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## Career Progression of Women in the Indian IT Sector: Matching Talent Management Practices and Employee Perspectives

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## Abstract:

Women talent management is an important area of interest for organizations not only across the world but more specifically in India, a dynamic and fast growing emerging market where opportunities for female participation in the labour market are increasing yet traditional barriers persist. Research in this important area is sparse and this paper is an attempt to address this important research gap. In this paper we examine the major issues and challenges facing women managers in the Indian IT sector, perception of the talent management policies by women managers and the impact of talent management practices on career progression of women. We use a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with HR managers, line managers and women managers in two IT organizations. Findings indicate that social, biological and family supports are the major factors influencing  women managers' participation and career progression in the company. Talent management policies were viewed positively while the perception of implementation with regards to performance appraisal and promotion decisions were viewed as constraints in women career progression. The support offered for women career development in both companies were of three types - Inspirational, developmental and facilitative with varying levels of emphasis in each of the two organizations.


Key words – female talent, women talent management, career progression, emerging economy

## Introduction

Over the last decade there has been an increase in research on talent management in India (Tymon et al, 2010, Teagarden et al, 2008), which has focused on talent shortages, particularly shortages of leadership talent. However, there is a dearth of research on female talent in India and it remains underrepresented in the academic literature (Horwitz and Budhwar, 2015). India is the world's fastest growing major economy, but has one of the lowest rates of female employment, a trend that has worsened over the last decade (World Bank report, 2017). The World Bank report cites just 27% of Indian women were working or actively looking for a job. This participation rate was not only significantly low as compared to Western nations, but it was markedly low as compared to other Asian counterparts. However what stands out is that the low participation rate was uniquely low for all levels of education and was not restricted to uneducated or low educated women in the workforce. This low participation has socio-economic consequences not only in terms of imposing constraints on the country's economic growth but also in terms of empowerment of women and outcomes for children.

Women in India and other emerging economies face challenges in managing their professional and personal lives that many in the west may not be concerned with (Rashid, 2010). According to a 2012 McKinsey report (McKinsey & Company, 2012), the proportion of women sitting in executive committees and corporate boards is significantly lower in India and Asia in general compared with many European and American companies. For instance, the McKinsey report highlights that in India this figure is 3 and 5 percent respectively. However, the gender representation at the board level seems to be improving in recent years because of governmental legislation in India. The new Companies Act introduced in August 2013 requires certain classes of listed companies to have at least one woman on the board of directors. We outline below several reasons for the low participation of women in the workforce in general and in management in particular.

First, female participation in the overall labour force in India has remained lower than male participation as women account for most of the unpaid work. Even amongst the paid work category, women are overrepresented in the informal sector. National Sample Survey (68th Round) results indicate that the worker population ratio for females in the rural sector was 24.8 in 2011-12 in contrast with 54.3 for males. In the Urban sector, the ratio is 14.7 for females and 54.6 for males. A total of 20.5% women were employed in the organized sector in 2011 with 18.1% working in the public sector and 24.3% in the private sector. In the organized workforce this low representation of females makes it more difficult to address the underrepresentation of women in management and makes it more challenging for women to gain access to the management pipeline.

Second, there is a low representation of women amongst the graduate population in India. As per the 2011 Census, while overall only 8% of the total population in India are graduates, across the country (with a couple of exceptions in Kerala and Chandigarh) the proportions of male graduates are traditionally higher than the proportion of female graduates. However a significant development is that the rise in proportion of female graduates in the previous decade is higher at 115% as against only 65% increase in male graduates for 2001-2011. The representation of women technology graduates has more than tripled in the corresponding period. This makes it possible for a greater share of women to be employment ready and issues concerning women representation in the organized workforce are becoming of increasing relevance to the industry.

Third, traditionally the number of women transitioning from graduate education to employment is low. For example, in India though 42 percent of graduates are female, only 29 per cent of entry-level professionals are female (McKinsey report, 2012). Understanding the barriers for women's entry to the workforce and

issues impacting on their experience and progression in employment would be of significant relevance in improving the transition of graduate women to the workforce.

The low transition of graduate women to employment is related to a variety of factors: Early marriage or not looking for or not finding jobs. According to the 2011 census data, the average age for marriage for women is 19.2 in 2011.

