

A Conceptual Framework & Analysis of Work-life Balance Challenges of Women Professionals in the IT Industry

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Abstract- India in the last two decades has seen ambitious women strive for empowerment competing at par with men in careers. The advent of the IT era has opened up vast job opportunities for women. Corporate organizations and Government have also recognised their pursuit and laid emphasis on gender equality, in terms of opportunities, career growth and education. However working women are faced with a unique set of challenges due to their gender and perceived pre-dominant role of a home maker. This creates an inevitable challenge for women to sustain a suitable balance between work-life and family-life.

This paper aims to create a framework that consists of the key factors (primary challenges) from work-life and family-life that impact work-life balance of professional women working in the IT industry. As an exploratory study, 33 working female professionals working in the IT industry in India across various cities were interviewed to understand these diverse challenges. The factors that emerged in the study were analysed in multiple dimensions like personal, professional, social and government sphere of influence to get a comprehensive depiction of the framework. Five fundamental challenges that impact the work-life balance of a professional woman working in the IT industry emerged which include: Work-load; Gender discrimination; Support systems; Health issues; and Compromises. Details of the study are presented in the paper.

Key words: work-life balance, professional-women, working-women, women in IT

I. INTRODUCTION

IT industry in India is one of the fastest growing services industry in the present global market. NASSCOM's 'Strategic Review 2015' states that the IT industry in India contributes 9.5% to the national GDP. The India Skills report, 2016, states Software and IT is the second largest employer of women in India. Women represented 21% of the IT workforce in India as stated by the Indian National Survey (NSS) in 2011. In 2014 the numbers have risen to 30% of the workforce as stated by the World Bank Enterprise survey (Raghuram et al., 2017). An increase in education facilities and change in the social and cultural beliefs has led to major rise in the women contribution to global workforce (Davidson & Burke, 2008). Organizations have introduced numerous initiatives like flexible timings, telecommuting and child-care facilities to overcome these challenges faced by women

(Boyar et al., 2008). The Government has introduced necessary laws on women safety, increased the duration of maternity leave, and other infrastructure mandates that have helped women. Gender diversity can exist where equal opportunities, open cultural and social mind-sets and women-inclusive policies all co-exist (Kelkar & Nathan, 2002).

Work-life balance studies the influence of work and family climate on the aspects of life (Kofodimos, 1993; Kossek et al., 2001). Clark defines work-family balance as satisfaction at work and at home with a minimum role conflict (Clark, 2000). The scope of this study is to identify the predominant factors under various dimensions of personal, professional, social life that impact work-life balance for women working in the IT industry in India. The objective of the study is to design a comprehensive framework with the key challenges identified from work-life and family-life that primarily impact the work-life balance. An exploratory study of 33 women professionals across India in the IT industry is done to understand the various dimensions of a working woman's life. Various external and internal factors that affect the demands of workplace and personal life like work hours, flexibility of work, organizational support and practices, social support, patriarchal influence on life decisions, gender bias in the society, healthcare support and government policies are analysed to arrive at the most crucial challenges that impact a professional woman's life.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The emancipation of women have taken place all over the world in the past few decades. Women have faced complex challenges to prove themselves as worthy competitors to men. Worldwide women emancipation has taken place. However in nations developing or developed, eastern or western, women have faced discrimination (Ahuja, 2002). Women have faced diverse and complex barriers in career advancement. These barriers to success of women can be classified into organization elements, social elements and individual elements (Shahtalebi & Yarmohammadian, 2012). There is a stark contrast in the jobs and salaries received by women having same education levels as the male counterparts in India. A vast number of professional women settle for lower

income jobs in attempt to balance the family life and work life evenly.

For women, balancing both the job and family is a major challenge as the traditional role of childcare and domestic work are principally a women's responsibility (Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001; Hayman & Summers, 2004). Women face conflict mainly due to responsibilities towards children. Women coerced by socio-cultural factors to give less precedence to career compared to family (Patel & Parmentier, 2005). Entry into the parenthood may lead to higher levels of stress and may lead to absenteeism, job dissatisfaction and lower employee commitment (Aryee, 2005). Imbalance in work and family life not only affects job satisfaction of women but also health to a very large extent (Harrington, 2001).

