

GENDER ISSUES OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES AT WORK PLACE IN INDIAN BPO SECTOR

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INTRODUCTION

Women have become equal participants in many respects at all levels of society. The future would see more women venturing into areas traditionally dominated by men. This will lead to income generation and greater sense of fulfillment among women. In almost all the countries, governments are providing special provisions for women's development and efforts are being made to extract maximum of their talent. In India, as during Veda and Upanishad periods, women are being accorded with respect and are facilitated in all spheres of life.

The attitudes of the society are changing, though slowly. Women are not seen with suspicious eyes as before; she is more liberated now and can lead a peaceful family life and support it economically as well. The World Bank has stated that the only surest way to lift India out of poverty is to educate and enhance the status of women. Women's health and skills are important for any family as they also contribute to the income of the family.

Thus, women are participating in almost all spheres of the economic activity. From village to city, it can be seen that number of women workers and entrepreneurs contributing towards the national income of the country. The Government and Non-Government Organizations are also promoting self-employment among women and build women entrepreneurship. Meeting a longstanding demand for gender parity in the workforce, the Government of India approved an amendment in the Factories Act to allow women employees to work in night shifts also.

Since 1970s, the role of women in Indian society has undergone considerable change. Today women are becoming more aware of their personal needs and selves, and are demanding greater equality and status both within the home and outside. In the last decade, the increase in the number of women in paid labour force has been greater than 40 per cent. Yet, the discrimination continues. There are formidable barriers of entry of women into professional career. Those who do gain access are often segregated in female occupations, relegated to lower ranks in the organization, and barred from moving up the organizational hierarchy because the promotion criteria are such conditions that the average Indian women can not meet.

There are numerous instances of women not being promoted despite successful performance because, “she had the flexile timing” to balance work and family commitments. Marital status is still used to implicitly infer willingness to relocate and commitment to the organization. Professional women in India are still doing three jobs- office, housework and child care. Instead of getting credit for the additional burden, this is used for discrediting women as being less committed than men.

Employees in BPO Sector

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector in India has several distinguishing features- its high degree of integration into the global economy, relative freedom from state controls and dependence on a steady supply of highly educated “knowledge workers”. Work in the BPO sector ranges from relatively ‘low end’ to ‘high end’ solutions and products. Apart from job mobility, there is also a high level of geographical mobility in this sector. Employees tend to go where the jobs are, rather than settling down in one city and then looking for work there. In addition, employees are liable to be shifted between different centres, and those in service companies may be sent abroad at frequent intervals for ‘on-site’ assignments, despite the increasing trend towards off shoring. Indian BPO services still have a fairly high proportion of such onsite work, in which employees are located at the client site for stints of a few months to more than a year.

Due to these factors, BPO employees tend to be itinerant, unable to put down roots in one place, at least during the early years of their careers. The workforce itself is quite young (the majority being less than 30), in tune with the recent origin and rapid growth of the industry. As a result, a large proportion of BPO employees are young unmarried women, whose single status enhances the much desired ‘flexibility’ of workforce. As they grew older, get married and move into managerial positions, BPO employees look for more stability in their jobs, creating a potential source of conflict with other employees.

However, the shift away from onsite work to more off shoring means that the nature of linkages between Indian BPO employees to the customer or parent abroad is changing, away from the movement of people to the movement of ‘knowledge’, or products and services, using new technologies and complex dispersed forms of organization. This change may reduce physical mobility in the BPO sector somewhat, but it has given rise to a new set of issues in the workplace-especially what are perceived as cultural and communication issues between BPO employees and their American/European customers or counterparts.

Women are under-represented in the BPO sector. The major determinant of the adverse gender ratio appears to be the availability of female graduates. The official line of BPO sector is that their hiring and promotion practices are gender neutral, and that the proportion of women reflects the proportion of women graduates. However, married women with children may be discriminated against even at the hiring stage. Apart from the low gender ratio in BPO sector, women tend to be over-represented in the lower level jobs and under-represented in higher level and managerial jobs .

Gender Issues in BPO Sector

Many women are unwilling or unable to put in as many hours as their male counterparts, for several reasons. Married women are less likely to be able to stay in the office till late night, unless there is a pressing need, because they may face objections from their patents or in-

laws or social disapproval. While young bachelors find a social life in the office that motivates them to stay late, women rarely become part of this camaraderie and in fact the men might find women's presence to be a drag. Also, women need to reach home safely although companies usually arrange for drops in the night.

