

A Study on the Career Trajectories of Women Employees in Information Technology (IT) Industry with Special Reference to Chennai City

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ABSTRACT : Career trajectories of Indians have undergone significant transformations over the last two decades. Of these, the career paths that modern Chennai women have chosen are both diverse and challenging. In this paper, study on the career paths of the Chennai women professional working in the IT industry is presented. The objective of the study was to understand the circumstances under which Chennai women professional decide to take a career break. The study was done on a cross domain sample of IT professional across Chennai City. It resulted in interesting insights into the myriad reasons for career breaks of women which could be broadly classified as cultural, social, structural, personal and job role specific. Based on the study policies which when exercised by IT employers and a women professional’s ecosystem will help them stay on the career track even after break in their career.

Keywords - Career Break, Flexi time Work, Second Career Women and Women in IT

I. INTRODUCTION

The technological revolution aided by liberalization, privatization and globalization has redefined the way of people in Chennai towards work. In the last two decades, career trajectories of the Chennai workforce have undergone interesting transformations as a consequence of better and greater job opportunities that the technology boom created. The IT industry opened doors to unparalleled career opportunities to aspiring young Indians as a result of some inherent advantages of the Indian work environment like the availability of a large talent pool of educated English speaking but inexpensive labor force, the Indian Government’s policy incentives for profit making IT firms and the natural comparative advantage of the twelve hour time gap with the American continent, where the activities of a vast majority of multinational IT companies is centered. In addition to contributing significantly to the export earnings for the country and creating a handful of new age entrepreneurs, the IT sector also offered a multitude of employment opportunities to the educated unemployed youth in India, including many attractive options for women. Women welcomed the opportunities offered of them which is validated by the fact that 30-35% (Total Workforce =3 Million) of India’s IT-BPO workforce is comprised of women, as of 2013 (NASSCOM, 2013).

However research shows that a significant percentage of women employees in the IT sector attrite every year. This attrition results in a whopping 48% women dropping off from the workplace before the age of thirty. Consequently, a huge talent pool of women with about three to ten years of work experience who have taken such career breaks is created. Hence, though the proportion of women workforce at entry level as well as middle level management has increased considerably over the years, there is inadequate representation of women at the senior level in the IT sector.

In this paper, study on the career trajectories of Chennai women professionals in the IT industry is presented. The study traces the career journey of Chennai women professional in the IT industry, against the backdrop of Indian culture. The study attempts to analyse the career trajectories of these women in order to bring various reasons for breaks in their career paths. The findings of this study will help to identify the measures needed to enable and empower the GenNext Chennai women that provide access to a sustainable career. The study recommends practices which when incorporated in Chennai women professional ecosystem will ensure that women potential is put to maximum use while granting the space to shoulder the responsibilities that various roles women play and demand.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, a brief review of work undertaken by gender inclusivity researchers from India is presented. It is well known that the last decade was witness to the war for talent wherein IT companies competed with each other to employ more people, a good percentage of which has women. The many lucrative

job offers had resulted in a considerable increase in the number of women at the entry level and the middle management level in the IT sector. The higher participation rates of women in the IT workforce can be attributed to comparatively high salaries, easy international mobility, gender neutral policy based on knowledge centric skills possession, and physically less demanding work processes in comfortable indoor work environment. Another interesting revelation is that though there are socially sanctioned gender inequalities in the Indian market, women prefer to work outside the home in an attempt to improve their social position in turn breaking free from family based dependence. The job opportunities in the IT sector have improved the financial autonomy, mobility and social acceptance in a male dominated society. The proverbial glass ceiling that prevents women in IT from advancing beyond a certain point in rank and wages has been extensively researched. Reference [1] studied circumstances under which an Indian women professional decides to take a break. Reference [2] made an endeavor to provide an overview of various surveys on Work Life Balance and Organisational Role Stress through review of existing literature after 2000 with reference to Women IT professionals in India.

The review indicates that though research has been done extensively on the career of women professionals in the IT industry, the research in the Chennai context is still very nascent.

