

STRESS COPING STRATEGIES AMONG GHANAIAN WOMEN IN MANAGERIAL POSITIONS

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Abstract

The study investigated occupational stressors, their effects and the coping mechanisms that women in managerial positions adopt. Selected women in various managerial positions in Ghana were interviewed using the Occupational Stress Inventory–Revised interview guide. The results showed that stressors experienced by the women included role over-load, role insufficiency, role ambiguity, role conflict, role responsibility and physical environmental stressors. The effects of these occupational stressors included vocational, psychological, interpersonal and behavioural and physical strains. Consequently, the women employed various coping mechanisms to combat these effects and that the severity of these stressors often depended on their coping strategies. There was no evidence to suggest that these women employed popular stress reduction techniques such as autogenic or progressive muscular relaxation including yoga and formal structured physical education in coping with the stresses they experienced. The results have implications on appropriate work place environment, particularly with respect to provision of stress coping or management strategies

Keywords: OSI-R, work overload, perceived control, rationalization of options

Introduction

Women in Ghana especially the educated ones over the years have played very important roles in the socio-economic development of Ghana. Women bring forth children to continue the human race and also train these children to fit well into the society. Women constitute about half of the total population of the world and about 51.3% of the Ghanaian population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010).

The woman's role in recent times however has become complex. They now occupy managerial positions in medicine, industries, mines and other institutions. Those, not privileged to be in managerial positions are

often self-employed; they engage in economic ventures outside the home in order to earn income to support the family's budget while performing their duties as a house keeper, a wife and a mother. The deleterious effects of long absence from home include children staying out of school and the consequences which they experience later in life (Greenberg, 2002; Bedu-Addo, 2010; The State of the World's Children 2007 Report).

These roles are entrenched in the Ghanaian culture. According to Dolphyne (1991) women have grown to accept their position as housekeepers, carers, irrespective of their educational status. In the Ghanaian setting, women grow up to accept the fact that it is their responsibility to cook the meal, clean and maintain the house. The performance of these duties thus put considerable stress on them. Thoit (1986) has correctly identified that Inter-role conflicts arising from the combination of work and family roles have a greater impact on women than on men. This may be as a result of the woman's inability to clearly discriminate between her roles in the house and the work place, probably because of her desire to attain the expected results in both places. This situation stresses the woman further and can affect her health and quality of life (Greenberg, 2002; Bedu-Addo, 2010). Furthermore, chronic life conditions such as inadequate housing, dangerous neighbourhoods, burdensome responsibilities, and economic uncertainties are strong stressors in the lives of some of these women (Greenberg, 2002).

How these women in managerial positions are able to perform their traditional roles together with their occupational responsibilities, handle stressful situations, keep their mental balance and achieve results and success in their work places is the problem that the present study investigated. The study highlights the nature of occupational stress experienced by these women and how they are or can be managed.

1.0 Methodology:

Convenient sampling technique was used to select ten (10) women from the population of females in managerial positions in institutions covering parastatals, ministries, and district assemblies as well as having varying professional backgrounds. These women would generally be married with children and/or dependants, of varying ages, and are well educated with first or higher degrees or professional recognition (Table 1).

A modified structured interview guide based on the Occupational Stress Inventory- Revised, OSI-R (Osipow, 1998) was the main instrument used to gather qualitative data. A tape recorder was employed in recording information from the respondents, as it enabled large volume and rich information to be collected.

Table 1: Basic characteristics of respondents

S/N	Affiliation	Age Range	Marital Status	Direct Dependence	Academic Preparation	Work Experience (years)
1.	Educational	41- 50	Married	4	2nd Degree	24
2.	Health	51- 60	Single	Several	1st Degree equivalent	> 35
3.	Local Govt	41 - 50	Single	4	1st Degree	< 5
4.	Finance	51- 60	Married	7	2nd Degree	30
5.	Resource Mob	51- 60	Married	7	2nd Degree	32
6.	Parastatal	41-50	Married	4	2nd Degree	21
7.	Security	41- 50	Married	4	2nd Degree	20
8.	Govt Ministry	41- 50	Married	4	2nd Degree	25
7.	Social Worker	41 – 50	Married	4	2nd Degree	31
10.	Health	51 - 60	Widow	4	Professional Qualification	31

The use of such instrument enabled the interviewees' perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations, and construction of realities to be assessed. The items on the OSI-R questionnaire were compressed to three main headings which were the determinants of stress, the symptoms of stress and the strategies for coping. There were seven (7) items under the determinants of stress, four items to determine the stress symptoms and four items were also formulated to find out the coping strategies of these women. The validity and reliability for the original OSI-R which was used for the interview guide was measured and this is also applicable to the present study.

The respondents reacted to various questions on the nature of stress experienced, coping strategies adopted and the resultant strain. Factor analysis was used to describe the data.

2.0 Results and Discussion:

2.1 Nature of Stress Experienced

The results revealed that the women experienced stress as a result of role overload, role insufficiency, role ambiguity, role conflict (boundary), responsibility and physical environment. The women indicated that they experienced role overload as a result of heavy work load, interruption of work schedule, dealing with many people, and inadequate human, material and financial resources. Majority (>75%) of the women usually worked on official items at home as a result of pressure to meet deadlines, unplanned work schedules and inadequate training skills in their areas of operation also contributed to role overload. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Cope, 2003; Jones & Kinman, 2001).

