

UNDERSTANDING FACTORS PROPELLING LABOUR TURNOVER OF MARRIED FEMALE WORKERS IN THE RETAIL INDUSTRY IN MASVINGO URBAN

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to interrogate factors that influence labour turnover of married female workers in Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the retail industry. The study utilized the qualitative research approach with structured interviews being used to solicit data from twenty-two purposively selected participants who had left employment within the last five years from SMEs in the retail sector. The findings of the study showed that labour turnover of married female workers in the retail sector was alarmingly high. The main drivers of labour turnover were sexual objectification of married female workers at workplaces, heavy and physically demanding work and human engineering. Disputes of rights, glass ceiling and securing marriages were some of the major propellers of labour turnover of married female workers in SMEs in the retail sector. The high rate of labour turnover significantly affects the performance of SMEs. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing information on labour turnover of married female workers an area which has not been explored by many researchers. The results also help managers of SMEs in the retail sector and government authorities to pay close attention and possibly address the problems faced by female employees in the retail industry.

Keywords: Labour turnover, Female workers, SMEs, Retail sector.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, employee continuity in various organisations and industries throughout the globe has suffered several setbacks yet it is one of the key strategies to organizational completeness and growth. Labour mobility has been on the increase in various industries, which has consequently resulted in a heightened increase in the study of labour turnover throughout the globe (Nyanga, Mpala, & Chifamba, 2012; Yidaan & Boateng, 2023). Due to the ever-increasing rate of labour turnover, debates on the subject have increased significantly. The increased research efforts focused on labour turnover rates to sales, growth, performance and profitability. Studies have persistently shown that labour turnover was extremely high throughout the globe although the global north is the hardest hit. According to Nyanga et al. (2012) most organisations especially those operating in distressed economic environments experience a lot of high labour turnover. Labour turnover affects almost all organisations irrespective of the size, industry and type of business. The retail sector faces a lot of challenges some of which result in labour turnover and brain drain of its most precious assets, human capital. Studies established that labour turnover breeds devastating consequences to organisations (Gupta & Shaw, 2014). For instance, labour turnover increases operation costs such as recruitment and selection, training new employees, financial performance and reduces productivity.

Zimbabwe has witnessed a phenomenal increase in the establishment of several retail outlets in both urban and rural areas. Industrialization and labour policies and regulations on equity have resulted in female employees swarming the formal labour market. Female workers have dominated the retail industry in Zimbabwe, with the majority of them being married female workers (Nyanga, 2021). The increase in the number of female employees in the labour market met with the increase of almost all the biographical categories of female workers such as married, divorced single and others. Being an active industry, the retail sector has lost and continue to lose workforce to their local and foreign competitors. Studies have shown that labour turnover is high among female married workers in the retail industry. Whilst all the other sectors experience similar challenges of labour turnover among married female workers, the retail industry is the hardest hit. There is very little if any research that has been done to establish the causes and effects of labour turnover of female married workers in the retail industry in a developing country such as Zimbabwe. Nyanga and Chindanya (2021) observed that the retail sector is a diverse and multifaceted business which is essential to economic development and transformation in Zimbabwe. The ability of an enterprise to analyse labour mobility helps it to achieve operational excellence, capitalize on the growth of emerging markets, improve work force effectiveness and productivity. The purpose of this research is therefore to find out push factors that propel labour turnover of married female workers in the retail sector. Furthermore, the study also explores effects labour turnover of married female workers in the retail sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Labour turnover is a term which has been defined differently by different scholars, but by and large it is general viewed as the movement of human capital from one organization to another in search of better working conditions or economic fortunes. Despite employees being viewed by many scholars, business community and researchers as the most essential factor that gives enterprises sustainable competitive advantages, some managers still view employees as a cost to the organization, which if given an opportunity would want reduced. Some organisations under-invest in employees, putting the organization competitiveness at risk (Bassi & McMurrer, 2007; Nyanga, 2022). Nyanga et al. (2012) observed that under-investing in workers is one of the principal drivers of labour turnover in almost all the business sectors. Failure by organisations to properly manage human capital turnover breeds adverse effects on the operations of organisations, profitability and productivity (Ongori, 2007). Besides under-investing in human capital, labour turnover is an indication of other underlying problems in the organization. Making employee retention a key strategic priority is one of the assets which firms should invest in so as to reduce several adverse effects that are propelled by labour mobility (Jayawickrama, Liu, Hudson Smith, Akhtar, & Al Bashir, 2019).

