

Political Orientation among Working Women: A Case Study of Kolkata

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Abstract

The main purpose of the present study is to understand the pattern of political orientation of the working women of Kolkata. By political orientation of the respondent we primarily mean her cognitive orientation (i.e. her knowledge about political parties, their symbols, and their stay in power and their judgements about political system). Survey was carried by the researcher on 1000 working women of Kolkata in the months from july-september, 2015. Results: Women working both in the organised as well as unorganised sectors play dual role looking after their children, elders in the family, husbands and also contribute to the family expenditure but they are not consulted at home regarding education of their children, investments etc. They consult their husbands, elder members of the family or the community before casting their vote and are not guided by individual conscience. Women do not yet exist as an effective political collectivity.

Key- words: political- orientation, working- women, Kolkata, evidence- based survey.

1. Introduction

Women's role in economic development, in most countries of the world, cannot be undermined. Although women constitute almost half of the total population of the world, their social, economic and political status is lower than that of men and they are subjected to the tyranny and oppression of a particular order for centuries and defacto even today. They are customarily expected to confine themselves to household environs and play a passive role as daughters, daughters-in-law, wives and mothers. They are typically considered as weaker than men. This attitude has constrained their mobility and consequently lack of opportunities for the development of their personalities. Women belonging to the underprivileged and poorer sections, irrespective of their social strata or region, are by themselves, in no position to unravel their problems. They are subject to discrimination and exploitation and occupy a lower status in domestic, political and economic scenario.

There are four important debates on the question of political participation of women both at the global level as well as in India: one debate tries look at the women's participation as "empowering women" particularly as political categories (Parida) Second debate tries to argue that voting rights or suffrage will remain as symbolism or "political tokenism" (Suchinmayee) rather than actualizing participation in traditional societies such as India, Iran etc. The third debate looks at suffrage as essential component for creating egalitarian society and final debate argue that political participation especially through "quota" or reservation not necessarily leads to social emancipation of women, as women are still without property rights and that gender bias still operates at the large level (Klausen). Gender equality is a phased phenomenon. It develops gradually, step wise and as a concerted effort where state intervention may assist in moving equality in high direction (Delharup).

2. General Profile of Women in India

The report by the National Committee on the Status of Women (2012) reveals that women's participation in the economy has been declining since 1921. Regarding workforce participation rate, in India as per 2011 census only about 26 per cent of total female population are working, against 53 per cent of the total male population. In case of non-workers, female accounts for 74.3 per cent of the total female population, while male accounts for only about 48 per cent of the total male population.

The cultural norms operate both as a restriction on a woman's mobility as well as an impediment for her participation in the public sphere. Indian society is extremely hierarchical with virtually everyone ranked relative to others according to their caste (or caste like groups), class, wealth and power. Though specific customs vary from region to region, there are different standards of behaviour for men and women that carry over into the work environment. A study of the background of political leaders revealed that most men have had past experiences as leaders in trade unions, cooperatives which provided them a training ground. Restricting women's participation in these activities and community-based organisations has denied them opportunity of developing their skills required to function as representatives in the public sphere. For women from minority and indigenous communities such barriers are often compounded with caste legacies. That explains why in India the 84th amendment regarding 33% reservation of seats never got passed in the Lok Sabha. Regarding present political status of women, United Nations observed that women are making scant progress around the world in getting into leadership positions in business, government and academia. Even in wealthy nations, the pace is still too slow. The first country to grant women the right to vote was New Zealand in 1893. Only 24 women have been elected heads of state or government in the century. Women hold 10.5 percent of the seats in the world's parliaments. (Inter-parliamentary union report to UN, 2013) The UN Data Base on Women's Indicators and Statistics shows that only eight countries have achieved the target of 30% or more seats held by women in parliament headed by Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway. In India representation of women have never exceeded more than 11% in all parliamentary elections and ministerial post are held by only 6% women except in 2014 where 25% cabinet positions are occupied by women. A study of women MP's in India (Shirin Rai: Women and Public Power: Women in the Indian Parliament, 1995) suggests that loyalty to class, caste and a range of other cross-cutting institutional loyalties limits the representation of women's interests. In our country even the best women parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within the party.

