Review of the Work-Life Balance Challenges of Women Professionals in Information Technology Industry

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Abstract: *India post liberalisation has seen a phenomenal growth in the IT sector. According to the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM 2012), the IT sector has increased its contribution to India's GDP from 1.2% in 1998 to 7.5% in 2012. NASSCOM and The Open University (UK) in a report titled "Women and IT Scorecard – India" (2017) revealed that Technology sector is the second largest employer of women in India and employs 34% women, i.e., 1.3 million. Despite the surge of women in the IT industry the literature on working women reflects that women face a unique set of challenges in the society as well as at the work place because of their gender. Paper reviews the Challenges, Issues and the Initiatives regarding the Work-Life Balance faced by the women professionals working in Information Technology industry. The work is based on review of published literature.*

Keywords: Information Technology, organization strategies, professional women, work-life balance

1. Introduction

Information Technology (IT) has played a very crucial role in empowering women. IT has resulted in double income families replacing the male breadwinner model (Clark and Sekher 2007). IT is a great prospect for women in terms of salary, career path, rewarding environment and intellectually stimulating work (Varma 2002b). Women IT professionals have amplified their status in the society by increasing their economic capital, social capital and symbolic capital (Shanker 2008). However the IT sector work environment is demanding. It often involves work pressure, extended work hours, after hour meetings, on-call duty and rapid technological changes (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006).

IT industry is one of the fastest growing industrial services in the present Indian market. The IT services industry in India had a market share of US$ 56.3 billion in FY13 and grew at a CAGR of 13% during FY08-13, according to National Association of Software and Services Companies (IBEF 2014). The India Skills report(2016), states that Software and IT are the second largest non-agricultural sector which employs women (Raghuram et al. 2017). Currently around 1.3 million women are employed by the IT industry. The advent of the IT era in India has opened up remarkable job opportunities for educated women. However the biggest issue identified can be labelled as the 'leaking pipeline' of women employees. A report by the Open University UK and NASSCOM, 2017 clearly states that women are 51% of the entry level recruits, as they progress the leadership ladder they form 25% of the managerial positions and finally merely 1% make to the C-suite. A huge number of women either drop out of the workforce or stagnate at lower rungs of the leadership pipeline. It is important to retain and promote women's entry and advancement given the shortage of skilled labour in the IT industry (Maitland 2001). Despite efforts retention of women is a challenge. Identification of these barriers and addressing them is imperative (Ahuja 2002).

Women face certain specific challenges at the workplace, home and in the society due to their gender. Among challenges at workplace gender bias has always been a key challenge for women. Gender bias along with the societal constraints cause women to experience the 'glass ceiling' (ChughandSahgal 2007). In the society the traditional stereotyped role apportion still exists where women are still the principal care takers of home and children irrespective of their work status (Singh 2004; Bhatnagar andRajadhyaksha 2001). Women in Indian society are still solely responsible for domestic work, care of elderly and childcare which has created a great challenge of balancing work responsibilities and family responsibilities. Families are facing challenges due to more women entering the workforce (Davidson and Burke 2011).

However the strategies used by organizations play a significant role in enabling women to have more enriched work and personal life. Organizations have recognized the challenges faced by women and introduced numerous initiatives like flexible timings, telecommuting and child-care facilities to enhance work life balance (Boyar et al. 2008). The Government has also introduced laws on women safety, increased duration of maternity leave, infrastructure mandates that have also helped women.The objective of the present study is to determine the key challenges in the work-life and in family-life and their impact on professional women working in the IT sector. It also studies the strategies used by organizations to maintain the work-life balance and further identifies the gap areas.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Issues faced by professional women in the IT industry

Women have faced complex challenges and discrimination across nations developed or developing, eastern or western (Ahuja 2002). However an increase in education structures and shift in socio-cultural beliefs has led to an upsurge of

women contributing to the global workforce (Davidson and Burke 2011). The IT industry has been a great enabler for women providing skilled and educated women exceptional opportunities. Despite being equally talented as men women are unable to grow at par with men due to challenges at workplace, society and home. A detailed investigation of the various issues facing professional women is carried out and discussed herewith. The key issues faced by professional women are shown in Figure-1.