Married women face additional constraints in that they have domestic responsibilities (from which married men usually escape) that require them to leave at a responsible hours. Finding an adequate support system for children is a major issue for women; apart from long working hours, many spend at least two hours commuting, which means leaving children for ten to twelve hours a day .

Because of these constraints, when there is a work pressure or an urgent deadline to meet women often faulted by their male colleagues for being unavailable or not pulling their weight in the team; the perceived unwillingness of women to put in the required work in such a high pressure job produces resentment and a tendency to marginalize women in terms of allotment of work. Women indeed put in a fewer hours than their male counterparts, but this could be an artifact of the differential distribution of men and women in different types of work.

Men in all male teams have been know to protest when there is a talk of recruiting a female employee for the team- they believe that this would not only bring down the performance of the team, it would also spoil the working atmosphere of male camaraderie and gender informality, in which off-colour jokes, for instance are permitted. The system of control through peer pressure within the team can be turned against women, who any case are in a minority, producing subtle pressure on them and marginalizing them when they do not come up to the expectations of other team members. The allotment of work within the team is done by the team leader through a process of negotiation with the employees. Women may be given less responsible tasks because they are perceived as unable or unwilling to handle more difficult tasks.

Another impediment to career growth for women is the requirement travel and short and long-term stints of onsite work. While unmarried women usually accept onsite assignments eagerly, and one finds quite a few women working abroad along with their male colleagues without much difficulty, married women prefer not to take up these assignments due to domestic or other pressures. While an employee can not be forced by the company to go onsite, such refusal does become a black mark on her record if she consistently refuses these assignments and this in turn will affect her career growth

Interruptions in women's careers due to child bearing have particularly adverse effects on their growth, given the rapid changes in technology and the need to keep abreast of new developments. Most companies give three month's maternity leave with option of an additional three months' unpaid leave and some offer women the option of returning to work after maternity leave on a part-time or consultancy basis or may allow them to work form home, for a year or more. Some companies even allow women to take leave without pay for a year.

However, such instruments provide only temporary respite to the problem of juggling child caring with work. Some companies provide crèches, it found that most women do not avail of them but prefer to make their own arrangements for childcare at home or at a private

crèche- often because of the long distances they have to travel to work. In a high-pressure job, women with young children often find it difficult to cope and end up leaving employment. Women also often find it difficult to make up for the loss of experience and learning during this period, and maternity leave can cause a major setback to their career growth and personal development.

Young couples employ various strategies to manage their domestic situation, from heavy dependence on servants and crèches, to reconstituting the joint family by inviting one or the other set of parents to live with them, primarily to provide childcare. But making and maintaining these arrangements often only add to the stress on women. In some cases such couples even leave their children with grandparents in India when they are working abroad. Because of these difficulties, many women postpone having children until they feel they are more 'settled'.

Another factor that affects women's careers is the husband's career. The main reason for men quitting is to further their careers or because they are getting better offers elsewhere, whereas women usually leave when they get married, when they have children or because of the husband moving. When both husband and wife work in BPO, the husband's job usually takes priority in case of transfer or overseas assignments, which means that the wife must forego opportunities or else they have to live apart.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The tremendous growth of the BPO sector over the past few years has resulted in considerable changes in the lives of its youth especially women workforce. Notably, unlike many other industries, the BPO sector provides opportunities for employment at a young age, high disposable incomes and quick promotional avenues. As a result, women professionals in the sector are reaching their career goals and financial targets much earlier than before. At the same time, BPO employees are adopting risky sexual behaviours and excessive drug and alcohol use has also been reported among this sub-population.

Aside from attractive salaries, the attractive work environment and benefits offered by the BPO sector have motivated many young adults to seek employment in this sector. The majority of BPOs provide provident fund, gratuity, group medi-claim insurance schemes (for employees as well as their spouse, non-earning parents and children), personal accident insurance scheme, subsidized food and transportation. Also provided by many BPOs are performance based incentives, flexi-time, flexible salary benefits, paid days off, maternity leave, and an employee stock option plan. Recreational facilities are also available in BPOs; these include pool tables, chess tables and coffee bars, and some even have well equipped gyms, personal trainers and many organize regular get together and other cultural programs for staff. Some even provide company leased (shared) accommodation for out-station employees, corporate credit card facilities, cellular phones/laptops, medical check-ups, loans and educational benefits.