Table 1: Number of women in Parliament

Lok Sabha	Total no. of seats (Elections Held)	No. of Women Members who won	% of the Total
First (1952)	489	22	4.4
Second (1957)	494	27	5.4
Third (1962)	494	34	6.7
Fourth (1967)	523	31	5.9
Fifth (1971)	521	22	4.2
Sixth (1977)	544	19	3.4
Seventh (1980)	544	28	5.1
Eighth (1984)	544	44	8.1
Ninth (1989)	529	28	5.3
Tenth (1991)	509	36	7.0
Eleventh (1996)	541	40*	7.4
Twelfth (1998)	545	44*	8.0
Thirteenth (1999)	543	48*	8.8
Fourteenth (2004)	543	45*	8.1
Fifteenth (2009)	543	59	10.9
Sixteenth (2014)	543	61	11.2

Note:* Including one nominated member.

Source: Election Commission of India.

However, an analysis of the success rate of women candidates as compared to men reveals that it has been higher in the last three general elections. In 2014, the success rate of women was 9 % as compared to men at 6%.

The working- women in India continue to face stiff challenges and social resistance. A recent survey conducted by World Economic Forum 2012, choosing 60 of the 100 best employers in India as a sample revealed that only 10% of senior management post is held by women in two-thirds of the surveyed companies. In a survey conducted by industry chamber ASSOCHAM in 2010 found that majority of working women often do a tight rope walk balancing a rather hostile domestic environment and professional lives as husbands and in-laws are yet to adapt modern mindsets.

Ejaz Ghani, William Kerr and Stephen D. O'Connell (Promoting Women's Economic Participation in India, 2013) are of the opinion that empowerment comes in many forms: increased female labour force participation, reduced discrimination and wage differentials and improved advancement practices that promote talented women into leadership and managerial roles. As per their survey in 2005-06 among the unorganised and manufacturing sectors, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu have relatively high female business ownership as compared to Delhi, Haryana, Bihar and Gujarat.

3. Working Women in Kolkata

West Bengal is now the third most populous state in India, with a population density of a little more than 900 persons per square km. Indicators of women's participation in political processes with reference to the last Assembly and Parliamentary elections held in West Bengal in 2011 and 2014 respectively suggest that among the five assemblies, West Bengal has the highest number of women members - 34 (12 percent) of the 294-member assembly. It is followed by Assam with 14 (11 percent) women members in the 126-member house, Tamil Nadu with 17 (seven percent) in the 234-member assembly, and Kerala with only seven (five percent) women legislators out of 140. People of West Bengal have elected maximum number of women parliamentarians.

The state has elected 14 women MPs out of 42 nominations compared to seven in the 2009 parliamentary election. Mamta Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress fielded maximum number of women candidates as compared to other political parties this election. (Source: Election Commission of India, 2014). Despite the land of various political, social, economic and cultural movements, the state has failed to organize a movement for development and upliftment of women as an entire class. They are practically excluded from decision making. Women are hardly visible in the high level decision making bodies of political parties in the state, in common with the rest of India.

Women in Kolkata have always participated in the vibrant political and cultural life of the city even as they do now. They are to be found in services and professions, as entrepreneurs and NGO activists, as industrial labour and home-based workers. If we look at the working women of Kolkata the percentage of women has declined and most of them belong to low income group. (West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004). Pradeep Chhibber (Department of Political Science, University of California Berkeley) seems to emphasise that if women are confined to home, they are less active in politics. But a contradictory view is found in the works of Anirban Mondal and Gitanjali Hajra (IJRC, 2012) on the slum-dwellers of Kolkata. They emphasise that women's autonomy depends not only on economic empowerment and education but also on social organisation, kinship and marriage. Sometimes role of individual decision making decreases and family decisions take a major role. (Mumtaz 1982). Sarit K. Bhowmik (NASVI, 2011) in his article on women hawkers of some big Indian cities including Kolkata find that due to lack of space, harassment by the police etc, women have become politically apathetic. Again in some cities women hawkers being members of some secondary groups (like SEWA) get protection and hence become politically active.