The case for including more women in the senior management positions in companies rests on both talent and performance rationales. A study of Fortune 500 companies in the late 90s found that the group of companies with the highest women concentration in their top management teams showed better Return on equity and Return to shareholders than group of companies with the lowest women's representation in top management teams (Catalyst, 2004). In an age of high competitive pressures and talent scarcity, having the best talent in strategic roles provides distinct competitive advantage (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; McKinsey report, 2012) and if half the population continues to be significantly underrepresented in the talent pools from which senior management personnel are selected, organizations will continue to lose out on the best talents (Collings et al, 2015). Further, performance benefits arise especially when the companies pursue effective diversity policies which combine the complementary competences and ways of thinking of male and female employees (Linehan and Scullion, 2008; Barsh and Yee, 2011).

Our study is based in the context of the Indian IT sector and explores issues related to talent management practices and career progression of the women employees, an area which has previously attracted little research. Though working women in general face challenges in managing multiple responsibilities, women particularly in the IT sector in India are challenged because of the additional factors associated with India continuing to be the leader in IT outsourcing as well as the center for many top companies setting up their IT innovation centers in India (IT & ITeS Industry in India, 2016). More skilled manpower is needed to meet the growth in the IT sector. Women can fulfill this demand for manpower provided there are conducive policies that support women in the workforce. Further, with increasing demand in manpower there has been an increase in stress associated with working long hours, sometimes across different timezones as well as performance stress associated with a competitive environment. Women also have to deal with additional stress owing to multiple responsibilities at work as well as home (Aziz, 2004). Hence, businesses have to take note of increasing women in the workforce as well as consider cultural factors that hinder the careers of these women.

In this study we investigate the perceptions of women in the IT sector about their experiences in the workplace, the challenges they face in their career progression and we seek to enhance understanding of how women perceive the talent management practices of their company. Our study also seeks to provide

insights into how women in the Indian IT sector manage work-life balance demands, pressures and expectations. Acute talent shortages in India and particularly in the IT sector make the development of female talent a key strategic talent management issue facing the industry. Failure to recruit and develop female talent constrains the growth of the companies and the industry

Previous research reveal that the Anglo-Saxon context (in particular EU) has a great impact on empirical talent management research (Gallardo-Gallardo, Thunnissen, 2015).

What are the major barriers to the advancement of women's careers in India IT sector ?

What are major advantages of increasing female participation in management in Indian IT sector ?

## Women in the Indian Society

Traditionally, women in the Indian society has been assigned a subordinate status than the male (Pande, 2001). Her role has been mostly to do with the indoor primarily responsible for child bearing and rearing, household chores, cooking etc. that involved drudgery within the confines of the home. The traditional patriarchal arrangements of the society has been instrumental in determining the fate of the woman. Starting from the birth of a girl child, her status in the family and then in the society has been lower than the male. The girl child is seen as a burden to the family and in some case a matter of agony for the mother who has to undergo torment for bearing a girl child. Until recently medical science was assisting in terminating the bane of the girl child by way of pre-birth sex-determination where families could get rid of the girl child when in the mother's womb. This reflected in the sex-ratio of India which hardly creeped up by a few numbers from 933 females per 1000 males in 2001 to 943 in 2011 (Sex Ratio in India, 2011). Though laws have been put in place to restrict sex-determination, the mindset prevailed. The birth of a son is seen with much fanfare as compared to the female child and the female child is burdened with carrying the "dignity of the family". The "misfortune" of having a girl child extends from the birth to the ensuing stages in her life that has repercussions such as lesser education, early marriage and the realization of being a second or even the last choice when it came to family priorities. This can be considered as a reason why Indian women see sacrificing their self-interests and desires for upholding the husband or the family's' interest as a virtue. Further, a girl child would also mean expenditure as the boy is seen as the bread-earner and someone who will carry the family name forward, something that cyclically relates to how the male child is prepared and trained from their childhood for employable roles that would sustain the family. On the other hand a woman is seen as incurring major costs to the family when her family has to bear the expenditure of her marriage and also give a hefty dowry as a gift for her marriage which has become more of a compulsion as it is demanded by the groom's family who has an upper hand than the bride's family.

Many scholars have written about the status of women in India and their efforts to break their stereotypes (see Pande, 2010, 2017; Goyal & Prakash, 2011; Kantor, 2003). The current status of the girl child in India has been attributed to many years of suppression, invasion and patriarchal mindset that the Indian society had to go through since ancient times. The status of the Indian woman as it was in the past trickles down to 21st century women in India. It is from this fettered past of womanhood, of being neglected and treated as subordinates within the immediate and extended family, friends, spheres of influence, school, society at large that has conditioned her to be comfortable within the low self esteem image she has borne since her birth. Such a status of the Indian women holds in the Indian society irrespective of the levels of education the family may have gone through or any other indicator of status. As a result, it becomes a deeper matter of concern when it comes to women taking up careers where they supplement their subordinate positions at home and compete at work-place and hold aspirations for career progression.