III. WOMEN IT PROFESSIONALS IN CHENNAI

The Chennai women professional have many dimensions, some of them unknown to counterparts in different parts of the world. In the Indian socio cultural milieu, a woman is expected to carry out commitments towards the various social roles. It was heartening to note that the last two decades were witness to revolutionary changes in the perceived lives of Chennai women. With the advent of globalization and the subsequent IT boon, more and more career opportunities were created, encouraging more women to take up professional courses that promised secure careers. Studies show that as of 2010, 42% of college graduates in India were women. It follows that women career assumed much more significance than in the earlier years.

The IT industry has many roles tailored for Indian women. Some of these are the job profiles of software developers, testing or quality engineers, project leads, business analysts, business or client relationship managers, IT infrastructure support personnel, senior leadership positions etc. Unfortunately, the attrition rate is also significantly higher amongst these women raising questions about their work family balance. It is noteworthy that in the Indian context, women IT professionals' career is influenced by familial choices, the ability to cope up with multi role responsibilities with attempts to negotiate them, self and professional identity, social support and from employers end organizational policies and practices. This explains the existence of feminization or the glass ceiling in the IT sector, wherein bulk of the women get concentrated in entry level job roles with only 5% of them actually climbing the rungs of the corporate ladder. The structural and cultural foundation of the glass ceiling is further strengthened by the fact that there exists the gender biased stereotypical policies, for example the notion that women have excellent soft skills and hence are good at routine, standard and repetitive functions, such a notion has an indirect influence on the recruitment and promotion of women employees. Studies also show that women actually fail to negotiate perks and salary bonuses, not very keen in upgrading their niche skills possibly because of other compelling responsibilities, do not eagerly job hop once they are settled in a comfort zone and do not have informal professional networks as they are not able to put in efforts after office hours to build. Their career prospects are further limited by domestic responsibilities, distance from home to place of work and various other social reasons.

This study focuses on women in IT who have yielded to the glass ceiling and have subsequently taken breaks in their careers. Apart from familial responsibilities, the study also brings out demands at work that eventually force women to quit. The study recommends measures that can be taken in order to ensure sustainable career for these women.

IV. METHODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENT

In this section, the survey, methodology and instrument are discussed. The study uses a descriptive research design. A survey was conducted among the women IT professionals with the help of a questionnaire. The study was conducted in Chennai, India. Chennai has the maximum number of software concerns in India next to Bangalore. The software industries in Chennai have extended their business in all verticals. Chennai is the most suitable place to conduct this research in India.

In this study, a convenience sampling technique is used for selecting sample. Researchers generally use convenience samples to obtain a large number of completed responses quickly. There will be no bias in the responses in using the convenience sampling since the respondents voluntarily participate in the survey. As the respondents show interest in completing the questionnaires, the error rate will be minimal [3] and [4]. In this

scenario, respondents are not forced to complete the questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was explained to them and their involvement in the study is their choice. Convenience sampling was the best sampling method available for this study. The study on career breaks was conducted among 324 women IT professionals in Chennai city, 226 are unmarried and 98 are married.

The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire adopted from [1] carried questions pertaining to career breaks of women in IT industry. Most of the questions had multiple choices as answers making the questionnaire largely objective. Respondents were allowed to choose multiple options as their answers to certain questions in order to accommodate their holistic view on the issue in question.

4.1 MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR TO IT CAREER SATISFACTION

It is good to first measure the important factors contributing towards women's IT career satisfaction. This will give capture their aspirations and what attracts them most.

4.2 REASONS FOR CAREER BREAKS

The major reasons why a typical Chennai woman IT professional takes a break in career is discussed. It was found that in the Indian socio cultural context, the various stumbling blocks that Women IT professional encounters as Cultural, Social, Structural, Personal and Job role related/Professional.