In order to get an overall picture of the present status of the working women a small survey was carried by the researcher on 1000 working women of Kolkata in the months from July-September, 2015. However it is too early to project the actual picture of the status and political orientation of the working women of Kolkata. Primary observations are as follows:

As regards religion-wise workforce participation, the women belonging to the Hindu community comprise the majority 93.80% in organised and 93% among the unorganised sector. (**Appendix Table 1**) The percentage of working women among other religion is very low. Only 4.80% of Muslim women work in the organised sector while about 7% are unorganised workers engaged in low-paid jobs. Among women belonging to the Christian community only 1% works in the organised sector. In terms of caste (**Appendix Table 2**) also it is observed that in spite of the reservation policy of the Government of India the percentage of women belonging to the SC, ST and OBC working in both organised as well as unorganised is low as compared to the general caste. While about 88.40% women belonging to the general caste work in the organised sector, a total of only 11.6% (8.40% of SCs, 0.20% STs and 1.80% OBCs and others 1.20%) work in the salaried jobs. The percentage is much higher in unorganised sector which is 20.4% (15.40% SCs, 0.80% STs and 3.40% OBCs and others 0.80%).

The study also shows that women working both in the organised as well as unorganised sectors play dual role looking after their children, elders in the family, husbands and household chores both before and after coming from work.

On an average they spend 3 hours or more. (**Appendix Table 3 and 4**) Thus it is evident that patriarchy has limited women involvement in the workplace. It has been observed that many of the working women who control their own income contribute to the economic needs of the family when required. They often participate in discussions at their workplace and their views are given due weight age before any final decision. However, when it comes to making investments, they often leave it to their husbands to invest on their behalf. They are not consulted at home regarding minor decisions regarding education of their children, their private tuitions etc. Dr. Kamini B. Dashora (Problems faced by working women in India, 2013) thus feels that working women are in a paradoxical situation; when a family suffers economically, people think women should go out to work, yet at the same time her participation in societal practices or politics is viewed as slightly inappropriate, subtly wrong and definitely dangerous to their chastity and womanly virtues.

The result is that empowerment of women in India is highly imbalanced and with huge gaps and this disparity is leading to unbalanced development. As regards their cognitive orientation, the respondents (both organised and unorganised) were able to identify the symbols and names of the political parties that are presently in power in both at the centre and the states. (**Appendix Chart 1 and 2**) They are also able to recognise and name the persons at the helm of politics earlier and present. Most of them actively read the newspapers and political pamphlets that are distributed during elections, but they are not ready to name the political party or the persons who harassed them probably out of fear of being evicted from home or any other harm to her or to her family members. (**around 2% in case of both organised and unorganised were vocal about their experiences in the hands of the party leaders and local goons**). An interesting fact that was revealed during the interview is that the family members of the respondents especially the male members are actively involved in politics either as members of a political party or occupying local party positions but they discourage the women members from doing so. It is interesting to note that during the survey it was revealed that many offices still do not have a proper grievance redressal cell as per government rules. As a result the women respondents refused to answer the question on whether they are harassed by their superior officers for the fear of losing their job. Despite their increase in numbers many women still are concentrated at the clerical level; very few women employees are at managerial level. Women managers, officers, and clerical groups in their banking career face some common problems. These include the burden of dual role, sexual harassment in the workplace, the refusal of men to accept women as colleagues or seniors, the need to work twice as much as men to gain recognition, and the lack of solidarity among women. All these problems contribute to increasing stress among women executives. (Chakraborti, Goswami)

It is necessary to understand the low level of participation in politics. These are as follows: (i) **Shortage of time:** Household chores and rearing of children took up so much time that it was not possible for most women to attend meetings regularly. So when women enter into the political and public arena, resistance becomes stronger. The lack of experience in working or heading organisations can prove to be an impediment in their leadership qualities once in power. This manifests itself in a) fewer women in the parties holding positions of power b) fewer women are allowed to participate in decision-making c) fewer women candidates being fielded in elections (ii) **Loss of a day's wages:** since a large number of women members worked as agricultural labourers or daily wage earners, they have to sacrifice a day's earnings. (iii) **Superstition:** In some household it is still considered inauspicious for women to be involved in political activities. (iv) **Communalisation of politics:** Women by and large are considered religious in nature and hence by injecting the venom of communalism, they are unable to transcend their religious identity. There are examples where women have become the victims of communal violence for instance in Bombay and Gujarat. This has adversely affected women's entry into the political scene. (v) **Lack of training:** There are several barriers for women to participate in the training imparted to them. Due to restrictions imposed on their mobility, the distance of training centres, the cost of training, non-availability of support of family members to take care of household chores and children impede the participation in training. Even when women enter power sphere there is evidence of poor retention rates and high turnover resulting from the difficulties women face in balancing their responsibilities at home and at work with their political engagement. (UNIFEM 2000). A common case is of Rebathi Das. She was the Pradhan of an all women panchayat (kultikari in Burdwan district). Due to volume of responsibilities she was forced to sell her market stall. Worse still, three of her brother's children fell sick and two of them died while she was engaged in very urgent panchayat work. Here her political work interfered with her domestic and job related responsibilities.