## Literature Review

Perhaps brief review of TM issues which impact the paper…e.g definitions of TM, Inclusive v exclusive approaches, distinctive nature of TM in Emerging markets ( acute nature of talent shortages, rapid labour turnover, rapid structural changes, rapid changes in labour force composition)

Studies mainly from the perspective of gender in the IT sector have been largely motivated by how the field of IT has been demonstrated to be more of masculine preserve (Inger, 2010) and are predominantly conducted in the western context (Mellström, 2010). According to Inger (2010), women may be accorded respect for their performance within a male domain albeit with a comparison of what is attributed as norms of appropriate behaviour of women which has little to do with their skills as women. She also looks at the perspective of 'doing gender' in which she specifies the need for people to fit in to either of the sex categories. Women in spite of working in a male dominated arena have to "continually prove that [they] are women" (p.18) in order to keep their feminine identity. These studies suggest that the stereotypes of gender play a significant role in the IT sector and highlight the challenges that women face in the employment sphere.

Inger (2010) in the Swedish context found that despite being prone to expectations of bringing in gender specific attributes to the field of IT, women participate in programming for the challenge and not necessarily to bring their traditional gender-specific qualities to the field.

Other studies suggest a strong influence of culture and norms on the relationship of women and technology (Paul, 2015; Mellström, 2010). Mellstrom found how Malaysian women dominated the IT profession for reasons that were based in the local context such as the quota system of Malaysian ethnicity; association of computer technology with the indoor spaces considered suitable for women; women's participation in the

IT labour force since pre-independence that helped overcome the masculine nature of technology, and women have outperformed men in the areas of 'serious' subjects as technology. The women interviewed in her study highlighted the importance of female role models who held senior positions in the IT field both in the industry as well as academia. Family responsibilities were upheld by the women in this case and retirement was around 55 years of age for the urban professional career woman without loss of status or career opportunities. Additionally, the Malays sharing a familial sense of commitment to building the nation helped in women's participation in the workforce. Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) also highlight the role of influential networks within the Lebanese culture that impacts on the career progression of women, and European research highlighted the importance of role models and effective networking and mentoring to female career advancement ( Linehan and Scullion, 2008). Such studies indicate how different cultures have positively impacted the notion of women in the IT sector.

Some studies (e.g. Wentling, 2003) have also indicated that many women's career progression has fallen well short of their expectations due to the barriers they face in the workplace. Tlaiss and Kauser's 2011 study undertaken in the Lebanese cultural context highlighted that women's strong desire for senior positions was an important factor influencing their career progression, however, there was still a lack of women representation in the senior management of the organization which was largely attributed to a culture which discriminates against women. Further Cooper's (2001) study indicated a concern for women's career progression within organisations and suggested a bias in favour of men at the middle management level, an important barrier for female career advancement. These are in line with earlier research which suggests that there is a gender stereotyping of the senior managerial role, wherein promotable managers to these roles come with an image of being assertive, strong, competitive, self-confident and independent, which contrasts with the characteristics women are held to (Fagenson, 1990). The findings also highlighted that women felt that they need to be given more challenging assignments to help advance their career progression.

## Indian Women in Career Roles

Women's domestic responsibilities and her position at home is a major challenge to performance at work (Chawla et al., 2016, Patel & Parmentier, 2005). However there has been a realisation of the need to break out of such a bias against women. In a study by Nath (2000) on the motivation behind Indian women managers for career progression it was found that women have found family parental support critical to launching their careers, and support from husbands to continue in their career path. Though this came with a sense of appreciation by these women, they also reported to undergo a constant 'gender battle' at home. Informal support groups have been a constant support for women pursuing careers such as women group

who would check on their children in the absence of the mother or domestic helps. Spiritual or religious groups were also reported as a source of support for these women (Chawla et al., 2016).

Nath (2000) found strong personality traits of not giving up or challenging societal norms, building on personal strengths, focus on goals and being adaptive to the environment were factors for women successful in their career. Some of the positive aspects of women at workplaces were also recognised in Nath's study such as how colleagues were sensitive to a presence of a woman in the team and the paternalistic behaviour of senior colleagues was seen positively, also there was lot of value addition seen by fellow women colleagues, women were reported to bring in a lot of warmth at the workplace in their dealings but not at the cost of professionalism. There were findings from the study that suggested there was no differential treatment for women that was expected. Some women rather took pride in claiming that they would like to compete with others on the basis of merit rather than gender. At times there was an indication of a need to be more understanding towards women at other times they were seen as more hard-working. Such instances indicate how women are learning to successfully cope with workplace expectations and there has been some level of support being extended to her in this regard. In fact Woszczynzki et al. (2016) recently used a cultural lens to explain their findings of no remarkable differences between Indian women and men in the BPO sector. They supposed that the BPO sector might have taken the right measures that have lead to eradicating any gender differences. However, their's was a study for one industry and a majority of respondents were males.