The BPO sector has opened up vast career opportunities for women, but at the same time employment in the sector has had an impact on women employees' lives. Several- young women BPO employees have had to relocate to outsourcing hubs and live independently. With the availability of higher disposable incomes, many women employees have reported

lifestyle changes. Indeed, among financially independent women employees there has been a visible move towards consumerism.

While employment in the BPO sector has meant that young women are reaching their career milestones and financial goals much earlier than before, women employees in the BPO sector experience high levels of stress as a result of working in closely monitored environments with pressure to meet ambitious performance targets. Strict deadlines and ambitious targets have also resulted in women employee “burnout”. Repetitive tasks, such as responding to telephone calls more than 100 times a shift have resulted in absenteeism and attrition among many young women employees. A growing number of women employees also experience physical and emotional problems such as panic attacks, depression, relationship problems, alcoholism and sleeping and eating disorders (Phukan, 2006; e-sat survey, 2005).

Several factors are considered to cause stress at work including travel time, changing duty shifts, insufficient holidays, work pressure and long working hours. Moreover, as many BPOs provide services to countries overseas, women employees in the sector are trained to understand the culture and accent of these countries; in some cases, women employees are required to use a different name, speak in a foreign accent and adopt a different persona at work, which may result in anxiety and related disorders.

Gender issues in BPO sector need to be understood within the context of the distinctive work culture and system of management that have developed in this sector. BPO companies appear to have highly enlightened managements and HR executives and other top managers espouse all the politically correct ideas about having a gender neutral and women-friendly work place, providing equality of opportunity, non-discrimination on the basis of gender and so on. However, there is a gap between official company policy and actual practice and the experience of women- and this is true with regard not only to gender but also to broader employment and management issues.

To address the gender issues at work place of BPOs organizations, there is need to monitor and conduct continuous studies. Academicians also must turn their interest towards these areas. Though, there are few studies in these dimensions, still there are some gaps found in review of literature. Hence, the present study is undertaken to fill the research gaps and to provide new and additional information in the area of selected problems of women employees in BPO sector.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The survey/ review of the literature has been done in order to assess the extent and quality of employee safety and employee job satisfaction, provided by various organizations in various industries. There have been a number of studies conducted so far in this area. However, a few studies of importance have been presented here.

1. Maja Dijkic (2008) in his study on physical environment an expanded model of job satisfaction, concludes with positive correlation.
2. Singh (2007) explains the main economic features of the Cotton Textile Industry in Kanpur and Discusses the nature and scope of Industrial relations.

3. Rao (2003) has studied some aspects of personnel administration and union management relations in the Indian Railways in the post-independence period.
4. Saxena (2000) gives socio-economic background of workers in the five selected units in Meerut district and discussed promotion policies, training, transfers, welfare measures, bonus, remuneration and the functioning of the trade unions.

All these studies help the management, unions and governments to improve the existing state of affairs mainly by emphasizing on functional areas of Human Resources Management and existing job satisfaction of the employees in a single unit or two units or more with a comparative study in the same sector like private or public or co-operative. Surprisingly, very few attempts have been made by the researchers to study the extent of gender issues of women employees in BPO Sector and also furnishes the reasons between the practice and precept.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the socio-economic characteristics of women employees of BPO sector.
2. To study the relationship between socio-economic characteristics and gender issues in BPO sector.
3. To study the work-life balance of women employees in BPO sector.

HYPOTHESES

1. There is no significant relationship between gender issues and socio economic characteristics of women employees.
2. There is no significant wok-life balance factor affecting the caring responsibilities of women employees.

Sampling Procedure

Among the different sectors in Chennai, the BPO sector has been purposively selected for the present study. The data and information is collected from women employees through pre-tested, structured interview schedule by direct interview method.

Sample Size

There are 265 BPO companies presently operating in Chennai city. There are 173560 women employees working in BPO sector in Chennai. Based on the women employees' response through pilot study, 500 women employees are selected for the present study.