4.2.1 CULTURAL FACTORS

The cultural factors that deter a women's career journey root back to upbringing and the cultural values instilled. Women belonging to conservative households are often not given the liberty to choose their careers. Even after they overcome barriers created by cultural conditioning and start a career in IT, many of them carry a notion that trying to sustain their careers is not really important when it comes to work life balance. As a result they attrite resulting in the phenomenon called pipeline leakage of women.

4.2.2 SOCIAL FACTORS

Social factors are those dictated by the responsibilities of the social roles that modern Indian women play. The various social roles that a woman dons in the course of lifetime are that of a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother, a mother-in-law, a grandmother in addition to being an employee. The various life events that characterize a woman's life are responsible for the social factors that lead to a career break. Some of these key life events are marriage, spouse relocation, pregnancy, child care, elder care, pursuing higher studies or under unfortunate circumstances chronic illnesses. In India, it is a common practice for the bride to leave home after marriage to embrace husband's home. It could be the case that women's husband is of the opinion that career needs a break for women to fully fit into new social roles, namely, that of a wife and a daughter-in-law. In addition, there could be spouse relocation which means, if marriage results in relocation for women to husband's place of stay and this particular place does not offer an environment where women can pursue current job, might choose to quit. Further on, becoming a mother, changes the life of a woman forever. As soon as women realize that there is a baby solely dependent on them for all of its needs, they find it increasingly difficult to pay attention to career. Women might decide to take a career break at this juncture. Moreover being a daughter and a daughter-in-law in a typical Indian household would entitle the woman to care of parents and parents-in-law. Women's career tends to take a backseat as they devote themselves to the needs of family.

4.2.3 STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Effective structural support systems at home and at workplace, many career breaks can be negotiated. Lack of proper support systems at home is one prominent structural barricade. For example if a family member care giver or a home based non family member care giver was available for child care, a vast majority of women professionals would choose to share their maternal duties with the care giver in turn avoiding an impending career break. Elder care could also be entrusted in the hands of a reliable care giver, helping the women sustain career. Similarly, poor day care and nursing facilities, which if available conveniently and affordably could assist women in child care and elder care. It was also found that the working pattern in the IT services industry results in a set of structural barriers that eventually forces women employed in this sector to quit. These include the notorious menace of long working hours, the unavailability of flexible work options and need to work night shifts to bridge the onsite-offshore time gap which makes it almost impossible for a woman to do justice to career and domestic responsibilities. The lack of growth opportunities within the organization, subject to limitations prompts a woman professional to further distance herself from career. With the time taken to commute to work increasing day by day due to the ubiquitous traffic snarl, the place of work becomes almost

inaccessible to women trying to juggle responsibilities. This becomes another structural barricade that makes a woman rethink career options. In India where crimes against women are being reported at an alarming rate, unsafe work environments also poses a threat to a woman's career journey. All these structural barriers, when present in varying degrees, result in tremendous familial pressure to quit, to which many women professionals finally succumb.

4.2.4 PERSONAL FACTORS

Another category of barriers that results in women taking a career break are personal in nature. It might be the case that a highly meritorious woman professional decides to take a sabbatical to pursue higher studies. The possibility of the women quitting career altogether to pursue other job options that make use of differential capabilities cannot be ruled out. Under unfortunate circumstances, a chronic health condition might invade a woman professional and career might not be in the helm of priorities. There could be other personal reasons like an unfriendly work atmosphere, professional jealousy and even many undisclosed reasons that discourage a woman professional from continuing job.

4.2.5 JOB ROLE SPECIFIC FACTORS

The IT industry has women occupying diverse job profiles across sectors. It is important to note that the corporate role played by a woman dictates the work pressure which indirectly influences decision to quit. Some of the typical job roles are that of software developers, testing or quality engineers, project leads, business analysts, business or client relationship managers, IT infrastructure support personnel and senior leadership positions. The responsibilities that are attached with each of these are varied and myriad. The limitations imposed on a woman primarily because of socio-cultural conditioning restrict from carrying on professional duties effectively. This in turn results in many women succumbing to work pressure and deciding to quit.