2.2 Organisational Role, Issues and Initiatives

Women are equally educated as men as they enter the workforce. However discrimination faced by the professional women of India, described by two common terms 'sexism' and 'glass ceiling', stop them from progressing in their careers (Ledwith andManfredi 2000; Chugh andSahgal 2007). 'Sexism' is the gender bias favouring men over women at a workplace and 'glass ceiling' is the invisible factors in an organization that act as barrier to the progress of women in their careers. These have resulted women concentration in the lower rungs whereas marginal representation at the leadership levels (Bhattacharyya and Ghosh 2012). Study by Shanker (2008) also affirms the glass-ceiling faced by IT professional women at Bangalore. Among other factors occupational culture (long hours, late nights may conflict with their safety concerns and family responsibilities) and lack of mentors are some of the structural factors faced by women (Ahuja 2002). Organizations are more sensitive to women issues and have introduced several initiatives like flexi-timings, tele-commuting and better childcare facilities to cater to work-life balance (Boyar et al. 2008; Doble andSupriya 2010). Numerous work life balance initiatives like compressed work weeks, work from home, various leaves for dependent care et al have been adopted by organizations to help employees balance work and family life (Frone 2003). Lot of work has been done on positive work-to-family spill over called work-family enrichment too. Healthy work life can significantly benefit the family life and personal life (Friedman andGreenhaus 2000; Grzywacz, Almeida, and McDonald 2002; Greenhausand Powell 2006). An organization that disregards employees' prerequisites for a balanced work and family life and focusses only on performance leads to a stressful life (Aryee 1992). Organizations that extend work-life balance support lead to higher loyalty, job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Marcinkus, Beny, and Gordan 2007). Organizations need to focus on work-family conflict as it may lead to job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, stress and turnover intention (Anderson, Coffey andByerly 2002).

1) Social & Cultural Issues

Women are predominantly driven by social values and norms which expects women to be home   and child caretakers despite their work-status. Women employees are afflicted with not just paid work at office but unpaid work at home. Social expectations is a key factor that affects a women's work-life balance (Ahuja 2002). Women coerced by social-cultural factors give more precedence to family than career (Patel andParmentier 2005). High value attached to a women's parental role. Unlike the west, women also remain occupied with taking care of the elderly at home

(Bhatnagar andRajadhyaksha 2001). Women in India are especially influenced by their culture and are committed to their parental, marital, and home maker roles over the life cycle regardless of their work status (Singh 2004; Bhatnagar andRajadhyaksha 2001).

2) Family Role & Issues

The studies done on employed couples indicate work-family conflict is related to parental responsibilities (Duxbury and Higgins 2008). Employed parents may face higher stress due to entry into parenthood. Since the parents have more demands and less control over time. Parent employees face more difficulty balancing work and family life (Galinsky, Bond and Friedman 1996). However work-life balance is perceived differently across genders (Smithson and Stoke, 2005). And women face more work-family conflict than men (Cowlishaw, Evans and McLennan 2010). Women feel more stressed than men if they ignore their family since work and family are equally important to women (Burke 2002). Working hours and child caring can have a strong impact on conflict between work and family (Devi and Rani 2016). Negative attitude of peers and co-workers hinder work-life (PattuandRavichandran 2012). Women primarily face work-overload and time constraints due to the twin role played leading to stress. Working women cannot excel in careers without family support (Sam andAnitha 2014). The challenges include insufficient time for household responsibility and childcare, lack of support from the spouse or family which in extreme cases results in dropping out of the workforce due to family obligations. The void is unavailable moral and physical support from the spouse or family.