Despite the seemingly positive signs that are starting to appear rendering a better condition and support for women at workplaces, the gender gaps in society continues to reflect in the workplace. Budhwar et al (2005), found in their study that men, though find it okay for women to work as their subordinates, may not be comfortable working under them. Gender perceptions and stereotypes of women reflect at workplace when women are assigned with lesser challenging role than men and are more often than not underestimated for their capabilities. Chawla et al. (2016) too found the gender perceptions of women rendering them inept for the workplace. The male ego was also seen as an issue to deal with when women superiors passed orders. Another concern for women is when they are excluded from the informal networks at workplace that is highly male dominated because how men perceived women (Chawla et al, 2016; Kroekar, 2011; Budhwar, 2005). These indicate that though women are coping with workplace pressures of trying to fit in, there is an ongoing challenge of fighting societal norms that underlies these women's professional lives.

 In developing economies like India, women are a growing and increasingly major part of the workforce. Female participation rates in the labour market are increasing significantly, however family related pressures, traditional customs and work related issues constrain women employee's ability to progress in the organizational hierarchy (Rashid, 2010). In addition Indian society is learning to cope up with the

changing expectations of women which challenges the traditional low status assigned to women in the workplace context. However, due to the recent increasing participation of women in the workplace, organizations in India have to address this challenge in order to best utilise the growing talent pool of female employees. Increasingly the challenge for Indian businesses is to support the development of women to the participation of the best talent in the higher levels of management, in a context where women's jobs are not perceived as important as men's.

Haq (2013) stresses on the need for businesses to understand the unique dilemma that women in India face when it comes to the challenges they face in society, careers and within organizations that can help to implement policies and take measures for supporting women in their career progression. This is increasingly important in view of the acute talent shortages in India, particularly in the IT sector where retention is a major issue (Tymon et al, 2010).

Talent management policies help companies align the needs of the business with the requirements of the workforce (Scullion et al. 2016 ; Sparrow et al, 2014). Exclusive approaches to High Potential talent identification is a dominant practice in large MNC firms (Krishnan & Scullion, 2016; Cappelli& Keller, 2014, Farndale et al, 2014). The exclusive approach to talent holds that individuals differentially contributes to the performance of the organization and hence are worthy of investment in development and retention. The present study will examine whether this approach is appropriate in the context of the IT sector in India.

The present study is a qualitative enquiry of talent management and the wider socio-cultural factors affecting participation of women in higher levels of management in the Indian IT sector

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions

1. What are the major issues and challenges facing women employees in the Indian IT sector seeking career progression? What are the major barriers to female career advancement?

2. How do the women working in the Indian IT sector perceive the talent management policies of the company?

3. How do the talent management policies of the company impact the career progression of women in IT sector?

*Methodology*

Our study on Talent Management for women employees in India is a new field of enquiry and hence we adopt an exploratory and highly inductive approach. We chose a qualitative methodology using multiple case study format in the Indian IT sector to achieve a stronger basis to yield greater insights into the perception of female talents and for analysis and interpretation (Yin, 2003).The IT sector in India is one of the largest employers of women in the organised workforce not only at the entry level but also at the board level. For example, women' representation at the board level is the second highest (next only to telecom) at 11.6% in the Information Technology sector (Korn & Ferry, 2016).

We used theoretical sampling to select the organizations to study. The criteria for selection of the organizations were company longevity, size of the company and the favourable employer brand image of the company. Both these companies selected for study were well established, ranked in the top 5 of the Indian IT services industry with top employer brands had been in operation for more than a decade and a half.

Perhaps add a few lines on the general approach to HR in the two companies and brief comment on key HR/TM issues…? Addressed in the findings section

Contact was initially made with the Head of HR in the two companies in order to ascertain the interest of the company and seek their confirmation for participation in the study. India is particularly challenging for empirical field based organizational research because of infrastructural constraints and a higher power distance in societal culture and having a legitimate authority to sponsor the study could ensure access to different stake holders and a relatively better response in eliciting information from the respondents (Krishnan & Shobitha, 2016).