4.2.6 CAREER BREAK

The various reasons that eventually lead to a career break for women have been discussed in detail. It might be of interest to know what happens to the career aspirations to the subjects of study during the aforementioned breaks. There is consensus on the fact that a vast majority of women sacrifice their career goals to attend to their domestic responsibilities. It follows that their career interests are not altogether dormant. However, with technology advancing at a break neck speed most of these women harbour apprehensions regarding the relevance of their skill sets once they decide to restart their career. They feel that the niche IT skills which they once acquired through their exposure in the IT industry, would most probably be outdated after their career hiatus. This implies the need to provide for up-skilling or re-skilling opportunities once they decide to resurrect their careers.

4.2.7 DURATION OF CAREER BREAK

In order to ensure a 'minimum break' support from family or with the availability of appropriate day care and nursing facilities, women can choose to avail of them for child care and elder care. Flexible working options and mentoring schemes at the employer's end is more welcome to the 'multi-role' women. Reduced working hours and a slightly lenient work schedule that implies less strenuous work can benefit women immensely, as they will keep up commitment to work without compromising much on the domestic front.

4.2.8 PREFERRED WORK OPTIONS FOR SECOND CAREER WOMEN

The IT industry had once invested heavily on training the talent pool of second career women and the good news is that they are willing to switch over to the career mode given the right opportunities. Having understood the different dimensions of their domestic responsibilities during their career break, most of these women favour flexible work routines in their second innings. Part-time work options that guarantee work-life balance is also viewed as another attractive possibility. The employer benefits from a reduced pay while the employee benefits from the ample time left with for other pursuits. With internet connectivity becoming omnipresent, work from home options are also hugely favoured by second career women. This eliminates the need to commute to work and employers agree that smart workers are extremely productive when they avail of this option.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire that addresses the IT workforce and carried questions pertaining to career breaks of women in this industry, in particular. The questions attempted to cover

both the married and unmarried perspectives. Fig. 1 shows forty eight percent of the unmarried women respondents feel that their being challenged is the most important factor for their IT career satisfaction, whereas married women feel flexibility (39%) followed by being challenged (34%) as the critical factor. From the outcome it is observed that relationship with manager is not considered as a major career satisfaction factor even though it is included as one of the options.

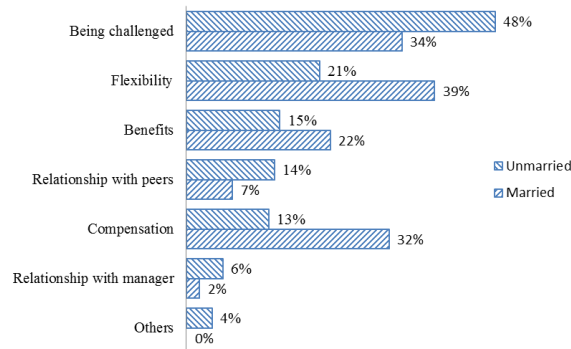


Fig. 1 IT career satisfaction

The popular responses on the life events that in turn result in women actually taking career breaks is depicted in Fig. 2. While marriage tops the list with around 57% of both unmarried and married respondents, child care and pregnancy were close behind with 55% and 45% respectively with married women. The segregated analyses bring out both the unmarried and married perspectives. 25% of unmarried and 55% of married women believe that child care is the common social factor that makes taking break inevitable. Except marriage (58% and 57%) there is a clear difference in all other four social factors between unmarried and married women respondents, pregnancy (25% unmarried and 45% married), spouse relocation (21% unmarried and 35% married), elder care (8% unmarried and 21% married).