Even during the survey it is revealed that in spite of education and well settled jobs, the women consult their husbands, elder members of the family or the community before casting their vote (about 50% -60% both in the organised as well as unorganised sectors). Sometimes they are guided by their husbands and family members to vote for a particular political party to which they are affiliated (47.80% in case of women working in the organised sector and 63.80% in case of women in the unorganised sector). They have also changed their voting pattern after consultation (16.40% in case of women in the organised sector and 30.40% in case of women in the unorganised sector) and are not guided by individual conscience. Women do not yet exist as an effective political collectivity. Political parties have been unwilling to admit women, allow them a voice in policy formation or give them opportunities for leadership positions. Ironically, Leftist and self-styled progressive parties are also not free from this dilemma.

Studies show that women newly entering the political arena benefit from capacity building and support. This has been the case in South Africa, where civic groups and women organisations have been able to repel laws regarding sanitation and water transport system, war stricken Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2006 where women came together and worked collectively and became leaders in their own right developing, coordinating and launching advocacy initiatives at the local level including a successful effort to amend municipal laws to better female workers (Brigid Inder).

Civic groups provide a more welcoming environment for women. In Europe and in countries formed after the breakdown of Soviet Union, women played a key role in civil society movements despite the fact that the post-socialist removal of quotas led to a decline in their presence in the parliaments. Therefore, 'Partnership Building' can help in good governance. In India for example, in June 2000, an agreement was signed for the rehabilitation of 3000 pavement dwellers in Mumbai between a landowner, construction company, the slum rehabilitation authority (SRA), involving women that helped them to relocate and register their societies and cooperatives. This World Bank survey demonstrates that the greater women participate in public life, the less is public sector corruption. (Advancing Gender Equality: World Bank since Beijing, 2000).

4. Future Vision

While going through books and journals the author has observed that there are no such studies specifically on working women of both the organised and the unorganised sector of Kolkata, Most of the studies done so far have emphasised either on the dual role played by women in the family and workplace and the problems encountered or only on their role in the decision-making process. The Right to work seen by the second wave of feminism as a tool for gaining equality for women pushed them into double or even triple burden situation where they are expected to be efficient workers (at places of work), loving mothers and partners(in families) as well as active citizens playing concrete political roles. As a result they are not able to devote quality time to every aspect or forced to sacrifice either her work or family or both in order to be active citizens. Decentralisation does not necessarily facilitate women's participation in public office. Women in government may be useful in delivering women's needs without succumbing to political pressures and able to represent or respond to the interests of women. The author will seek to focus on these areas in future research.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1: RELIGION

TABLE 2: CASTE

TABLE 3: AVERAGE TIME SPENT WITH FAMILY BEFORE GOING TO WORK.

