Gender inclusivity in Information Communication Technology: Some policy indications

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ABSTRACT: *The Information Communication Technology sector made inroads into India's economic scene in mid 1990s. It has provided employment opportunities to female work-force into this organized sector substantially as it provide good indoor work environment that suits them. This paper discusses women work life in terms of opportunities and constraints they face in this sector. The reflection of this paper is based on literatures from different secondary sources. Most reviews reveal that though fairly satisfactory yet an optimal level of gender inclusivity is still to be achieved in this sector. Drawing from reviews the paper discusses framework of policy indications to make it gender inclusive. The paper addresses policy makers to focus more on gender planning and gender sensitive priorities towards gender inclusive information sector i.e. policy towards women should shift from equality to equity.*

KEY WORDS: *Women workforce, Information Communication Technology, Glass ceiling, gender sensitive policy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has made deep inroads in the Indian scene in post 1990s with market liberalization and emergence of the Information Technology (IT) sector. Development of Information Communications Technology (ICT) in recent decades facilitated by the high-speed data communication links contributed to improved communicative networks bridging the temporal and spatial boundaries and correspondingly, widened the scope of opportunities for people seeking paid work. The onset of liberalization and globalization in 1990s paved the way to growth of Indian IT industry as it enjoys natural comparative advantage with a large cross section of educated English-speaking but cheap labour force and Indian Government's policy incentives e.g. setting up of several Software Technology Parks (STPs), providing tax holidays to profit making IT industry etc. The growth of IT sector has its inherent spillover benefits such as the creation of employment opportunities for a large section of educated unemployed youths including an attractive option for women, boosting up export earning and creating a new pool of entrepreneurs etc. IT industry has now captured about 51 per cent of the world market (Kumar 2001). NASSCOM–Mencher Report 2009, however, has revealed that over the years the proportion of women workforce at entry level as well middle level management has increased considerably but there is lack of adequate representation of women at the senior level.

This paper attempts to get into the policy needs that get highlighted from the overview of literatures on women working in Indian high-tech industry. To start with, the probe into the secondary literatures is taken into consideration for the questions raised in the objectives of the paper. The paper makes attempt to look forward to gender sensitive needs to be addressed through policy so that this sector becomes more gender inclusive.

II. OBJECTIVES

The current paper tries to address the following two objectives:
1. How far the development of ICT in India has achieved gender inclusivity?
2. Frame for gender sensitive policies.

Inclusivity of women in ICT sector:

Employment opportunities in IT sector:- The Indian IT-BPO industry has emerged as the largest private sector employer in the country with direct employment of about 2.23 million professionals. The percentage of female employees, over the years, has steadily increased from 35% in 2006 to 36% in 2008 at the junior level in IT industry. In Call Centre/ITES sector, women comprise of 37% of jobs (NASSCOM-Mencher, 2009).

The important factors that encourage women workforce to participate in ICT sectors are for white-collared job with comparatively high salary, easy international mobility, comfortable indoor work environment, gender-neutral policy based on knowledge-centric skills possession, tele-working, flexible work routine and physically less demanding work process (Kumar, 2001; Upadhya, 2006; Shanker, 2008). High employment potentiality in this industry inspired a large number of girls to go for professional education, especially computer engineering courses. It is evident from the report that 5 to 8 per cent female engineering graduates were in the IT industry during 1980s whereas this figure has increased drastically to 20 to 30 per cent currently (NASSCOM-Mencher, 2009).

Social effects among women workforce in ICT sector: - The studies relate to women workforce in IT/ITES in Delhi and Bangalore. Kelkar and Nathan (2002)observes that effects of women's entry into the IT sector has increased household income, enhanced their bargaining power within their households and increased work participation rate among women apart from increased social mobility. Also, according to Clark and Sekher (2007) women employees' their financial autonomy, greater mobility and larger social acceptance in male dominated society improved among women employees.

But 'achievement' is selective. It has not been possible for the women in the IT sector to challenge the structural inequalities and gender relations at work and home. An ongoing struggle brews in on their part to challenge the embedded patriarchal relations and existing structural inequalities (Kelkar and Nathan, 2002; Shanker 2008).

It raises the next part of the question as to what kind of gender relation, women in ICT, experience at the work place where gender neutral 'Equal opportunity policies' are followed as Human Resource Policy.

Gendered perception makes gender segregation/exclusion at ICT sector:

Studiesunderline the existence of 'feminization of workforce' or 'glass ceiling in this industry since the women workforce gets mostly concentrated at the lower level of job hierarchy in IT sector. At the senior level, women representation is only around 5 per cent. The reasons attributed to this are: (a) stereotyped the female professionals, (b) personal sense of mid-career guilt, and (c) proverbial 'glass ceiling' (NASSCOM-Mencher report, 2009). A small percentage of women are in managerial position. A few women work as Software developers, Architectures, Tech leads, Consultants or Project Managers whereas a bulk of them works at the lower level as Testers, Programmers or Quality assurances and other such low-end jobs. They are, thus, paid less compared to their higher level post-holders and, consequently, they have fewer channels of growth and less chance of going abroad. Women, thus, cluster at the lower level of job-ladder leading to feminization of certain service activities and segregation. Very few women reach higher level of managerial jobs (Kelkar et al. 2002; Upadhya 2006).