3) Personal Issues: Health and Psychological Impact

Health impact like psychological stress, hormonal imbalance, lifestyle diseases like obesity due to insufficient time for recreation and rest are common ailments among the women employees working in IT sector. Work-family conflict is related to psychological stress and strain (Poelmans, Tack andFeenstra 2001). Stress has a physical as well as a psychological impact on women. It can lead to myriad health problems including high blood pressure, heart diseases and stroke. Stress affects not only the individual but also the employees'environment (Devi and Lakshmi 2017). Study by Ali, Hassan and Ali (2013) has observed that employees face health and productivity issues causing stress due to long work hours. Work involving long hours and shift schedule cause psychological consequences like disruption of circadian rhythm which effects performance, sleep patterns, mental health and cardiovascular disorders. There is increasing evidence that women of childbearing age may face disruption of menstrual cycle and increased stress leading to reproductive disorders (Harrington 2001). Excessive strain at workplace could result in 'emotional exhaustion'. Emotional exhaustion can have delirious effects like anxiety, chronic fatigue and depression, it does not affect individuals only but also has effect on the organization. The employees manifest lower organizational commitment and have turnover intentions (Cropanzano, Rupp and Byrne 2003). Higher stress may lead to job dissatisfaction, absenteeism and lower employee commitment (Aryee 1992).
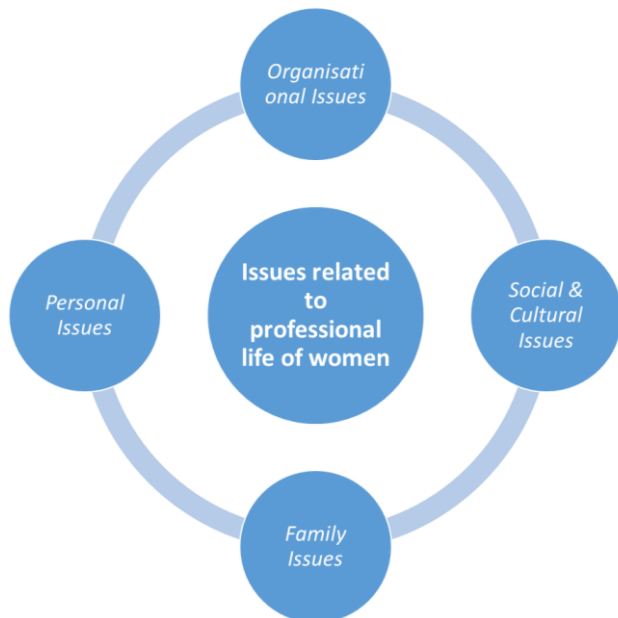
Figure 1: Key Issues faced by professional women in the IT industry

4) Categories of challenges before IT women

Work-family role pressure by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) has three components: time, strain and behaviour. The incompatibility occurs when the time, strain or behaviours required in one role makes it difficult to fulfil requirements of another role. Work-life linkages are complicated where demands from both sides can beextreme. People may have to make trade-offs to maintain the balance (Moorhead and Griffin 2010). Clark (2000) defines work-family balance as satisfaction and good functioning at both work and at home with a minimum role conflict. Fisher-McAuley, et al. (2003) assessed three dimensions of work-life balance as:i) work interference with personal life (WIPL), ii) personal life interference with work (PLIW) and, iii) work/personal life enhancement (WPLE). Considering both positive and negative spill over of work over family life, work-life balance is the degree to which an individual is able to balance the temporal, emotional and behavioural demands at work and at family (Hill et al. 2001).

Michael White et al. (2003) have used the term 'work demands' to describe those factors of employment which have the potential of negative work-to-home spill over. Work demands include work hours, peaks in work load, intensity of work and pace of work. Quality of work life may be affected by high work pressure and high intensity causing fatigue, anxiety and adverse psychological effects. Social factors, structural factors and work-family conflict may act as barriers to career choices, persistence and advancement of women in IT (Ahuja 2002). The key factors influencing women's advancement opportunities and voluntary turnover in IT are: Managing family responsibilities; Work stress; Work schedule flexibility; and Job qualities (Armstrong et al. 2007). Shahtalebi and Yarmohammadian (2011) have defined the obstacles on the way of success of women under three major components: organizational elements, social elements and individual elements. Six major themes that emerged from a study done by Valk and Srinivasan (2011) on the IT women in Bangalore that affect work-life balance are: familial influence on life choices, multi-role responsibilities and attempts to negotiate them, self and

professional identity; work-life challenges and coping strategies; organizational policies and practices; and social support.

5) Government Policies and Regulations

In India the government has played a very crucial role in extension of maternity leaves to 26 weeks from earlier 12 weeks according to the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act in 2017. The government has made ample laws to encourage women education and safety at work. Issues like long commute and work at odd hours may raise security concerns for the women. The Government has created mandates and laws to ensure their safety. The lacuna identified is not in the policies being in place but in the execution. Need for timely and effective law enforcement action in case of harassment and emergencies still need to be ensured on part of the Governments. There exist insufficient regulation on policies of work hours and late hours. Government can look into efficient regulation of work hours for women employees.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Analysis of Gap areas

1) Legislation Issues: Governmentrole & Policies

Though Government has taken many steps to boost women education and employment, however, adequate policies and legislation is needed with respect to the following Issues. Government should realize that educating women and reserving quota for women in jobs will not be sufficient to retain women in the jobs. Women's responsibility to give birth to children and take care of their family is also an important function of women for a noble society. The role of organisations and the Government go side by side. The Government frames the policies whereas the organisations implement it.

Adequate policy for women retention: Government Effort to impart costly technical and higher education to women is meaning less if they do not opt for service and sit at home taking care of children and husband, for this as its responsibility Governmenthas to create suitable infrastructure and policies for women retention in such a way that justice is done at both the place, i.e., enable women to take care of both 'family responsibility" so that family structure is safe and is not broken and also enable to work in office without fear .