An organization culture which doesn't regard employee necessities apart from work and focuses only on performance creates family-work conflict (Aryee, 2005). Sturges & Guest (2004) have stressed on friendly work policies and practices that decrease stress and create a positive work attitude of employees. Frone (2003) talks about a number of work-life balance initiatives like flexible timings, compressed work weeks, work from home, range of leaves attending to the needs, and dependent care assistance et al. Ingenuities from organizations like flexible work timings, part time work and child care facilities have helped enhance work-life balance (Doble & Supriya, 2010).

Majority of empirical investigations exploring work life balance stem from North America. A scale reported by Fisher-McAuley, Stanton, Jolton and Galvin (2003) assesses the work life balance. The scale measured three dimensions of work life balance: work interference with personal life (WIPL), personal interference with work (PLIW) and work/personal life enhancement (WPLE). Over the time, numerous scales have been developed to measure work-family conflict (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams's, 2000; Matthews et al, 2010). The scales used to assess work-family conflict should include different directions of role interference, work's interference with family and family's interference with work (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Valk and Srinivasan (2011) in a study on women software professionals in India, found that there are six major themes concerning work life balance. They are familial influences on life choices, multirole responsibilities, self-identity, work-life challenges and coping strategies, organizational policies and practices and social support.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data was collected from interaction with the subject matter experts, experienced HR leaders, managers of various IT companies and faculty which helped understand the various elements involved in a professional women's life. Focussed group discussions with groups of women working in IT

helped brainstorm the fundamental challenges faced by women in the workplace.

Data for the study is collected from the in depth interviews conducted with the working women. The qualitative research study engaged Thirty three (33) women working in the IT industry across cities in India like Bangalore, Delhi-NCR, Pune and Chennai. The participants of the research population were selected using snowball and judgement sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The demographic profile of the research population ensured women from all life stages like single, married and experiencing motherhood. The participation was voluntary.

The exploratory study was conducted to understand various dimensions of working women. The goal of the interview was eliciting real life experience of each woman and recognizes the challenges she faces and how she copes with them. Emphasis has been on to understand how women negotiate between the twin roles they play as a professional and at home as a daughter, housewife or a mother.

Data transcripts were collected using semi-structured face to face interviews using a pre-prepared interview questionnaire (table-1). Each participant was encouraged to speak freely for around 30-45 minutes about their experiences ensuring them of the confidentiality of the narratives. Open ended and directive questions were asked to the participants. The structure of the interview involved questions related to the challenges faced by women at the workplace as well as their family life. What are their limitations and difficulties due to their gender? What are the compromises they have made in their journey of life? How they handle multi-role responsibilities. How do they handle stress and derive motivation. What are the health and psychological impact of balancing work and family life? What are the coping strategies they use? Questions were asked to gauge the social pressures and barriers they faced as women. An exhaustive description of the experiences regarding work-life balance of professional women was recorded.

Phenomenology, as both a philosophy and a research methodology is used to scrutinize and understand the real life experiences of people regarding an event that is complex and not immediately explicit (Goulding, 2005).

Colaizzi's strategy is used to explore and understand the working women's experiences. Colaizzi's (1978) used following seven steps for collection and analysis of data:

1. Interact with the participants to understand their view
2. Extract the statements relevant to the study
3. Focus on the significant ideas
4. Cluster the meaningful themes
5. Arrive at a comprehensive description of the phenomenon
6. Arrive at the core structure explaining the phenomenon

7. Revisit the participants and validate interpretation

Through steps suggested by Colaizzi's (1978) the narratives dataset collected were examined, organized and collated to emerge with the findings of the study.

A questionnaire was designed to be administered to a selected target population. The questionnaire was based on the above factors identified. These key elements that form the work-life balance parameters needed to be measured through a qualitative questionnaire.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Five major factors emerged from the analysis of the interviews and research conducted in relevance to work-life balance challenges that women IT professionals in India face: Workload; Gender Discrimination; Inadequate support system; Health Issues; Compromises. These factors when perceived from the personal, professional, social and most overlooked legislative level, throw light upon the gaping discrepancies that women in IT sector face on day-to-day basis.