Data was collected from two Indian multinational companies in the IT sector. The same two researchers were present in all the interviews which were conducted in English. In one company (Company A), two focus group interviews with four HR managers and seven women line managers were conducted on the same day in the company premises in Bangalore and, a telephone interview of the Head of HR was also conducted. For the second company (Company B), two telephone focus group interviews with 3 and 5 HR managers respectively were conducted. Extensive notes of the interviews were taken by the two interviewers. Due to privacy constraints the interviews were not recorded. The notes from the two interviewers were consolidated into one summary. The HR personnel of Company A who organized the interviews was present in all the interviews and she actively participated in the focus group interview with the HR line managers. However for company B, though the HR managers were not said to be present, the affordances of an audio-based telecom with a group may have its limitations such as presence of fellow participants who were not visible to the participant.  In addition to data from the interviews, information

from documentary sources was also used.  For example, talent management policy documents were used as a secondary data source to shed light on retention and promotion issues facing f women in the respective companies.

The interviews across the two companies were conducted successively. The researchers predetermined the codes based on the research questions of the study. Disaggregation of company A interview data were conducted. Any emergent themes were also coded. After coding the first focus group interview summary separately by two coders, the coders met to discuss and rationalize the respective codes. A common pool of coding was agreed upon and specific memos for each were prepared. This was followed by contextualization where each of the nodes were interrelated in order to investigate each research question. Based on the final codes the questionnaire was modified for the interviews with the subjects in company B in the IT sector. While we are positive that the methodology provides us with rich qualitative data for analysis, we recognize that one limitation was the inability to record and transcribe the interviews could limit the level of analysis that could be done with this method.

## Findings and Discussions

As indicated in the literature and the empirical findings from our study too supported that  social, biological and family support were major factors that influenced the women managers' participation and career progression in the company. There are multiple cultural factors that lead to women facing issues at workplace. A participant from Company B expressed how women face a challenge when they first begin employment as the education system still follows a segregated pattern.  As a result of this women faced greater challenges than men in integrating to the work environment. Another participant also highlighted the impact of women and men being culturally segregated in India and the challenges this posed for the IT sector. In particular, women may feel uncomfortable initially when they join the company due to the culture of gender segregation which suggests  that  companies need to support the integration of female employees in order to both develop and retain female employees.

Further, as was pointed out in the literature, social factors also influenced how women in the IT had to cope with both their family responsibilities and professional roles, which sometimes were in conflict. However, the participants mentioned various coping mechansims to counter such social challenges. In some cases women opted to take a break from work to fulfil their parenting responsibilities before getting back to their career aspirations. It was indicative of the multiple roles the women play that affect their participation in management.

The data highlighted not only social but biological factors limited women's participation in management. A significant concern of the women was that they did not want to be excluded or left out professionally due

to family responsibilities, while at the same time not wishing to be neglectful of family responsibilities. In Indian culture this is a particular challenge for females wishing to progress their careers as culturally Indian women are expected to take primary responsibility for family including looking after the elderly which often includes extended family as well as primary responsibility for domestic responsibilities, which is common in Asian cultures . For instance, one of the focus group participants, a line manager in Company A narrated how she has coped with work and personal life balance by taking a break for 7 years from her work and got back to work when she felt she could manage the demands of both of career and family. Managing these tensions is a major challenge for Indian organisations who seek to attract and develop female talent and highlights both the individual and organizational aspects of seeking to increase the role of female talent in Indian organizations.

The perception of talent management policies were generally affirmative while the implementation of certain policies especially with regards to performance appraisal and promotion were viewed as areas that could be improved. The participants expressed great reliance on the maternity leave policy which provided support for coping up with pregnancy. However, one of the participants expressed how taking a maternity leave led her to compromise on her work role. Further, the demands of the job in the IT industry often requires women to work late in the evening which was seen as conflicting with meeting family commitments. While there were specific policies to limit late working for females (e.g managers needed to explain if women in their team are consistently working late and approval was required for working beyond 8pm) However, there was considerable ambivalence among the women about taking advantage of the provisions to limit late working as some participants felt that showing unwillingness to work late shifts would damage how they were seen in the company in terms of flexibility , and they felt that being left out of late night calls could damage their promotion and career prospects. Hence perceptions played an important role in women's job distribution regardless of what policies are in place to support the employees. The barriers to women advancing to senior positions were found to be both organizational as well as social. For example, according to one participant from company A, quality is overlooked in favor of quantity in role change. Similarly another interviewee added how the work time requirement of 9.15 hours was emphasizing quantity over quality as some employees might be able to attend to the same task in less time than others. In addition the strict work timings could limit promotion prospects for women in the organization because of perceptions that women spent less time at the workplace than their male counterparts. For example, one of the participants in Company A expressed a view which was typical among female IT workers which suggested that women who may are allowed to leave early due to family reasons, could over time be seen as unreliable and be offered less work than men.

