



Gender in IT Industry: A study of ‘Mommy Track’

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ABSTRACT

Climbing the organizational ladder is a herculean task especially when one is wearing high heels. The probability of getting stuck is very high. A career-oriented woman is always under the dilemma to choose between marriage, babies and having a career. Aspirations and expectations of women are often re-shaped by their family role and social dictates. Indian women’s cultural conditions and societal pressure will force her career to take a back seat most of the time. Most of the exit interviews in the IT sector says that maternity is the reason for quitting the job. When one chooses motherhood, this decision has both penalties and costs, especially when it comes to re-entry after maternity leave. Maternity is not simply meant pregnancy and giving birth, it’s a continuum that involves pregnancy, childbirth, child nurturing, psychological changes and physical healing. Recently London Business School conducted a survey in which 70% of women expressed their anxiety about taking a career break. In the IT sector, taking a career break is riskier than in any other sector. A small career break can have a greater impact. Most private-sector employers believe that having a career break creates a knowledge gap and lack of confidence. Upskilling and re-skilling of professionals are needed after maternity leave. IT sector jobs require longer hours and regular weekend work in addition to the normal working week which is not manageable by most mothers. The cost of good crèches is very high and most families find it unaffordable. It is seen that women are restricted from networking either due to personal or cultural barriers. Through the networking exchange of information’s happens and this exchange helps in shaping up career decisions and strategic moves. Lack of access to informal networks results in exclusion from industrial and tactical knowledge. HR practices see things in black and white and were not able to understand what is going on with women in the workplace. Organizations should introduce well-planned re-joining programmes and career counselling programs that can help women to reorient themselves to the demands of corporate life. This paper aims to explain the perspective of the Indian IT sector towards women techies seeking a career re-launch.

Keywords: Mommy Track, Career re-entry, Networking, Maternity leave, IT sector

1. Introduction

‘Mommy track’ is a career path with flexible work arrangements for women who wish to combine both work and family at the cost of their career advancement. It is an identifiable form of discrimination (Sidle, 2011) based on the preconceived notion that women have to choose between career and family. Traditional gendered practices give women a primary caregiver role. Society’s dichotomized view of motherhood gives choices to women either to be devoted mother or cold careerist with no family responsibility. Working mothers are not considered an ideal fit in the IT industry. The women who are unmarried or childless is treated as career primary women and women who are married and have family obligations comes under career and family women. The majority of the women falls under this second category and are viewed as less serious in their career by their employing organizations (Williams, 2005). Women who are on the ‘mommy track’ (Schwartz, 1989) are treated as second-class professionals and often they get side-tracked in their career.

Gender segregation is very much predominant in the IT sector. There is plenty of studies showing that more females are in C – Suite resulting in greater performance for both the organisation and sector (Devnew, Le Ber, Torchia and Burke, 2018). Several talented women are entering into IT sector but very few are climbing the ladder of the organizational hierarchy. Despite the growth in the number of women techies, women are still underrepresented in key

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decision-making roles in the IT industry. The majority of women are clustered in a low-end job like coding, programming and testing of the software while very few numbers of women are found at the higher-end job like the development of software package, customization and project design. The purpose of this research is to examine the whys and wherefores of the phenomenon 'Mommy Track'.

2. Work-Family Issues of women in the IT Workforce

Women share a disproportionate burden of balancing work and family than men (Basu,2008). Longer workdays and late hours job nature makes working mothers very difficult to combine both work and family life. As a result, women in greater number choose family over career (Douglas and Michaels, 2005).The marital/ parental status of male professionals is immaterial to gain occupational heights.

According to Indian Economist and Philosopher Amartya Sen, "Indian women requires cultural and economic independence to make their own decisions". The factors which hinder the career progression of women can be personal or organizational. Personal factors affecting the career progression of women are the attitude of colleagues, societal perception about working mothers and lack of child care facilities whereas organizational factors like, not being perceived as someone who can think and take decisions independently, not giving challenging assignments or responsibility, not easy considering for promotion, and paying less salary compared with a male colleague of the same designation, and experience. Opportunities are available to women and the hindrances in exploring those discovering those are examined in this study.

Lack of dependable arrangements for child care, lack of access to informal networks, exclusion from strategic decision making, family obligations, unclear career paths, lack of female role models at the senior level and work-life issues derails women career progression. Firms are not generally interested in promoting women because of the prevailing belief that women are not serious about their career and they leave the firm to fulfil their caregiver role in the family. The cost of retaining women is great than men. From an organizational point of view, giving training to women and promoting them will not give Return on Investment (ROI). This kind of workplace discrimination leads to loss of morale, lower self-satisfaction, lack of motivation, lack of organizational commitment, lack of enthusiasm, weak well-being and increased turnover intentions among women employees.