Shanker (2008) in Bangalore echoed the same observation to the effect that women professionals were concentrated at the entry and intermediate levels rather than middle and upper ranks, thus, creating the glass ceiling. Though Indian (Business Process Outsourcing) BPO/ITES industries predominantly employ female workers yet the senior management circle is consistently male dominated. Culturally, there is persistence of gender-based stereotypes made by the management for its ideological construction of women's skills as having 'soft skills', and is good at routine, standard and repetitive works thus shaping the recruitment practices. This in turn limits the opportunities for women's promotion. Reinforcement of gender based stereotypes creates a culturally and structurally defined glass ceiling (Abraham, 2008). Actually, women's participation has been evident in the 'IC' or information communication of ICTs but not necessarily in the 'T' or technology due to inherent gender biased practices culminating in feminization (Morgan et al., 2004).

Kelkar et al. (2002) also pointed out that gender stereotypical typecast resulted in concentration of female mostly in human resource (HR) sector as women have better interpersonal skills to handle people better than men. Marketing, now-a-days, is a women-dominated sector since women are considered better at building a rapport with clients and possess better communication skills. In finance sector, women are perceived to be honest, less demanding but hard working and yet cheaper.

Women workforce in Information technology sector face glass ceiling and is not able to rise high after certain level of hierarchy as they fail to bargain for proper perks, stock options, pay scales etc. Again, usually they fail to upgrade their skills; tend to remain attached to a particular company for a longer period rather than go for job hopping thus, stuck to immobility (Shanker, 2008). Failure to put up late hours to build informal networking, debars them in getting information on career openings, marginalization of women at the workplace during the time of project deadlines by team lead or male colleagues (Upadhya, 2006). Their career choices are constrained by distance from home, domestic responsibilities, company reputation, job security and other social reasons.

Gender equality vs. Gender equity

Gender is defined as a social and cultural constructs based on one's biological sex of a person defines his or her roles in society. Gender equality could be defined as full equality between the sexes, where no discrimination against anyone based on his or her sex i.e. "same rights" and the "same opportunities" which must be available to all men and women.

But interestingly, full equality in a meaningful and real sense, under the law is vitally necessary but not sufficient. It is the historically, cultural and traditional beliefs that typecast women as inferior to men. So, "gendered" stereotypes and prejudices act as barrier and prevent achievement of full equality between the sexes, of cause of inequality. Thus, gender equality refers to the equal valuing of the roles of women and men. While gender equality is used to refer to the overarching canopy of equal rights and opportunities, together with corresponding lack of gender discrimination in all spheres of human activity, gender equity has a more narrow application and strongly economic or rather, material connotations.

The gender equality is generally encompass a broad spectrum of rights and opportunities, but to address issue of gender relations in development gender equity has specific socioeconomic underpinnings hence, the term , gender equity is preffered over gender equality.

Moser places equity as the second phase of WID (Women in development), after the welfare approach. The equity approach focused on the subordination of women to men not just in the family, but also in the marketplace, and considered economic independence as synonymous with equity, together with reduction of the inequality between men and women. According to Moser, the equity approach should meet actual strategic gender needs then just practical needs.

Policy Indicators:

ICT Industry in India adopted best practices in areas of HR to promote the growth and increased employment of women but incidence of feminization and glass ceiling points out to a gendered workplace (NASSCOM-Mencher 2009). The situation, therefore, question gender inclusivity at every level thus, need for policy that is inclusion of equality and equity aspects taken into account during policy formulation.

Moser (1989) has coined 'Women's special need Gender planning approach' to take into consideration of different gender needs for men and women as they play different roles in third world society. Gender planning relates to identifying women's triple roles (reproductive, productive and community) and distinction between practical and strategic needs. Women involved in participation of labour force are constrained by triple commitments (practical needs). Strategic gender needs involve abolition of gender division of labor, alleviation of the burden of domestic chores and control of male violence.

Overarching principle of equality should not just include 'equal opportunities for jobs and promotion' but prejudicial practice in recruitment and promotion and in gender relation within workplace has to be countered. The claims of equality can only be fulfilled women practical needs and strategic needs are to be met. Practicable women friendly policy like flexi place, flexi hours, work as part-time to be effectively introduced as employee options. The policies against sexual harassment; paid leave during pregnancy; unpaid leave for rearing children and leave for illness in the family should be followed. Infrastructural facilities like transport during the night, women only transport at night, crèche facility and hostels for working women need to be initiated.