TABLE4: AVERAGE TIME SPENT WITH FAMILY AFTER COMING BACK FROM WORK

CHART 1: PERCENTAGE OF ORGANISED

CHART 2: PERCENTAGE OF UNORGANISED

Chart1

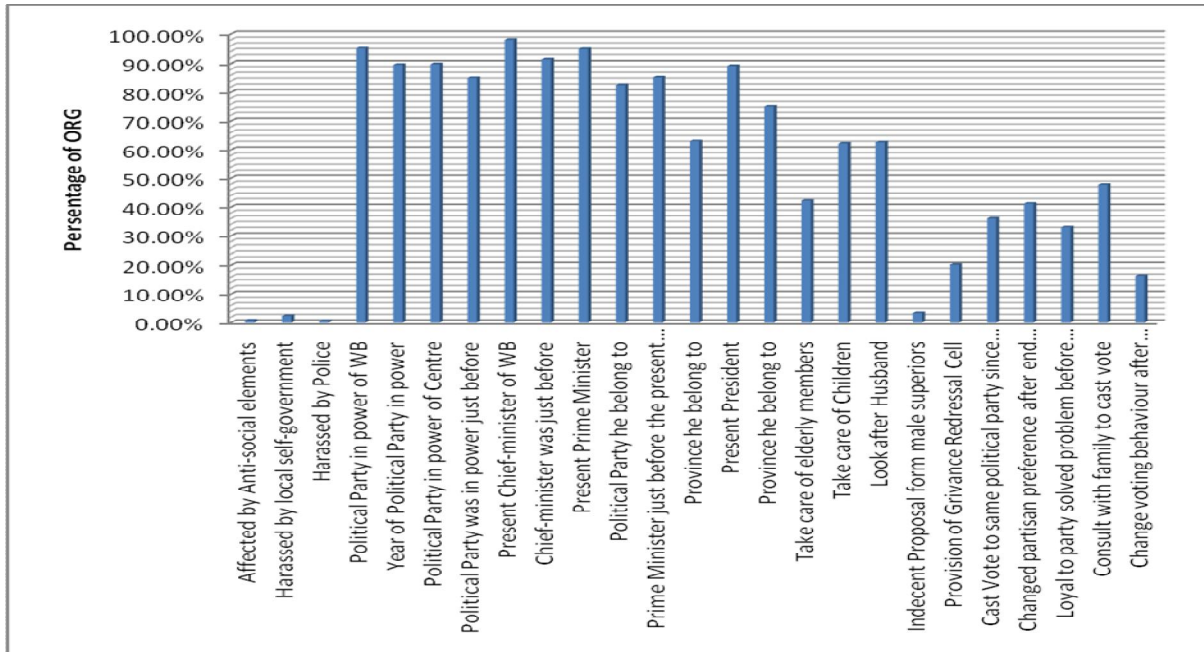


Chart: 2

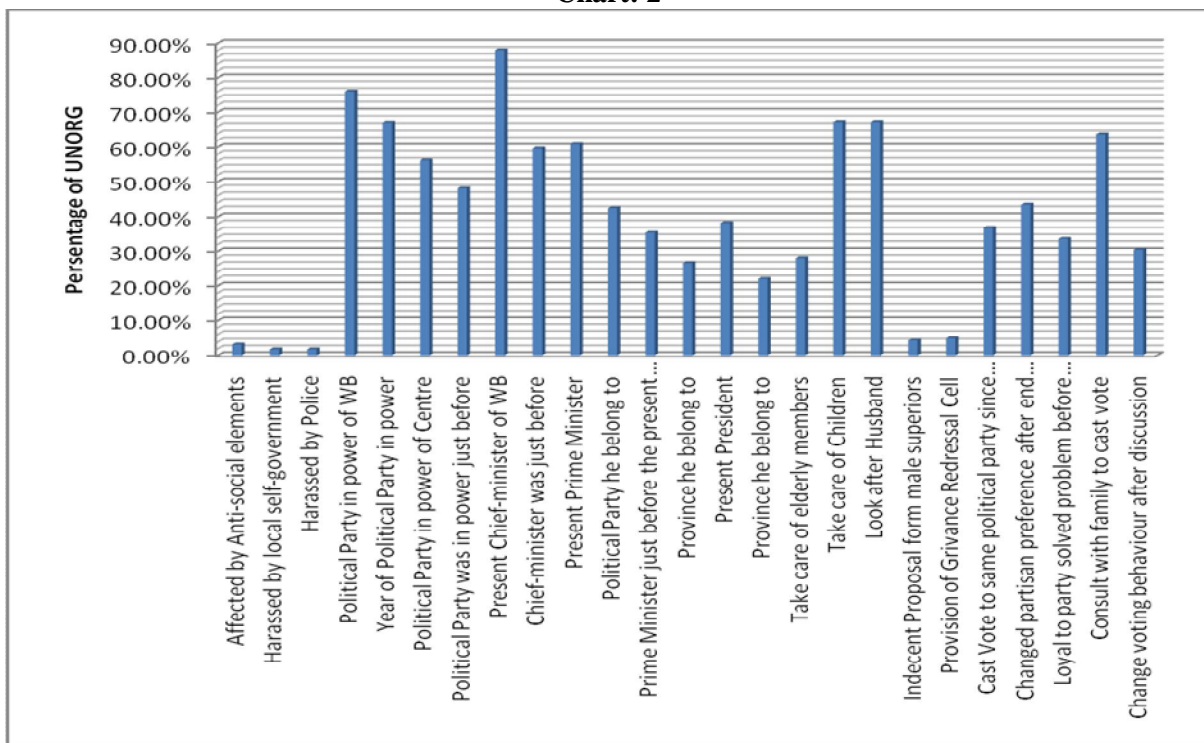


TABLE 1

RELIGION				
Religion	Number		Percentage	
	ORG	UNORG	ORG	UNORG
Hindu	469	465	93.80%	93.00%
Islam	24	35	4.80%	7.00%