3. Methodology

'Individual Differences Theory of Gender and IT'(Trauth, 2002) and 'Social Role Theory' are the guiding theories of this research.50 women career returners techies were interviewed to know the constraints they faced in their career, strategies they adopted, their definition of career success and support from their family. Women techies who have become mothers within 10 years is chosen for the study. The duration of the interview was about 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews were semi directed and are audio-recorded. Interview data explored how women techies perceived mommy track. Qualitative methods were used to establish the profile of women techies and quantified their experience of career barriers. Interviews were fully transcribed and analysed with a technique developed by Savall and Zardet (1996) based on 'Selection of Meaningful Sentences'. General themes that emerged in this study is perceived organizational support, work flexibility, family support, organizational climate, mentoring, financial wherewithal, person-job fit, technical skills and competence. Analysis of the interviews was done with the qualitative software ATLAS.ti.

4. Obstacles Women Identified as Impacting their Careers

The receptivity of women is very low in the IT industry which perceives to be gender-neutral. Maternity leave usually happens at 6 to 10 years of career time when the employees are about to consider for the top level. Career break at this crucial time restricts their advancement possibilities. Technology is changing in the blink of an eye. Techies may take time to return to the career track after maternity leave, they need to be skilled and re-skilled to cope up with the technological changes. The vast majority of the women techies interviewed for this study agrees that they did not get any feedback, challenging work assignments and career development training in the re-entry after maternity leave. Mommy trackers are clustered in low and mid-level management and often experiences a sense of alienation in the workplace. It is seen that, due to re-entry difficulties, female brain drain is occurring in the IT industry.

The influence of a mentor is very crucial. As most women do not have mentors, they create a safety net for themselves by opting for an image of being risk-averse. High visibility assignments and global projects require professionals who can take calculated risks. Career- family women with greater amounts of skills and qualifications than males is only be considered for promotion (Euwals,2001). If a worker performs, they have to get what they deserve irrespective of their gender and background. The women IT professional careers face a double bind, they can 'either likeable or competent, but not the both' (Corbet et al,2010). If the organization recognizes the women as competent, they are penalised by being rated as less liked which also affect promotion. Lack of female participation in the board room favour men in performance appraisal. Everyone wants to be in their comfort zone and with people having a similar working style.

Male prejudices create unwritten norms and practices that hinder the working mother to advance in their career by thinking that long hours are necessary for hard work. Not just from men, some studies say that women experience gender discourteousness from female colleagues also (Gabriel et al., 2018). In gendered analysis 'Queen Bee Syndrome' is a concept used to denote the attitude of women to undermines their female colleagues by endorsing gender stereotypes.In Queen Bee Syndrome, the woman who achieved career success in a male-dominated sector treat other women as their competitors (Davidson & Cooper, 1986)and reinforces the notion that the precedence of career over family is the best practice to obtain career progression (Hurst et al,2015). Women are forced to adopt an aggressive leadership style to climb the organizational ladder in the male-dominated sector. By adopting a

leadership style that is not their natural style women experience intrapersonal conflicts and gender role strain.

The majority of the informal business networking events are happening at night and most of the women prefer not to attend those events because of personal reasons. Most of our organizations are still practising western culture which supports meeting over drinks. These meetings are significant to get tactical knowledge. Exclusion from the networking events/activities will automatically lead to a lack of visibility. Instead of this if there is a practice of meeting for breakfast or lunch, women also will be in a position to build contacts. In performance appraisal whom you know is more important than what you know.

Lack of transparency of the performance appraisal system, absence of senior female role models or mentors, lack of careful planning, exclusion from informal networks of communication, cultural barriers, gender stereotypes, organizational politics, lack of affordable child care facilities, and the lack of training programs to enable employees to balance work-family responsibilities are reasons that cause the shrinkage of talented women from the career pipeline. IT industry is experiencing a gender crisis due to the leak out of talented women that are happening at every stage (Ball, 1998). The paucity of gender-sensitive policies, the cultural orientation of Indian women, and societal pressure will force her career to take a back seat most of the time (Gregory, 2003). Most IT companies do not have a creche, although it is compulsory under the provisions of Section 48 of the Factories Act. Any factory employing 30 or more female workers is needed to provide childcare facilities for their kids under the age of 6.