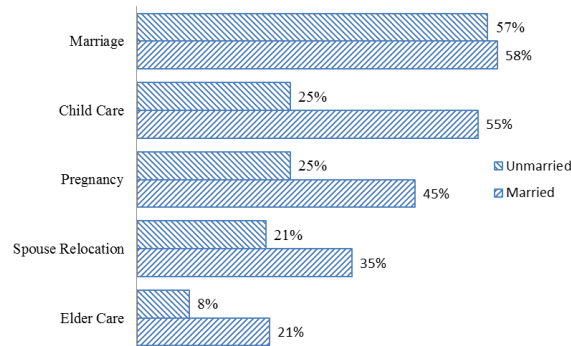


Fig. 2 Social factors

Fig. 3 shows twenty eight percent of the unmarried and forty one percent of the married women respondents believe that health issues force women to drop their career pursuits. Around 20% of both unmarried and married women respondents believe that a desire to pursue higher studies as another personal derailer.

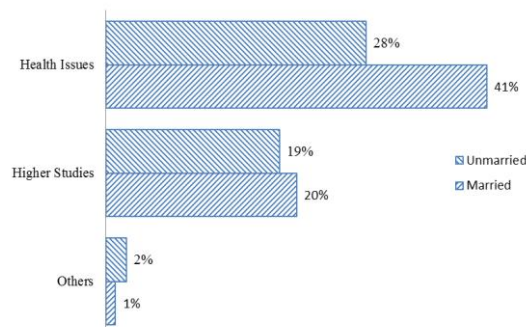


Fig. 3 Personal factors

Majority of the survey respondents 59% unmarried and 64% married feel that long working hours plays a crucial role in women's decision to quit. As in figure 4, 29% of unmarried and 33% of married feel that night shifts are not very favorable amongst women seeking to sustain their careers. The complete list of structural factors is given Fig. 4.

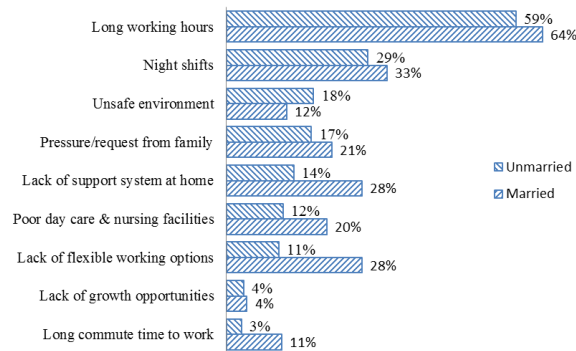


Fig. 4 Structural factors

Fig. 5 shows 44% of unmarried and 50% of the married respondents opine that software developers are top role that is most prone to break.

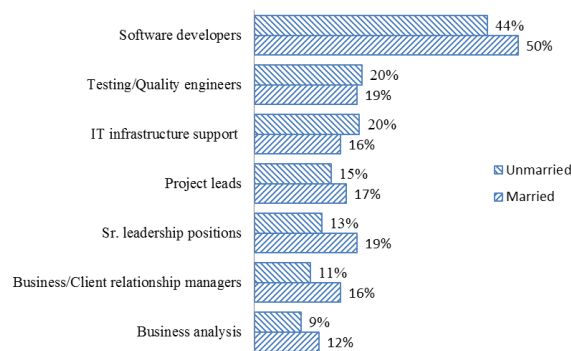


Fig. 5 Job role specific factors

The study also shed light on the duration of breaks that women professionals in IT typically take as in Fig. 6. It was found that career breaks of women are largely between 1-2 years. 45% of unmarried and 40% of married respondents feel 1-2 years and 3-6 months respectively.

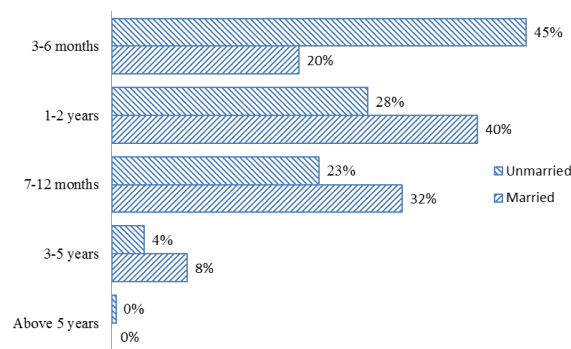


Fig. 6 Length of break

Fig. 7 shows that majority of the respondents (51% unmarried and 46% married) are of the opinion that a 3-6 months break in the career of an IT professional will not require to undergo additional training once they gets back to work. Only 5% feel that re/up skilling might not be necessary at all for women professionals with career breaks.