Christian	5	0	1.00%	0.00%
Other	2	0	0.40%	0.00%
Total	500	500	100.00%	100.00%

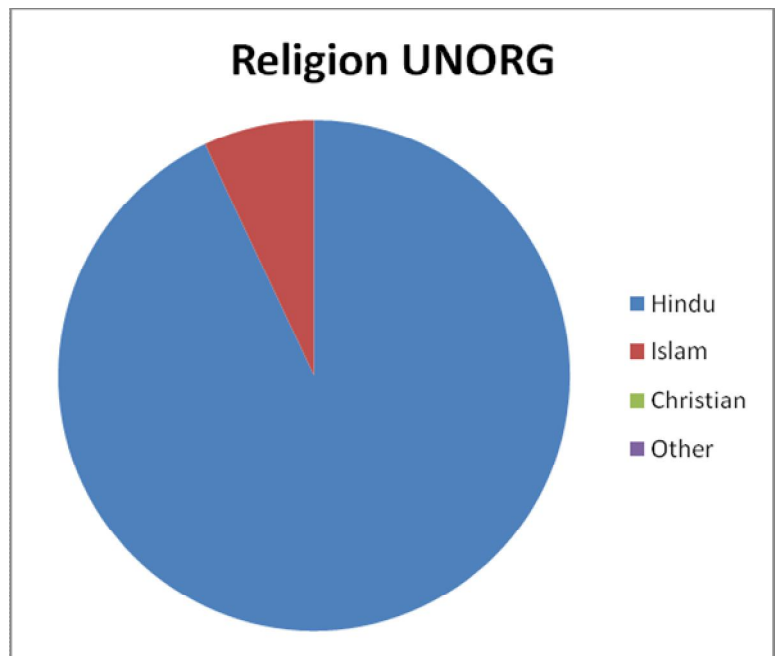
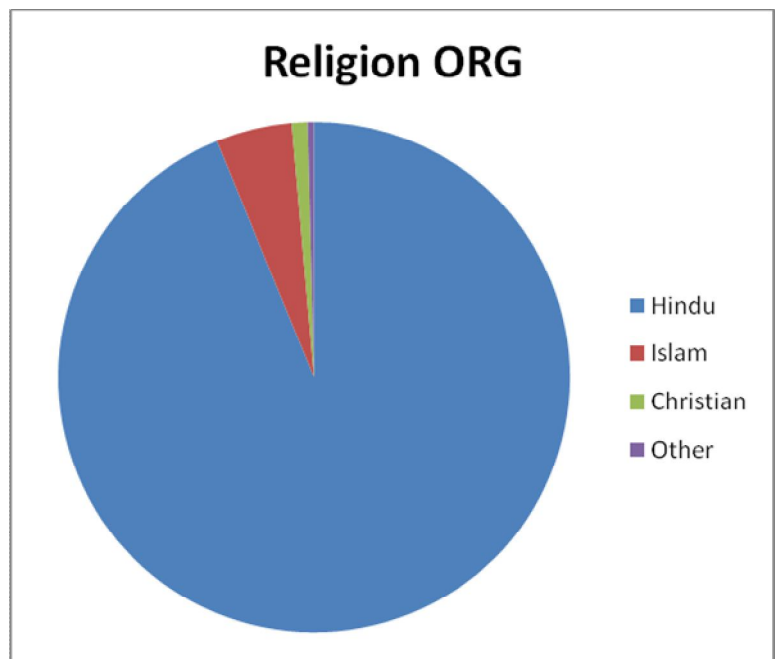


TABLE 2 (CASTE)

Caste	Number		Percentage	
	ORG	UNORG	ORG	UNORG
Sc	42	77	8.40%	15.40%
ST	1	4	0.20%	0.80%
OBC	9	17	1.80%	3.40%
General	442	398	88.40%	79.60%
Other	6	4	1.20%	0.80%
Total	500	500	100.00%	100.00%