An organizational culture which assumes that women are less capable of handling work than men is damaging to female aspirations to progress in the company and in particular is a significant barrier to women's promotion and career progression. An interviewee from company A highlighted how the perception of quality which equates to more hours of work, can limit women's position and status in the workforce over time. The impact of such perceptions impacts more heavily on women than men as women are less able to work late shifts and they may need to leave work earlier than men due to Indian culture which requires them to take the major share of domestic and wider family responsibilities. Also, appraisals and promotion decisions are sometimes largely based on availability at workplace, which acts as a barrier to women progressing in the organization. Our research suggests that support is required from both company and family and also changes in the wider society to help Indian women cope with considerable work-life balance challenges they face.

One participant from company B thought opportunities for women had improved in recent years and this was reflected in greater problems of retention as increasingly women could move to different jobs. In the past personal reasons or need to relocate when partner moved was more important. The same participant emphasized the challenge of work-life balance issues and the persistence of the notion of men as the main bread earners in the family were also seen as detrimental for women's advancement in employment. In addition, women were usually expected to relocate to support the relocation of the men which reinforced their secondary status in the labour market and women's returning to former jobs if they did relocate remains problematic.

There were, however, some positive perceptions of company's policies as well. One of the participants expressed an understanding of the competitive pressures facing the company and some policies were understood in this light. E.g some policies which were not very women or family friendly such as clocking hours of work or promotion opportunities limited were seen in the context of the pressures for cost reduction and increased productivity. . Other positive aspect involved highlighting the advantages of working with women managers. The interviewees from company A highlighted how women line managers could be more effective in time management and also more sensitive to their fellow women's needs. However it was also suggested that problems could arise when women supervisors pose awkward questions such as "if I can do, why can't you." This is a further covert barrier to women's participation in management, which is often overlooked in the literature.

Due to the cultural and organisational barriers facing women seeking career progression coping strategies were developed by the women. One such strategy for women professionals was to seek to negotiate personal responsibilities and professional roles related to their personal circumstances in the absence of effective support structures both in society and at the company. Due to the increase in female employees

in IT sector and the increase of female participation in management, there has been some organizational support for the women in the form of talent management policies. However, it is far from clear that talent management policies effectively addressed the particular needs of the women in the company reflecting the acute work life balance challenges they face. In struggling to handle both the work pressure along with the considerable family and domestic expectations in the Indian context, women are faced with greater challenges than men. One female respondent outlined the difficulties of managing a team of 14 along with parenting responsibilities. Our research suggested that under the existing corporate culture women who place more emphasis on family commitments risk limiting their career enhancement. This raises questions about the extent and depth of the "family friendly" HR policies in the organization that would be required to support the career enhancement of women given their domestic responsibilities of women to their families. This suggests that HR policies and practices need to change fundamentally to address challenges related to promotion and retention of female talents.

Organizational policies on retention helped women who took a work break to come back to the workforce. This is more important in the Indian/Asian context reflecting the more acute nature of the work-family challenge and the greater tendency of women in India to drop out of the labour market in the child rearing years compared to Europe An instance of retention can be related to one of the interviewees who took a break of 7 years from her work life for family reasons after which she effectively returned to the workforce. This also indicates the nature of the retention challenge during the parenting years. Women joining after long years of break need to be oriented and fully supported in the return to work process. It also highlights the need for effective HR policies which involves a number of elements to be put in place to support the development of this particular talent pool. A participant in company B, expressed a typical view that the challenges of supporting women returning to work was not to be underestimated and highlighted the difficulties faced by women seeking to manage their re-entry to work. Research suggests that integrated policies and support can help in retention of women talent and these policies should form part of a wider TM strategy that seeks to take an inclusive approach (Scullion and Collings, 2012) In addition, HR policies which show flexibility such as creating opportunities for work from home and a supportive manager could also be a way to overcome such challenges. However in IT companies this could depend on the approval of the clients of the Offshore Development Centres. This is increasingly necessary as given the very high levels of labour turnover in the IT industry, effective management of female talent can have a very positive impact on labour supply. Organizations which operate with a more strategic approach to female talent management can gain a competitive advantage over their competitors.

Talent management programmes and its impact on women employees' career progression:

The organizations in this study were approached based on their good reputation for people management, and in particular for their progressive approach with respect to the employment of women IT professionals. With regards to the perception of 'talent and 'talent management', these terms were defined in gender neutral terms. For instance as per the Group HR manager in company B, "Talent includes employee or resource available for hire that can be deputed for work towards organizational goals. A talent is hence an individual capable of contributing towards organizational goals. Hence this would include both male and female employees and refers to the capability of the person to contribute to the organizational effectiveness. Similarly according to the HR manager, Company A prides itself as an equal opportunity employer. There are no obstacles to career progression due to gender. The question is to what extent this works out in practice.