The training of women in male-dominated work area widens employment opportunities and abolishes the gender division of labor, thereby, fulfilling the strategic gender. Identifying triple roles for women may provide methodological tools for planning e.g. provision of off-peak transport facilities may meet practical needs but 'Women only' transport particularly at night provides strategic gender need of countering male violence; provisions of crèche, parenting workshops and women's forums etc. are less common in Indian IT industry.

The above situation calls for a comprehensive holistic policy need to be formulated at all levels. NASSCOM-Mencher, 2009 points out that for greater gender inclusivity and empowerment of women policy recommendation at all levels of ecosystem can be identified.

Individual level:

Women, as individuals, have the greatest leverage in bringing about desired changes where awareness and willingness can shatter glass ceilings and stereotypes. Attitudinal change is needed for women to maintain work-life balance. Women can raise themselves by recognizing their skills and weaknesses, upgrading their professional skills etc. to reinforce their collective bargaining power and become role models for others.

Societal level:

Society plays an important role in shaping beliefs and norms, setting boundaries of conformity consequently shapes access of women to education and workforce participation.

In the Indian context, societal level promotes 'multiple role models' for women rather than stressing on redefining gender relations and not just confining women's primary commitment in their homes.

Due to societal attitude, career oriented women find work as secondary and feel apologetic and guilty of spending much time at work. They end up being 'stereotypes' aspiring to be good wives, mothers etc. and for that end in view they even leave careers to be perfect wives, mothers and daughters-in-law. So, sufficient change needs to be brought about in societal attitude.

Institutional level

Institution should attempt to have supportive structure for women to realize their capabilities. Instituional level it is important not only to provide 'equal opportunities incase of employment for men and women; changing perception of male colleagues and bosses regarding perception as women workforce and skills and also it is important to provide strategic needs like night transport for women only night transport, facilities for creche, women hostels for working etc. Organization has provided opportunities to a large number of women, but they have fallen short of empowering them at the leadership level. Policies need to be upgraded to attract women at the preferred level as they have low level of attrition.

At institutional level a forum for formulating policies against sexual harassment; awareness on company's women friendly policy need to be created. Surveys need to be conducted for voicing women's problems and to communicate and create awareness on the best practices of the organization. It should make provision for crèche, practicable flexi-hour policy and also provision for post maternity leave.

focusing women who would role model at leadership level balancing home and work; women focus group to discuss work-life balance preference for part-time/flexible work arrangement; equal pay for equal work; salary grades should be transparent to everyone. Attitudes for recruitment should be unbiased not to be coloured by feminine traits or masculine traits; high professional women as mentor, women networking opportunities through seminer and conferences.

Governmental level:

Suitable legislation, public policies and laws should be introduced by the Govt. to allow and enable inclusivity and diversity across society. Policies like provision of transport for women, security to night shift workers and forum for redressing grievances of women.

Government provides tax holidays to these profitable industries. It is losing substantive revenue which could better be spent on supporting physical infrastructure, higher education, research in software technology (Kumar, 2001). The immunity from Government that software companies enjoy regarding issue of handling sexual harassment cases should be strictly enforced (Upadhya, 2006)

Women only colleges and institution; focusing women who would role model at leadership level balancing home and work. Incentive to firm giving gender inclusivity, train women in male domain of sales, engineering and technical field;

III. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In 1990s and 2000s Information Technology sector has become the largest private sector employing women in India. Due to its employee-friendly/gender neutral human resource policies with emphasis on equality of opportunity and meritocracy, policy like flexi-time and place, Tele-working, internet have attracted many a women to get into technical and managerial positions provided good avenues of employability of women candidates. Consequently, enhanced female participation in public domain has emancipated them from male constriction and raised them to equality claims.

Due to high attrition level of workforce in this sector, Software companies have put in place employee-friendly and gender neutral human resource policies with global management practices. Moreover, emphasis on equality of opportunity and meritocracy has encouraged many women who get into technical and managerial position provided good avenues of employability of women candidates i.e. ¼ of workforce (Upadhya, 2006).

Short-term change would lead to long term transformation. In the same way, it assumed meeting the practical needs may lead to satisfaction of strategic gender needs. We may add the following observation as follows:

Emergence of IT sector has provided a lot of window opportunities for Indian women are evident from the facts emerged from recent NASSCOM study. This sector has helped many women to move beyond the traditional roles of wives and mothers. It enables them to seek employment and careers outside the home. It has also provided platform to question the patriarchal relation at home and to take up profession of their choice. Furthermore, women can now think of alternative professions beyond women exclusive/segregated professions of teachers, nurses, clerks, social workers which used to be conceptualized as 'suitable' profession for middle class women in India. Thus, employment in ICT sector has challenged many notional constrictions previously imposed on women. IT sector, thus, provides an opportunity for career mobility as well as careers in far-flung areas situated out-side home for women irrespective of constraints they face in the workplace and Society.

This situation calls for more women sensitive policy formulation taking into consideration not just equality but equity to make more women inclusive sectors.

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