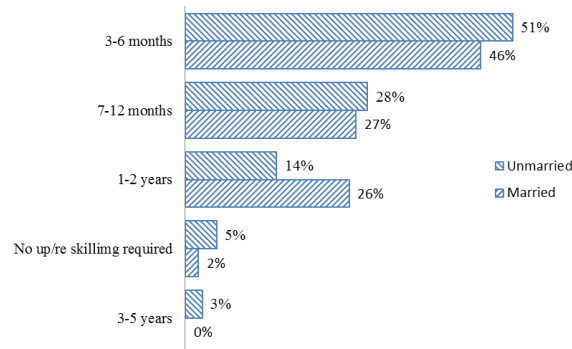


Fig. 7 Up/Re Skilling

Whopping majority of women 51% unmarried and 70% married feel that flexi time work is the most preferred career enabler that would aid women professional in sustaining career as in Fig. 8. Support or motivation from family and colleagues are on the heels with 36% and 41% of unmarried and married respondents respectively, vouching for it. Reduced working hours (28% unmarried and 31% married) also helps a women balance career and personal life while doing justice to both.

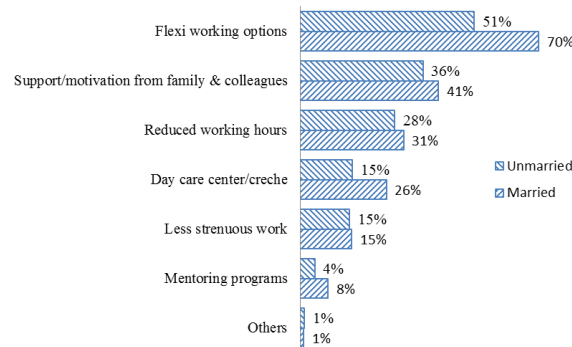


Fig. 8 Career enablers

Fig. 9 shows that 71% of unmarried and 59% of married women respondents vote for full time work options with flexibilities that will aid the balancing act of women professionals. 25% of unmarried and 32% of married surveyed feel work from home is also not a bad option. There are fewer takers for part time work, with only 7% unmarried and 17% married vouching for it. Only a miniscule 5% unmarried and 7% married are ready to undertake full time work options after the career break.

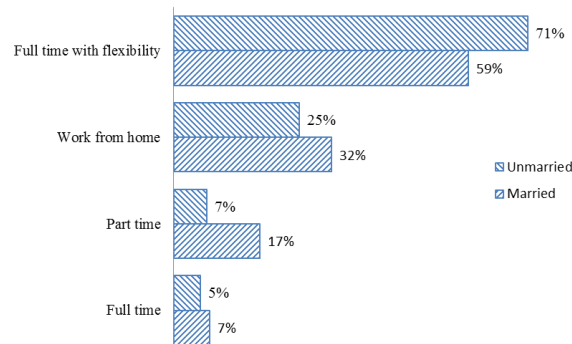


Fig. 9 Second career options

VI. CONCLUSION

Chennai women have made a giant leap in the career front with their aspirations and there is no denying this fact. They have been one of the chief beneficiaries of the IT boom and it follows that their career trajectories have many underlying intricacies waiting to be studied. The study examines the career breaks of women IT professionals. The study revealed that their career trajectories are often not smooth and undisturbed.

There are many factors cultural, social, structural, personal and role specific, those force them to digress from their ambitious career journeys. Identifying the pitfalls can be of immense use to the employed women themselves as it might help them take proactive measures to sustain their careers. Potential employers ready to exploit the women talent pool, can also gather insights and make their work environments more women friendly. For young women at the threshold of career, knowledge of what awaits can help better prepared to face the future and keep alive the sparks that ignited career in the first place.

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