What is interesting however is that some of these stressors such as inadequacy of resources and informal training were not seen as contributing to role overload by the women interviewed because they employed various coping strategies such as consulting others or not being shy to learn from others in an informal way, as ways of coping with such stressors. Women who did not take work home had more time to relax, were able to have enough rest at home and were not as stressed as those who did.

A study by Karasek and Theorell (1990) cited in Roxburgh (1994) found that the most stressful jobs were those which allowed little decision making and yet, placed huge psychological demand on the worker. Examples of psychologically demanding jobs were those in which one has to work speedily and suspend a huge workload. This is confirmed by the present findings that the women in the study were expected to pursue their organizational goals to achieve the vision expected and not what they thought was good for their organizations as managers.

Thus, lack of perceived control over work that the women experienced confirms other previous studies that the amount of work does not seem as critical to health as the control the worker has over the work rate or related work process. Furthermore, the women experienced role insufficiency to some extent. They claimed they had the skills and interest to do the job but added that there were frustrations and challenges in the work, and sometimes the work was boring. Women with higher levels of stress were those not employing coping resources effectively to deal with higher levels of role insufficiency (Osipow and Spokane, 1987; Cope, 2003).

This study also identified role conflict because the women claimed some polices did not go down well with them and roles were not also clearly defined. They also reported that they had divided loyalty as a result of performing family obligation, religious activities and taking care of their children. These findings are consistent with those of Thoit (1986), Roxburgh (1994) and Kim *et al.*, (2005). This echoes the assertion by Ross and Halation (1982) that attention should be paid to the effect of family stress on the worker's performance, because of its tendency to bring about negative effects. This would particularly affect women in countries (societies) such as Ghana where gender inequality is strong and where more women are now involved in the formal employment. Responsibilities at work may conflict with family responsibilities such as care for a sick child or an elderly relative, or commitments to family and friends. This may be as a result of the woman's inability to clearly discriminate between her roles in the house and the work place probably because of her desire to attain the expected results in both places.

The hazardous working environments of the women exposed them to some dangers and harmful materials at their workplaces. For example they

reported that “noise from the road sometimes obstructed their work as it made ‘hearing and listening difficult’. Materials in the work environment such as chairs were also reported by the women as “affecting their back”. It is reasonable to suggest that such high levels of noise and unsuitable furniture in the work setting may have contributed to these women’s experiences of stress in the work place. The present findings are in consonant with those of other investigators in various industrial settings (Belojevic *et al.*, 2003; Lee, 2002) that physical environments of offices contribute to stress.

2.2 Effects of Occupational Stress

Effects of occupational stress identified from the study included absenteeism, tiredness, inability to concentrate, and irritation and worries. The findings also suggested that the number of dependants of the respondents especially those in pre-school and those under the age of eighteen added to the home factors that stressed the women, including health concerns.

2.3 Coping Strategies

The ability of these women to cope with the indicated stresses depended on the coping strategies or mechanisms adopted. Rationalization, self-care, rational cognitive coping, social support and recreational activities were some of the coping strategies they had adopted to minimise or overcome their stresses. For example, although the respondents admitted that they did some work which were below their abilities and lacked adequate resources and training, their rationalization served as coping mechanism which appeared to have reduced the effects of the stressors. This is consistent with the observation of Spokane (1985) and Osipow (1998).

The coping mechanisms that the women employed to moderate stress are consistent with those found elsewhere (Steptoe, Lundwall and Cropley, 2000). However, none of the women employed stress management techniques such as relaxation or physical exercise as recommended by Connell and D’Augelli (1990). Although the women enjoyed social support as a way of coping with occupational stress, some studies have found inconclusive buffering effects of social support on stress (Kim *et al.*, 2005)..

Conclusion

The findings of the study has implication for the worker (employee), employer, the counsellor, Trades Union, Government Ministries, Policy Makers and all parties involved in the industry. Occupational stress is a very serious menace in the work place that should be tackled by all stakeholders in the industry. It has sources which are inherent to the work place or

organisation although the worker also brings into the work place some level of pre-disposed factors to stress. These have serious implications for the productivity of the organization, employee and the employer. There is therefore the need to put in place measures to reduce or prevent the occurrence of stress in the work place which have adverse effects on the individual's health, his or her family, work performance and social life in general. Policies that promote good health and enhance work performance should be formulated in the work place. A simple requirement will be for periodic evaluation of stress levels of managerial staff.

Even though, women in managerial positions in Ghana work under tremendous stressors, various organisations do not realise that part of the problems stems from the women themselves; they quietly get on with their jobs by employing various forms of crude coping mechanisms. Employers should thus put in place policies that reduce the stresses these women encounter so that they will be able to perform their functions assiduously. In particular, counsellors and HR managers must play key roles in discussing with staff their job descriptions and performance expectations, as well potential dangers or hazards that they will have to cope with.

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