Over the years there has been more acceptability and openness on challenges faced by women in the organization. TM practices are no different for men or women. Company A follows an inclusive approach. In the words of the recruitment head, "Everybody is a talent" and "Most processes are for everybody". The organization uses a mix of immediate and long term view and uses both internal and external talent development activities. Through specific links with targeted university campuses for graduate engineers as well leadership development activities a long term view of talent development is adopted.

The ratio of salary at entry level hires is 1:1 for men and women in both the firms. Yet there was recognition of the importance in such organizations of the need for support from line managers and top managers in effectively promoting female career progression. Career progression in both companies were accorded equally irrespective of gender. Company A provides for extended career hierarchy, clear definitions, scenarios and expectations on job, span and role relations viz growth expected, competencies for every role.

Our research highlighted that rotation and reassignment could impact on female career progression and could arise either on closure of a project where an employee needs to be reassigned to a different project or within a project rotation across different modules. Minimum duration of 2 years has to be completed (in a long duration project) before an employee is rotated (of which 1 and ½ years of productivity). One of the women HR managers highlighted the opportunities and benefits of being re-assigned and gaining experience in different roles which reflected the policy of the company to provide developmental opportunities through job transfers : "Whenever I need a change the company provides for it." During her decade long experience with the company she initially joined as a recruiter and seeking opportunities and stretch assignments for development, she moved through a variety of roles which offered both variety and depth of experience which enhanced professional skills and career. The roles included a specialist HR role, HR generalist role, and a number of HR Business partner roles which involved increasing levels of responsibility. For example in her current role she oversaw three times the number of employees as in the

previous role. . Promotion is based on behavioural assessment as well as role maturity. Normally role maturity is for 3 years . According to the head of diversity programme in the company B, in recent times most of the attrition in mid-level of women employee is due to the availability of better opportunities. This is significantly different from 4-5 years previously when personal/relocation reasons were the major reasons for female attrition. This is one indicator of a growing trend of women managers emerging as an important talent pool for organizations in the IT industry.

As suggested above the hiring, reassignment and promotion policies are all based on well-defined gender neutral terms. Also there has been positive work experiences of women with the programmes.

While both the companies adopted an inclusive approach in facilitating career progression of both gendered employees, company B also had a fast track programme and High Potential programmes. Around 30% of the population who are categorized as outstanding (top two rating bracket) are provided overleveraged roles - higher role responsibilities. In order to determine high potential individuals f feedback is taken from multiple individuals such as peer group, customers, in addition to line managers and achievements and contributions are identified from a range of sources.

The interviews and secondary data from the companies revealed that the support offered for female career development in both companies were of three types: Inspirational, developmental and facilitative. Inspirational programmes typically consisted of variety of activities through which women employees are motivated to seek greater challenges within the company at the same time retain them by addressing issues of work-personal life conflict. Various events in which an interaction with successful women leaders either from inside or outside the organization are facilitated. The senior women leaders are invited to share their experiences in balancing their personal and professional lives. These programmes helps coach and counsel aspiring female talents and to reflect on work life priorities. In practical terms the female high potentials could draw on the experience of senior female leaders in meeting the challenging work-life balance issues and motivational lectures by female leaders speakers inspired and motivated the female talents to think innovatively about these issues. For example, one of the interviewees reported that she reverted her decision to quit after listening to a timely lecture by a woman leader.

Developmental programmes typically are aimed at developing women for leadership positions in multiple ways – e.g support programmes, peer mentoring and coaching, and platforms for women to learn and exhibit leadership capabilities. According to the the Diversity Head in company B, Individual coaches and mentors are increasingly assigned to work with high potential women. Senior women managers acted as mentors and conduct workshops where female talent can exchange experiences about the conflicting work-life balance challenges and learn from each other. This increases the role of female voice in developing career

opportunities for women. Networking and group mentoring were two important activities for developing female talent in the companies. Interestingly these activities were identified as very important for the development of senior female managers in the European context ( Linehan and Scullion, 2008) and more research is required on their role in the Indian\Asian context.