A study by Wareham, Smith, and Lambert (2015) showed that the relationship between gender and turnover intention are inconsistent. In other sectors such as the construction industry, the relationship between gender and labour turnover is very strong while the relationship is very weak in others. A study which is closely related to the current study is the one which was done by Salami (2008) who argued that there is a relationship between marriage and turnover intentions of employees. The study focused on marriage in general and did not specifically focus on female married workers in the retail sector. For example, in some cases unlike single people, married people find it difficult to re-locate to a new place for a new job. Furthermore, in their study on domestic workers Nyanga, Sibanda, and Kruger (2019) observed that married domestic workers have a dual 'employment' in that apart from work responsibilities they are also expected to do some family responsibilities such as laundry, cooking and many others. Society expects married people to do some tasks in their nuclear, extended families and society in general. Nyanga and Sibanda (2020) observed that most women who engage in entrepreneurial businesses or activities left their formal employment for purposes of finding economic ventures which give them flexibility to attend to both their business and social responsibilities.

Research has shown that employee turnover is usually high in developing countries especially in the retail sector and that it triggers operational disruptions in firms (Nyanga et al., 2012; Nyberg & Ployhart, 2013). The retail industry, being one of the major sources of employment opportunities for women in developing countries has also become an area which is hard hit by high labour turnover of female married workers. Nyanga (2021) observed that, retailing jobs especially in SMEs are usually characterized by poor

management systems, low wages and poor working conditions which consequently lead to high labour turnover. For instance, recent studies on strategies of expanding the manufacturing industry in Ethiopia established that reducing labour turnover rates was one of the key strategies that can be employed to grow the manufacturing sector (Blattman & Dercon, 2018).

SMEs in the retail sector are among the largest employers in Zimbabwe and play an important role in employment creation, poverty eradication and economic development (Nyanga & Chindanya, 2020). SMEs in the retail sector have consequently become one of the major employers for female married workers. By virtue of being traditionally regarded as a labour market for females, the sector has over the years served as an entry point for most female workers into the labour market (Nyanga & Chindanya, 2020). The industry is a huge employer consisting of various forms of businesses such as shops, open markets, supermarkets, backyard markets and many others. The proliferation of diverse forms of employment in the retail sector is one of the huge and vital evolutions in retail employment, which has introduced various changes in the labour market which consequently led to a huge increase in the number of female workers in the sector.

Over the last two decades, there have been reports in various forms of media such as newspapers, social media that SMEs in the retail sector in Zimbabwe were experiencing high rates of employee turnover. Labour turnover was observed to be very high among female married workers in almost all SMEs in the retail sector. Most studies that investigated the causes, effects and consequences of labour turnover covered very little if any causes of labour turnover married female workers in the retail industry in Zimbabwe. The main aim of this study is therefore to explore the primary causes of labour turnover of married female workers in the retail industry. The study also sought to establish the economic activities they engaged in after leaving their jobs and the effects of labour turnover on organisations.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the qualitative research approach. Establishing the causes and effects of labour turnover of married female workers in the retail sector needed the utilization of the qualitative approach which could reveal the feelings, attitude and perceptions female workers had about their jobs. The use of the qualitative approach is consistent with Patton (2014) who viewed the qualitative research approach as the most suitable method when inquiring about a subject where finer details of data are required. The qualitative approach is valuable for this study in that it promotes the collection of comprehensive data which would be ordinarily difficult to collect using the quantitative approach. Marshall and Rossman (2014) argue that the qualitative approach was most suitable in carrying out studies that require explanations on opinions, perceptions, feelings and experiences.