Workload: The conversations with the women respondents revealed that the top pain point deterring them from achieving work-life balance was the amount of work itself. Women at a personal level faced the burdens of primary responsibility of household like chores, child care, elder care, care of the sickly and family in general. At professional front, they found themselves confronted with deadline pressures, inflexibilities with time, job sharing, telecommuting, odd and extended work hours and more such.

'One cannot really take a stand against odd timings and extended hours because if you don't stay back, someone else will. Your job is always at jeopardy. I find myself crushed under the weight of insecurity professionally and guilt personally, for not being available to my children'.

In a transitioning society like India, there are myriad social structures arising out of dual career partners, single mother families which demand a change in outlook, however, traditional roles of women as homemakers and caretakers are also deeply entrenched. The stereotype of men perceived as breadwinners and women as caretakers continues to exist and any overlap or switch in roles is looked down upon. However, through sheer determination and desire for self-progression women have been able to make the switch, but the staunch social conditioning still encumbers majority of them. The result has led to role overload, where women end up fulfilling both sets of responsibilities.

Respondents also pointed at the unaccounted gender differentials like physical endurance, susceptibility to menstrual, reproductive and postpartum diseases that are specific to women and make work and life a challenge.

'It is not easy for me to drive two straight hours to work and take another two to come back home, complete household chores, teach my children and prepare for the next day. I believe I end up doing twice the work for half the stamina of my spouse.'

Most women felt the need to relook and regulate the policies of work hours and late hours and take more steps towards gender mainstreaming (integration of a gender differences into the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies). Gender mainstreaming can prove to be a powerful tool to achieve gender equality.

Gender Discrimination:

A vast majority of respondents shared instances of gender discrimination they had experienced across the spectrum. Beginning at a personal level, where most ended up taking on and were held accountable for the primary responsibility of homemaking and caretaking despite active careers and interests, much like their male counterparts.

At work, women on day to day basis experience some of the very detrimental effects of gender discrimination. Unequal opportunities, disparity in promotions, male dominance in decision making, and prejudice of being less competent than male counterparts were a recurring subject.

'I cannot tell you the amount of times I have borne the brunt of being a woman. Being the only women designer at work, I was once discouraged from discussing the vision of the product with the team of all-male developers since the discussions often got heated. It is not my fault that they couldn't work in harmony. I must also acknowledge that the men in my team very supportive and friendly'.

Society plays an important part in both establishing and demolishing social evils. Gender bias has festered in many ways, from patriarchal control at home to male dominance at work and andro-centricism in the society. Initiatives on gender awareness, regulation of labor laws on hiring ratio, more stringent laws on women's safety, severe punishment on sexual harassment and the vital actions most women expect from the government.

Inadequate support system:

The findings point heavily to the importance of spouse/family support for the women IT professionals to achieve the work-life Balance. Unfair distribution of responsibilities, lack of motivational support, domestic help and dearth of childcare options lend greatly to imbalance in work-life at a personal level.

'All my life I was taught to worship my work. Work gave me my sense of identity but I had to put it all on hold because post marriage my new family did not support my ambition'.

At an organizational level, uncondusive work environment, unsupportive team and management, safety and conveyance issues become major deterrents in striking work-life balance.

More women-friendly policies, adequate infrastructural support and need for timely and effective law enforcement action in case of harassment and emergencies are identified to be the need of the hour. Government's focus on developing policies on work-life balance should aim to reduce strain on workers and improve their well-being and efficiency.

Health Issues:

Health continues to be one of the prime factors for attrition of women in IT sector. Stress, detrimental lifestyle changes, insufficient time for recreation and rest lead to a barrage of health issues that make work and life a challenge. Factors like difference in physical endurance between men and women, susceptibility to reproductive and postpartum diseases go unaccounted.

Inadequate healthcare facilities like access to medical care and sick-room, support from management on Pregnancy/Childcare/ Health issues adds to the woes of women who are trying to strike a work-life balance. There isn't enough support lent to the exceptional cases like disability, chronic ailments and such.