Pilot Study

The aim of the pilot study is to refine and further develop the model and interview schedule used in the main survey. The pilot study is conducted for 30 women employees and the results from this study fuelled the development of the models and the master interview schedule that is subsequently developed.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to provide top management with information from which a sound HR policies especially women employees may be devised. The identification of

unique characteristics and issues for women employees should assist the management with specialized work-environments designed around very specific and unique tasks of their women employees.

Additionally, casual factors for gender issues should also assist the management for effective implementation of polices and creating women-friendly work culture in BPO sector. This can be accomplished by complete elimination of the constraints altogether when possible, or by using innovative counseling strategies to understand the gender equality and improve women employees' performance and satisfaction. Hence, the main inquiry of the present study concerns on causes of gender issues and their influence on women employees. Besides, the results of the study would be used to provide the guidelines to improve their women employees' work-life balance and career development opportunities.

MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The majority of women employees (54.40 per cent) belong to the age group of 21-30 years followed by less than 31-40 years (36.60 per cent). Only 7.00 per cent of women employees are in the age group of 41-50 years followed by more than 50 years (2.00 per cent).

The correlation co-efficient shows that age is positively significantly associated with security at one per cent level of significance. The results also indicate that age is negatively correlated with leadership and work-life balance at one per cent level of significance.

More than half of the women employees (51.80 per cent) are under graduates followed by post graduates (30.40 per cent) and professionals (17.80 per cent).

The correlation co-efficient shows that educational qualification is negatively significantly associated with work-life balance at one per cent level of significance. The results also indicate that educational qualification is negatively correlated with leadership at five per cent level of significance.

More than half of the women employees (50.80 per cent) are in the position of junior level followed by middle level (43.60 per cent) and senior level (5.60 per cent).

The correlation co-efficient show that job position is negatively, significantly associated with institutional, leadership, career advancement, work-life balance and security at one per cent level of significance.

The results show that about 45.80 per cent of women employees earn monthly income of less than Rs. 10000 followed by Rs.10001-20000(25.80 per cent) and Rs. 20001-40000(24.00 per cent) and more than Rs. 40000(4.40 per cent).

The correlation co-efficient show that monthly income is negatively, significantly associated with institutional, leadership, career advancement, work-life balance and security at one per cent level of significance.

The results indicate that about 54.40 per cent of the women employees have the experience of less than two years in the present company followed by 2-5 years (41.20 per cent) and more than five years (4.40 per cent).

The correlation co-efficient show that experience in the present company is negatively, significantly associated with institutional, leadership, career advancement, work-life balance and security at one per cent level of significance.

It is apparent that about 53.60 per cent of the women employees have the total experience of 2-5 years followed by 6-10 years (34.00 per cent) and less than two years (8.40 per cent) more than 10 years (4.00 per cent).

The correlation co-efficient show that total work experience is positively, significantly associated with security at one per cent level of significance.

The results indicate that 60.40 per cent of the women employees are working around 41 – 45 hrs / week followed by 35 – 40 hrs / week(22.20 per cent), 46 – 50 hrs / week(11.00 per cent) and more than 50 hrs / week(6.40 per cent).

The results show that about 60.00 per cent of the women employees are single while the rest of 40.00 are married while 40.00 per cent of the women employees have joint family while the rest of 60.00 have nuclear family.

The correlation co-efficient show that marital status is positively, significantly associated with security at five per cent level of significance.

The correlation co-efficient show that family status is negatively, significantly associated with institutional, leadership, career advancement and work-life balance at one per cent level of significance.

About 53.00 per cent of the women employees have no caring responsibilities while the rest of 47.00 per cent have caring responsibilities.

The correlation co-efficient show that caring responsibilities is negatively, significantly associated with institutional, leadership, career advancement and work-life balance at one per cent level of significance.

CONCLUSION

The majority of women employees belong to the age group of 21-30 years and more than half of the women employees are under graduates. More than half of the women employees are in the position of junior level and the leadership, organization and security discriminate the job positions of women employees in BPO sector.

The BPO employment does not only provide young women with a profitable and challenging work environment, but also has other positive outcomes: many young BPO women employees associated their increased independence and self-efficacy to their employment in this sector many reported close peer networks and savings orientation.

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