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The population of the study comprised all married female workers in SMEs in the retail sector in Masvingo urban. The study employed purposive and snowballing sampling approaches to select organizations and individuals who participated in the study. Five organizations were available and willing to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria for the organizations that participated in the study was that the SMEs should have been in the retail business for over 5 years and had employed at least 8 married female workers from 2016 to 2021. Twenty two married female workers were selected using the purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were still in employment but with intentions to quit while snowballing was used to select participants who had quit employment within the last five years. The inclusion criteria were for two categories of participants namely; those who were still working for SMEs but had intentions to quit and those who quit their jobs from SMEs in the retail sector within the last five years. The two sampling techniques were chosen because they gave the researcher room to choose participants who met the inclusion criteria and had full information about the subject under investigation. The sampling techniques which were used were appropriate for the current study because the study required participants who had full knowledge and experience about SMEs in the retail sector work environment. The use of purposive sampling technique is consistent with several scholars (Patton, 2014; Suri, 2011). Furthermore, consistent with Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007)'s view that purposive sampling technique is most appropriate where informants with a specific type of knowledge or skill were required, purposive and snowballing were found to be the most suitable for the study.

Data was collected using a 14-item interview guide. Face to face interviews which lasted at most 25minutes per participant were conducted to solicit data from all the selected participants. The face-to-face interaction was used as the sole data collection tool. Interviews were the most suitable for this study because they assisted the researcher to stimulate informants to open up and provide the required data. Interviews also gave the researcher room to observe the informant's body language and emotions. Thematic data analysis was used to analyse all the collected data. Themes and sub-themes were developed during interviews and after interviews when data was scrutinized and analysed.

. FINDINGS

The study established that labour turnover was rampant among married female workers in the retail sector. The rate of labour turnover was unrelenting and alarmingly very high to the extent that some SMEs end up having new sets of workers every month. It was observed that the majority of workers who leave jobs in the retail sector join other industries such as education, health and others. Some workers who leave their jobs in the retail sector join their families and stay at home engaging in various backyard business ventures such as horticulture, poultry, dress making and many others. This group of people view working in the retail sector as cumbersome, mentally and physically straining yet pay and wages are exorbitantly

low. A significant number of married female workers who leave jobs in the retail sector relocate to the developed world to take up menial but better paying jobs. Most married female workers who left their jobs to search for better economic fortunes in the diaspora did courses on basic health care for them to qualify to be on the most wanted workforce in the countries they targeted. The findings are consistent with Nyanga et al. (2012) who observed that labour turnover and brain drain in Zimbabwe were mostly propelled by workers' desire get better paying jobs with better working conditions abroad.

The study revealed that sexual objectification of women is one of the factors that propel labour turnover among married female workers. Some retailers disregard the marriage status of women and reduce them to merely sexual objects by passing sexually coloured remarks, requesting for barter trading sexual favours with promotion or salary increments and also using vulgar language. Such a work environment pushes principled married female workers to leave their jobs and search for better jobs or engage in other income generating ventures such as backyard business activities like poultry. Sexual objectification of women leads to loss of dignity, gender inequality, quarrels in families, breaking of marriages, stress and expose female workers to various forms of health risks. One responded noted:

One married female worker who was working as a till operator was fired from her job when she became pregnant because the owner of the SME felt that pregnancy makes her cease to be sexually appealing to customers.

Married female workers were being taken advantage of their beauty and body structures to attract customers which in a way degrades workers to sexual objects used to lure customers. Such a work environment led workers to leave their jobs because they perceive it as a gross unfair labour practice. Failure by core workers, supervisors and managers to get sexual favours from female workers lead to misunderstandings and conflicts at the workplace. Misunderstanding between the management and subordinates as well as personal clashes may result in tension such that either party will leave the organisation. In such scenarios employees will not be particularly leaving their jobs but rather they will be running away from their superiors or colleagues. The findings are consistent with Guest and Conway (2011) who argues that sour relations and perceived unfair labour practice are some of the push factors which increases the chances for employees to leave the organization. Furthermore, a study by Nyanga and Chindanya (2020) revealed that labour turnover is high among female employees in the construction industry because of some superiors, majority being male employees, who requests for sexual favours from female workers and also use sexually abusive language at the workplace.

The results of the study indicated that the majority of female married employees leave their employment for purposes of securing their marriages. Female married workers do not feel comfortable to leave their husbands with their house maids for over 8 hours while they will be at work. There is a general belief

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among married female people that men can easily be lured or get sexually attracted to ladies whom they spend most of the time with. Below are some of the remarks which were made by some participants.