'My world came crashing when I had to quit my dream job. I have always lived a very healthy life but unfortunately when I was diagnosed with a debilitating, chronic ailment, I found it very hard to continue working as there wasn't enough support from my organisation. I had to give up the job I loved for no fault of mine and when I needed it the most'.

Women's health issues are on an evident rise amidst a considerable dearth of awareness and sensitivity. Women-centric health insurance plans need to be put in place.

Compromises:

The study also explored the compromises that women working in the IT sector face. Delayed marriages, delayed motherhood, stressed relationships were some of the most commonly brought up compromises women made on a personal front.

On professional front, declining promotions, opting slow career progression, dropping out of work force were the prime compromises women made. What may seem like mere factors are life altering decisions that majority of the women in the cohort have had to make in comparison to their spouses, male members of the family or male counter parts.

'My former company did not give flexitime and WFH options. After my child was born I had to give up on my career as I had too much on my plate. I miss working but I

have to balance my priorities, which my husband does not have to do.'

Women often find themselves socially and financially marginalized since once they drop out of work they also very often lose out on their social circle or family responsibilities leave them with very little time to socialize. Women who were once financially independent now have to rely on their parents or spouse.

'My husband and I now often have a constant tug of war over money. I remember gifting him a bike on his birthday but now I must ask for money for the smallest expense. It hurts, I miss being financially independent'.

Government should extend a supporting hand towards dealing with such sensitive issues. Stringent laws by government on working hours enforcement and payment of extra remuneration for late hours working to avoid late sitting culture in offices can be a plausible solution. Gradual amelioration of all factors would help address the issue of unfair compromise that women make on regular basis.

The findings are tabulated in the Table shown below.

V. CONCLUSION

This research has complemented prior studies by extending the insights into the work-life balance challenges faced by women working in the IT industry in India by creating a comprehensive framework. The framework consists of the key factors (primary challenges) analysed under the four unique dimensions: Personal; Professional; Social and Government sphere of influence. Five fundamental challenges that impact the work-life balance of a professional woman working in the IT industry emerged which include: Work-load; Gender discrimination; Inadequate Support systems; Health issues; and Compromises.

The main conclusions indicate a very forceful role for the Government to introduce a) effective regulation on working hours rules in IT industry b) timely and effective law enforcement mechanism in case of harassment and emergencies c) women specific health insurance policies d) awareness on Women's health issues e) law for payment of extra remuneration for late hours working to avoid late sitting culture in offices. The family plays a pivotal role in providing motivation and support by sharing the household as well as children responsibilities. The organizations should create more progressive policies and compassionate practices by providing a) flexible work arrangements, b) infrastructural support for women health issues and c) a congenial culture with equality for women.

'WORK-LIFE BALANCE' CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'			
Factors	family/home	Professional	Social
			Governmental/ Legislative
Work Load	Primary responsibility of household chores, child and spouse care Lack of family support due to nuclear families; Patriarchal control over life and career decisions Dropping out of workforce for family responsibilities	Working at odd hours/ extended work hours/ Deadline pressures flexibility issues- work from home, login time etc. Disparity in promotions/ Gender Dominance in decision making Sexual harrasment	social obligations viz. festivals, rituals, ceremonies, social gatherings and events, marriage functions etc. Ineffective Regulation on policies of work hours and late hours
Gender Discrimination		Andro-centrism: Prejudice of being less competent than male counterparts	Enforcement of laws on womens' safety Lack of sensitivity towards women's issues
Inadequate Support system	Fewer childcare options Lack of physical and motivational support from spouse and family Stress/ Lifestyle diseases/ Insufficient time for recreation and rest	Inadequate infrastructure to deal with women problems like sick room, doctor Lack of official conveyance Inadequate support from management on Health issues	Need for timely and effective law enforcement action in case of harassment and emergencies Lack of women specific health insurance policies
Health Issues	Pre and post-natal health issues Delayed marriage or children Stressed relationships	Unaccounted gender differentials e.g. Physical endurance, susceptibility to reproductive and postpartum diseases Declining Promotions or Opting slow career progression Dropping out of work force	Lack of policies on part time work Lack of stringent laws by govt on working hours enforcement Payment of extra remuneration for late hours working to avoid late sitting culture in offices
Compromises		Social marginalization	

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