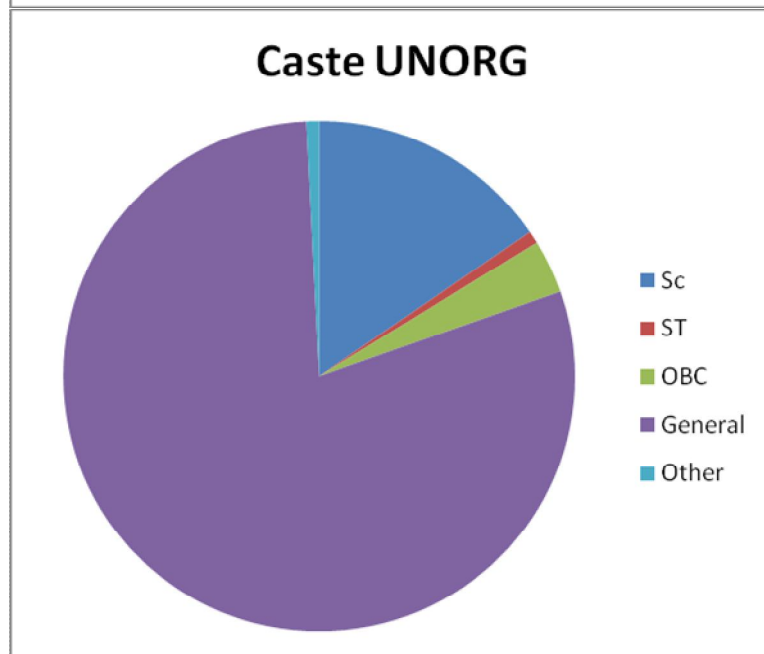
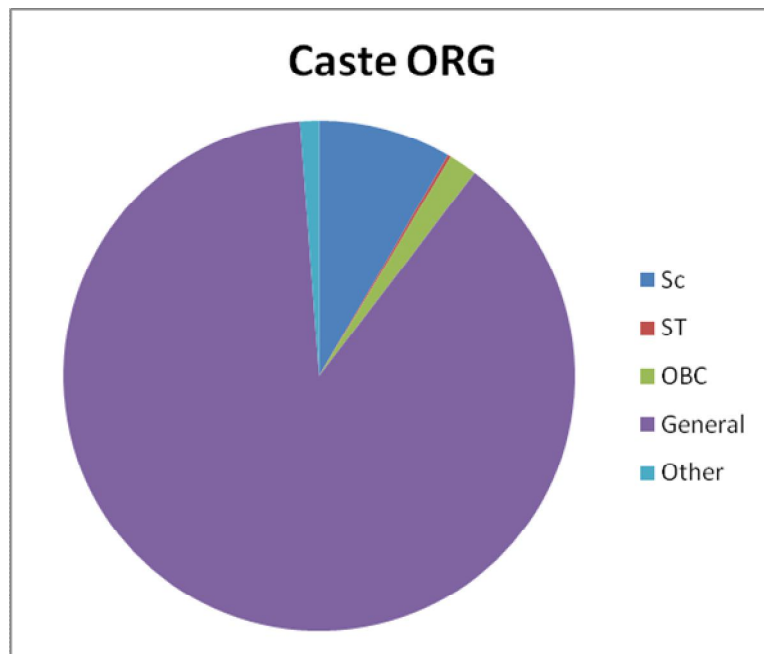


TABLE 3(Time spend before going to work)	Number		Percentage	
	ORG	UNORG	ORG	UNORG
3 or more	177	154	35.40%	30.80%
2 or more	164	195	32.80%	39.00%
1 or more	127	117	25.40%	23.40%
Less than 1	22	32	4.40%	6.40%
No Time	8	2	1.60%	0.40%
RA	2	0	0.40%	0.00%
Total	500	500	100.00%	100.00%

