxi drivers in Thimphu city are not different from the challenges faced by other female taxi drivers in other countries. They mainly experience discrimination by their male counterparts and to some extent from passengers. Surprisingly, female passengers are the ones who discriminate the most. Moreover, these females working in the male dominated transport sector also encounter serious challenges with balancing their personal and profession lives. They have to take care of household responsibilities and their children.

Furthermore, the study indicated a lower level of female participation in public transport, reflecting a larger issue of occupational segregation between males and females. Despite the existence of gender equality in society, the taxi industry faces challenges in achieving gender parity and providing equal opportunities for female. Gender stereotypes emerged as a recurring theme, with respondents reporting the existence of gender inequality. Female faced questioning and disapproval when attempting to pursue different career paths, while male was more readily appreciated. These societal norms and biases contributed to the limited acceptance and opportunities for females in the taxi industry. In addition, verbal abuse was identified as a common issue in the taxi industry, affecting the job satisfaction and morale of female taxi drivers.

The study also found that some passengers, particularly female passengers, refuse to pay the taxi fare. This presents a financial challenge for female taxi drivers and underscores the need for mechanisms to ensure fair compensation and protect their earnings. The study also revealed that the majority of female taxi drivers in Thimphu City are elderly individuals, indicating a lack of participation by younger female. This suggests that younger females are less inclined to pursue careers as taxi drivers due to various societal factors or personal preferences. The study findings highlighted that family members were

often unhappy with the choice of their work as taxi drivers indicating lack of acceptance of females in non-traditional occupations.

The findings underscored the need to address societal viewpoints and gender stereotypes to promote the acceptance and inclusion of females in non-traditional occupations. By creating supportive policies, fostering a respectful work environment and promoting gender equality which will empower female taxi drivers and enhance positive experiences in the industry.

Recommendations

The study showed the need for government to consider developing a policy that would respond to the key challenges of work-life balance which is very common amongst females working in the transport sector. Development of such policy would allow these females to prosper in both their professional and personal lives as mothers since this will allow professionals working in transport sector to work only for certain hours and enable them to commit time for their family. The policy can be developed in consultation with the professionals of transport sector.

Relevant organisations should advocate the need to demonstrate respect for colleagues, particularly females. Additionally, it is important to create awareness among the general public regarding the verbal and physical abuse and beliefs in culture.

Bhutan Construction and Transport (BCTA) should also conduct ad-hoc monitoring of taxi parking to ensure that female taxi drivers are not harassed or abused. Regulations which will penalise those who do not adhere to the regulation should also be developed by BCTA.

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