Married female employees' turnover can be attributed to protection of marriages. The majority of married female workers, especially those whose husbands work from home or do some backyard businesses, do not feel comfortable to leave their husbands with their maids. They therefore leave their jobs so that they can do the family chores and avoid hiring a maid or be at home together with the maid.

The retail industry is associated with heavy and physically demanding work in which workers are required to carry heavy goods into the shops or pack goods on the shelves. The work is physically straining to female workers such that they end up failing to bear the pressure and end up leaving their jobs or habitually absenting themselves from work. Such female worker unfriendly activities result in high labour turnover of married female workers since they will still be expected to do some family chores when they get home. The family chores women are expected to do include babysitting, preparing meals, laundry and many others. The retail industry is characterized by high labour demands, which Pandey, Singh, and Pathak (2019) view as one of the precipitators of labour turnover. The findings of Pandey et al. (2019) were that when the demand for labour in an industry is high, an opportunity for changing jobs in that industry becomes enhanced. This view is supported by Selhadin (2019) who argued that environmental factors such as the intense working hours and strenuous work influence labour turnover. Married female employees in SMEs in the retail sector complained about carrying heavy goods, working overtime, working on weekends and public holidays without being given overtime pay. One of the respondents said:

The salaries for workers in SMEs in the retail sector are relatively low and workers are normally not paid on time. Workers can go for two months without pay especially if there is a decline in volume of sales. For instance, during the Covid-19-induced lockdowns which restricted consumer movement the volume of sales for most SMEs significantly declined, which led to most organization to fail to meet their salary obligations.

The other push factor for labour turnover of married female workers is the deprivation of workers to exercise their right to have rest during the day and also during weekends and public holidays. The retail industry in Masvingo is characterized by intense working hours and copiously business packed day. Work is structured in such a way that it deprives workers adequate rest and gives birth to poor work-life balance. The increased trading hours, which are used as a tool to maximize profits especially during weekends and public holidays propel worker exhaustion, which in turn lead to labour turnover of female married workers. This is consistent with Fuwa (2014) who argues that work-family conflict affects workers behaviors in the workplace, promote absenteeism, tardiness and low organizational commitment. The failure by some SME

retail organizations to offer flexible work arrangements influence work-family conflict for married female workers which consequently lead to labour turnover. One of the respondent remarked:

We work for more than twelve hours a day instead of eight hours which are outlined in the labour act chapter 28:01. This distorts work-life balance which consequently propel low job satisfaction and employee disengagement.

Most SMEs have the problem of poor timetabling and management of shifts at their work stations which result in poor work-life balance and unfair treatment of workers. Good work scheduling enhances opportunities for workers to pursue other social life goals apart from work related goals such as attending religious gatherings, staff development programs, having more time with families. Poor work life balance makes it impossible or near-impossible for workers to pursue other life goals and exposes workers to stress-stimulated illnesses such as high blood pressure. Mukuvisi, Nyanga, and Mashavira (2019) observed that workers require both physical and mental rest in order for them to be efficient and effective in the execution of both their work duties and societal duties. The findings are consistent with Brue (2019) who argued that work-life imbalance influences high turnover since workers find it difficult to meet the demands of the job with social demands.

Like all other employees in the retail sector, the study established that married female workers leave their jobs because of low wages and salaries. Married female workers' needs are normally higher than those who are not married because they usually carry the financial burdens for their extended families. Due to this heavy financial burden, most married female workers chose to leave their jobs to engage in other income generation activities such as horticulture, backyard poultry and others. Rewards that are viewed as insufficient, influence dissatisfaction to employees and consequently propel intentions to leave the organization. On average workers in the retail sector earn between USD150 and USD250 yet the bread-basket in Zimbabwe is much higher than what the majority of workers are earning. The remuneration and benefits married female workers get are not adequate to cover their basic needs such as food, shelter, education for their children and others.

The study further revealed that human engineering was one of the major precipitators of labour turnover of female married workers in SMEs in the retail sector. The furniture and the physical infrastructure in general were found to be inappropriate for female workers. The furniture used by female married workers was found not to be female worker friendly since some of them expose their private parts and also make them develop some mild disabilities such as backache. For example, the desks and chairs at till points expose women to the extent that female married workers were forced to wear long dresses or trousers. Due to the unavailability of financial, human capital and financial resources most SMEs fail to provide furniture and infrastructure which addresses basic human engineering requirements for a female working in a retail

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shop. It implies that the financial position of an organization help it to reduce labour turnover of married female workers.