 Facilitative programmes typically are aimed at providing support, flexibility and care for women employees took several forms including:  Work from home policies for parents, opportunity to work from city based offices instead of the long commute to suburban offices - especially helpful for the pre and post-natal period for women employees, telecommuting option and also part time work options where an employee could work 2 or  3 times a week. Family friendly policies may also make provision on some days form children kids are allowed to come to work spaces. Further help is provided across the various offices for engaging day care facilities. Voluntary affinity groups also function which provides a platform for discussing around the issues of parentage, women etc. Communications made on women safety also helps women employees update themselves on how and whom to reach out in times of need and also some of the precautions to follow even when out of the office. While most of these options are gender neutral, these are especially relevant in easing the work logistics of women employees, reduce apprehensions and helps ease of work. ICT has considerable influence on the lives of these women and they have been able to benefit out of it both professionally and personally. One of the women managers opined that e-commerce has enabled them to buy grocery, do shopping and daily need items conveniently. This has reduced time in managing the household purchases which otherwise required a significant time in managing the household. While both the companies had practices and policies pertaining to these three spheres, company B had a predominant focus on the inspirational and developmental programmes, while company A had a greater emphasis on facilitative programmes.

## Discussions

While there were no explicit bias against women managers, some of it were implicit,  as in the literature, and got reflected in performance and potential evaluation which affected opportunities for higher managerial roles. As other studies found, the constraint that women in India face in working late because of family related pressures, security related issues does affect the perception of being a 'team-player' and the ability to handle larger roles. The sex typing of managerial roles is not something unique to the Indian context as it is found that 'think manager think male' phenomenon existed in different countries such as US, UK, China, Germany and Japan and were particularly impactful for women middle managers (Schein, 2001). As per social role theory, gender typical roles pertaining to men and women shape their expectations on the appropriate behaviours of both men and women, and the belief they have about their own skills and capabilities (Eagly, 1987). Since leaders require agentic qualities in order to succeed, there  might be a

mismatch between the leadership role requirements and the female gender roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Agentic qualities gets manifested in such behaviours as speaking assertively, competing for attention, influencing others, initiating activity, for assigned tasks etc while women in general show communal qualities exhibited in behaviours such as speaking tentatively, not drawing attention to themselves, accepting other's direction, supporting and soothing others etc. But even if women possess such characteristics as required for leadership roles, there could be a differential interpretation of the same behavioural display by either genders. While assertiveness may be viewed as agentic quality when displayed by men, the same is sometimes interpreted as aggressiveness when women display these behavioural traits (Allen, Kimberly & Poteet, 2016). However the modern, professional career women is a legitimate social identity - even a norm (Billing, 2011). Both the companies provided career support practices which not only eased women managers' ability to balance work and personal life but went further ahead to provide developmental opportunities and even inspirational programmes which are attuned to their needs. This was a positive sign in the IT sector as was seen in the literature for the BPO sector indicating a realisation of the need to have supportive policies for women. Many of the women managers who join the Indian IT firms compete with their male counterparts at all levels and are seen as legitimate and sometimes even superior performers to the role they hold. While gender categorisation may be visible there could be other categorisations based on similarities and differences in social forces that we identify with and these could be dynamic that changes over time (Billing, 2011).

In spite of these broader influences on the identity that women carry to the workplace, family responsibilities such as motherhood, household responsibilities, societal expectations such as taking care of a sick child, supporting the child at studies and extracurricular activities, taking care of aged parents and parents-in-law are still largely looked upon as a women's preserve (Jain & Mukherji, 2010). Research on Vocational Psychology has shown that when doing career planning, women, likely to be influenced by societal expectations, consider family and relationship goals more in line with a broader 'life planning', which in turn limits the career options (Allen et al, 2016).

## *Conclusions:*

In terms of the view of women talent, it is seen that both the IT organizations took policy level initiatives to promote and  develop women managers in their respective organizations. Over the years there has been more recognition  and openness in discussion on challenges faced by professional women in the workforce. While there has been a positive perception held by women employees in both the companies on the efforts undertaken to support women's career progression, women employees also seem to hold forth that the predominance of the efforts of the company to ensure productive performance should be appreciated. This study has three strengths: First, it is perhaps the first of the studies looking at facilitative factors for women

career progression in the Indian IT industry. Our findings reveal that social, biological and family support are the major factors that influenced the women managers' participation and career progression in the company. Second, it looks at the perception of talent management policies from the view point of women line managers. While policies are gender neutral, the way it is implemented, especially the appraisal process which helps 'categorise' talent and the inputs for promotion decisions have been constraints in promoting women managers. Third, the findings also reveal a three factor structure in the support offered for women career development with varying degrees of emphasis for both the companies. Our research suggests that companies need to address the complex cultural and organisational issues limiting the advancement of women to secure the growth of female participation in their leadership teams. It also supports the view that talent management challenges in the emerging markets are distinctive and suggests that companies in the emerging markets have little choice but to nurture local female talent as a solution to the acute talent shortages they experience.

 Future research could employ a mixed methods approach to explore these issues.

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