Part time women specific Jobs: To save the family structure and care of children which are the future of any society, Government, should think for creation of women specific jobs suiting to take care of their both the above responsibilities . This calls for creation of regular part time, full time and long time Jobs. Part time regular jobs of 4 hours and 6 hours. Duration and full time Jobs of 8 hours duration. Long time Jobs demanding late stay > 8 Hrs to 10 hrs duration and be created mainly for unmarried women and Singles women having no family responsibility and opting exclusively for such Jobs voluntarily.

As the gender equality and equal opportunity always implies with equal work/ job, if jobs are created to fit the women and looking at their convenience, some compromise

with respect to salaries will have to be done to ensure they do not become a liability to the organisation and cut on its profitability.

Curb on late office stay: Also a system of stopping and discouraging of late night stay culture in most of the organisations be initiated by the Governments by way of formulating a policy to pay overtime stay salary at a rate of double the day time average hourly charges, so that late stay be called only when there is utmost need of employees to be present in the office after the normal official office hours. This will also force the organisations to plan their activities as far as possible within the official working hours and not putting the women in embarrassing situations at the end of the day.

As all the IT companies have different financial capabilities and small companies and start-ups may not always be in a position to adopt women centric policies due to their size and economy, however a way has to be found out by the Government for adoption of a common frame work on women issues.

Maternity Follow-up leave: In the interest of retaining the family structure and not putting women employees to undue pressure after maternity ,It is also important to consider unpaid maternity follow up leave up to 12 months after the allowed maternity leave is exhausted , It is because human siblings are totally dependent on mothers up to the age of about 1.5 to 2 years and need to be cared properly for their healthy and emotional growth as they can't even speak and tell their problems and exploitation on the hands of paid caretakers.

Re-employment policy: Re-employment of women who have quit the Jobs to take care of children rearing etc. should be done on priority basis as it is often observed that companies choose to lose such employees for a fresh cheaper fresh man power coming of the technical institutes year by year.

2) Role of family
In India working women can't expect a good work life balance without family support to share their responsibilities such as house-hold chores, cooking and child care etc. by other family members such as husband or parents. The fact can't be denied that many of the responsibilities like cooking, health care, child care etc. cannot be outsourced to paid servants on a permanent basis and have to be taken care by the family members only.

3) Review of suggested classifications
The prime most classifications of challenges faced by women in IT sector gathered through the literature review have been compared in below. It is found that there is no consistency in suggested approach and mostly deal with problems of IT women in foreign countries. There is not sufficient research done in India in this segment. Hence a classification suitable for IT women's challenges in India has been suggested further, details provided below.

4) Suggested classification for women challenges in IT Industry in India
Based on analysis of literature and data available the challenges of women working in IT Industry in India, a 5 fold classification has been suggested herewith to adequately measure the challenges before the women working in IT sector. These challenges fall under- Professional, Family, Personal, Social and Legislative classes as shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Suggested classification for challenges faced by women in IT Industry in India

- **Professional challenges:** Primarily include extended work hours, gender discrimination, disparity in promotions, unavailable flexibility options and facilities at workplace, unhelpful attitude of co-workers and management etc.
- **Family related challenges:** Inadequate family support for house hold responsibilities, childcare, elderly care etc.
- **Personal Challenges:** Include paucity of time for self-health, recreation and rest. Stress due to emotional pressures at home and office, peer pressures etc.
- **Social challenges:** Include patriarchal control over life decisions and stereotyped role apportion for women regardless of the work status.
- **Legislative challenges:** Include ineffective regulation on women employment and retention policies such as Maternity Follow-up leave, Women Re-employment policy and regular part time jobs suiting to women by the Industry. Also curb on organisations promoting habitual late office stay and an effective law enforcement in case of women harassment and emergencies is absent.

4. Key Points- Observations and Conclusions

1) The study finds that for a comprehensive framework the challenges can be classified adequately into five categories- professional, family-related, personal, socio-cultural and legislative.
2) Organizations should discourage late hours work for working women as it leads to safety issues and also is deleterious for their family role and may lead to women opting out of work.
3) Flexible working hours is an important solution and must be implemented by both the organizations and the Government.
4) The male managers and the managements need to be gender-sensitized enough towards the problems of women which includes health issues, pregnancy and childcare of young children.
5) For women to excel in professional career, sharing of workload at home and childcare responsibilities by the spouse or family members is imperative.

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