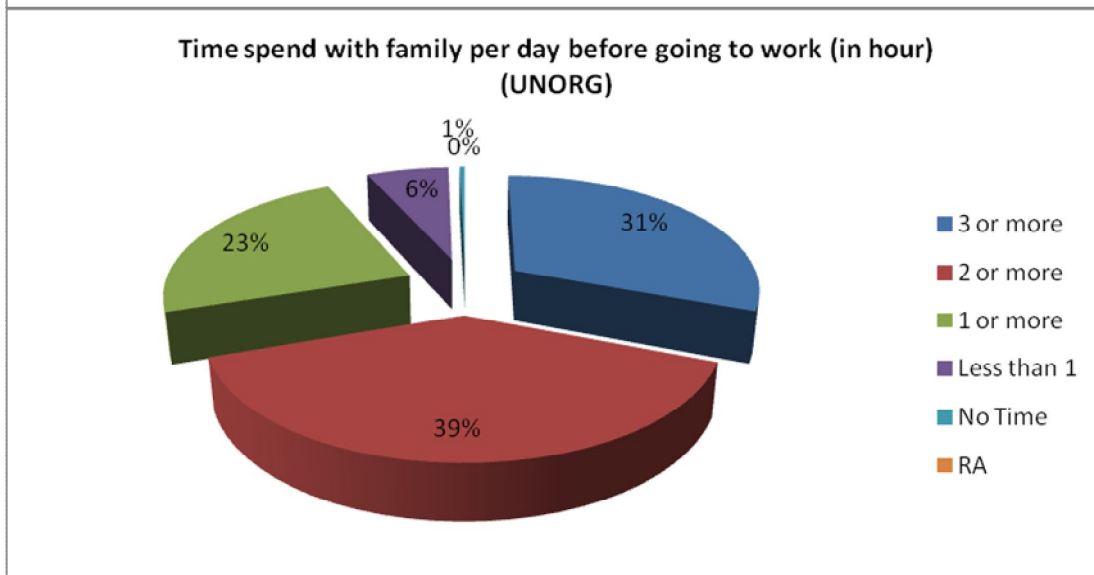
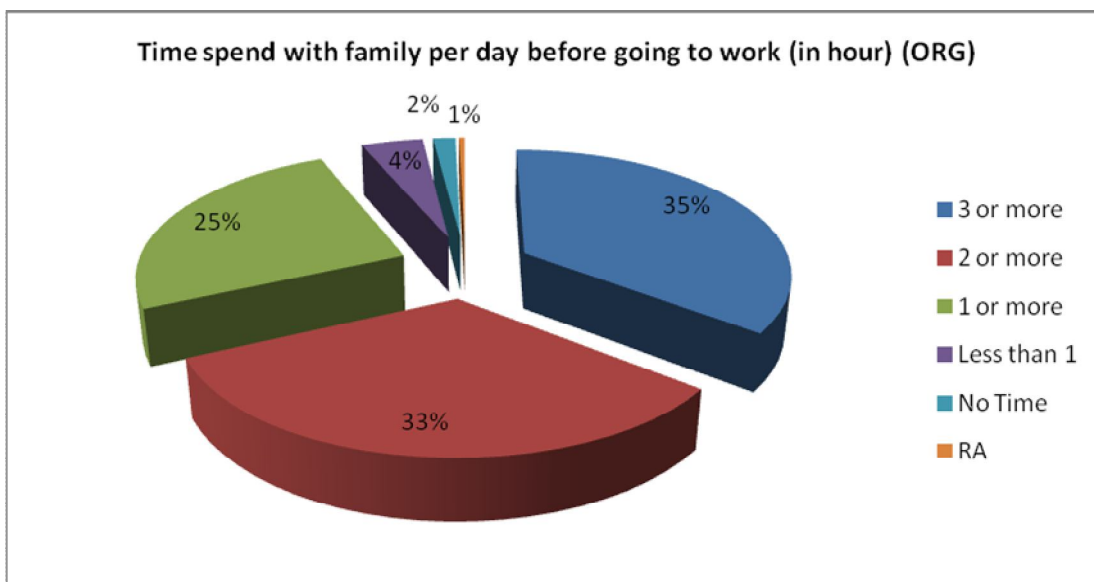


TABLE 4(Time spent with family per day after coming back from work)

Hours	Number		Percentage	
	ORG	UNORG	ORG	UNORG
3 or more	322	336	64.40%	67.20%
2 or more	124	125	24.80%	25.00%
1 or more	36	34	7.20%	6.80%
Less than 1	7	4	1.40%	0.80%
No Time	9	1	1.80%	0.20%
RA	2	0	0.40%	0.00%
Total	500	500	100.00%	100.00%