Glass ceiling is one of the factors that propel labour turnover among married female workers in retail SMEs. The ratio of female to male employees in the retail sector was found to be 3:1 but despite this, fewer women progress to supervisory or managerial positions. Senior management positions in retail shops are dominated by men. Glass ceiling was employed to deprive female workers opportunities for promotion which consequently drive them to join other sectors where they are better recognized and granted better promotion opportunities such as in the public sector. Female workers expect their employers to recognize their contribution to the organisations by promoting them whenever such opportunities arise. Nyanga et al. (2019) observed that workers do not want to remain glued to one position and duties for too long but expect to be promoted to higher positions within the organization. Therefore, the need for skills development and promotion become a driver for labour turnover.

The study further revealed that high labour turnover of married female workers is influenced by the ever-increasing disputes of right. Female workers have some rights which are clearly spelt out in the Labour Act 28:01 such as being granted paid maternity leave for 98 days and some hours to breast feed babies. Some managers of SMEs in the retail sector deprive workers from exercising their rights which consequently lead to disputes of both interests and rights. Such disputes breads low job satisfaction and worker engagement, which are both influencers of labour turnover. One of the participants remarked:

One former married female employee who wanted to come back to work after maternity leave was denied the opportunity to rejoin the organisation yet the law out rightly gives female workers the right to take 98 days maternity leave with pay.

Females married workers lose a large proportion of their income by taking time out of the workplace to bear children. Most SMEs deny female workers to take paid maternity leave and also some hours outlined in the Labour Act for breast feeding. Usually, when a married female worker is faced with a situation where she needs to perform both paid work and housework activities, she usually decides how much time and effort to allocate to formal job and to domestic responsibilities. Most SMEs in the retail sector do not religiously follow national, industrial and organizational set rules and regulations regarding working hours, offering long-term contracts with benefits such as pension, maternity leave, compensation for sick days, and annual leave. The failure by employers to provide such basics requirements lead to low job satisfaction which many studies (Mukuvisi et al., 2019; Nyanga et al., 2012; Nyanga & Sibanda, 2020)ma viewed as influencers labour turnover. Some participants remarked:

Work at SMEs in the retail sector is largely characterized by disputes related to wages, insecure jobs, unsocial working hours and other forms of non-standard types of employment conditions.”;
“The expectation of most female married workers is that when they join an organization they will be

well remunerated, treated with respect and dignity and also get an opportunity to utilise all the skills they gained at college. Most SMEs do not meet these expectations which lead to worker disengagement and low satisfaction which are both key antecedents to labour turnover”.

The study also showed that the high labour turnover of married female workers has devastating effects to the performance and growth of an organization. Most SME's have witnessed stunted because labour migration. Studies have persistently shown that workers with more years of experience perform much better than workers with little or no work experience. Organizational performance, survival and growth heavily rely on employee expertise, competences, knowledge of the culture of the industry, employee loyalty and commitment. SMEs in the retail sector can increase their sales if and only if they manage to retain experienced workforce and workers who have a positive attitude towards their work and institutions at large. The high rate at which SMEs lose experienced married female workers to other local and foreign companies make them lose a lot of business and soil the company's corporate image.

5. CONCLUSION

Firstly, it was concluded that labor turnover is very high among married female workers in the retail sector. The majority of female married workers leave their jobs to join other industries or companies where conditions of employment were more favorable to them since they have several family chores to do at home after work. Some workers leave their jobs to join their families and concentrate on doing domestic chores such as preparing meals, washing and many others. Secondly, it was concluded that there are several factors that influence labor turnover of married female workers in the retail sector. Some of the factors include human engineering, glass ceiling, sexual assaults and poor and inconsistent remuneration. Thirdly, it was concluded that owing to the unavailability of financial, material and human capital resources, most SMEs in the retail sector find it hard to address labor turnover challenges of married female workers in the retail sector. Fourthly, labor turnover of female workers has devastating consequences to the growth of SMEs and psychological well-being of workers.

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