IT industry have careers such as computer programmer, Computer engineer, computer scientist, interface designer, network specialist, software engineer, database administrator, database specialist and systems analyst. Most jobs in programming, which can also be done from home. Indian IT industrialist and co-founder of Infosys NR Narayana Murthy has a work from home option advocate for working women who are aiming to achieve the top. Facilities like flexi-time, work from home, telecommuting and job sharing can help women to achieve work-family equilibrium. 'Work from home' becomes a new buzz word in Covid 19, which was often thought of as an ad-hoc measure has now given rise to new work culture. Almost all IT have using the work from home option. Numerous IT companies that did not have any such policy before the outbreak are now changed their policies to survive the pandemic situation. Travelling time can be converted into quality time with family or can develop any hobbies which can be a stress buster. Some changes are perhaps good and this trend may help women to contribute more to the industry provided if women can demarcate between work and family.

Career success is highly associated with the opportunities available and the power to make the right decision at the right time. The women who demolished the mommy track are risk-takers and those women who are on the mommy track are risk-averse. The most striking commonality observed in the personality of the successful women interviewed for this research is a sense of autonomy. Success is not always linked with an aggressive leadership style which is popularly known as the masculine style. The success mantra that these women established is the feminine leadership style instead of following the notion that women should conceal the emotional aspect of their personality to climb up the corporate ladder. The problem with the feminine leadership style is that often it gets misinterpreted as poor leadership quality and failed to get promotion and reputation in the firm (Ferguson and Dunphy, 1992). Subordinates often tend to underestimate the feminine leadership style because of its less confrontational nature. but this leadership style is effective in creating a supportive professional relationship for the long term. Women can use a combination of both sympathetic ear and heightened sensitivity in the rough and tumble corporate world. All successful participants are independent, go-getters with tremendous stamina and dare to take calculated risks, planned assignments.

5. Concluding Remarks

IT sector is perceived as a knowledge-based, gender-neutral and diversity-oriented sector and should provide its members with equal opportunities. Conducting networking events in which families can also participate helps the family to understand the work culture. On-site child care facilities can reduce the stress of working mothers and they can concentrate on work without worrying about their child. Enhanced maternity leaves for new and adoptive mothers, also assist females to adjust to the dual duties they assume after motherhood. Lenient paternity leave is as helpful to the mom as it is to the new dad for households where both spouses work. The organization can conduct a gender audit to ensure the institutionalization of gender equality in firms.

Firms that value diversity and inclusion should create an organizational climate that ensures all employees irrespective of their gender and social background achieve their full potential. To challenge the status quo and generate real change, bold leadership at the top level is required. Organizations need to provide training programs to mobilize young women staff into better practitioners. Ensuring a workplace that is truly diverse and friendly is not only a policy concern but also a cultural challenge. The work culture of an organization should be developed to guarantee complete assimilation and acceptance through the introduction of well-planned re-joining programs that assist females to readjust themselves to corporate life requirements. An organization's culture is replicated in all employee's strategy, and this flows more efficiently from top to bottom. By seeing their superiors, new entrants learn the culture. Having visionaries in the upper echelons of organisational authority can implement diversity and can make a huge positive impact on society.

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Appendix:

Interview questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your education level?
3. How many children do you have and what are their ages?
4. How long you took a break in your career?
5. What was your salary & position before taking maternity leave and when you returned to work?
6. How would you describe your relationships with significant others in your work life before and after your career break?
7. What was the maternity leave benefit you received from your employer?(Amount of time off-Paid and unpaid, child care reimbursement ,reduced hours when returning to work)
8. Is creche /child care allowances are available?
9. How would you describe your overall experience of being a working professional and a mother?
10. Have your child care arrangements ever affected or hindered your career plans in anyway? If yes, can you describe a situation where this was a problem?
11. How has your involvement with your job and career increased or decreased since you became a mother?Can you tell us a situation where this has been evident to you?
12. How you describe the IT work culture? In your opinion what are the challenges faced by womenIT professionals in the workplace and how you handle them?
13. Do you attend social networking events? What is the nature of those events?
14. Are you a mentor? Do you have mentors?
15. Are there times when you experience alienation at your workplace? If yes, please explain the situation(s)?
16. Is there any organizational policy on gender inclusiveness and anti-sexual harassment in your workplace?
17. Have you experienced pressure to cope up with the expectations of your colleagues in the workplace?
18. In your opinion how you examine feminine leadership in the IT sector?
19. What changes you would like to recommend to the promotion policy of your company?
20. What are your recommendations to enhance women's status/position in the IT field?