



## TRENDS AND PATTERNS OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN BPO INDUSTRY IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*In the contemporary world, women have no longer been lagging behind in terms of career development and career goal. BPO is one of the industries, which has witnessed high growth of women participation and recognizes their significant contribution to the sector in several ways. The objective of this article is to analysis whether BPO industry is a means towards empowerment of Indian women or has it emerged as a manifesto for their exploitation. The article examines the current status of women, their roles and the challenges they face at work, discusses the initiatives taken by the industry for gender diversity, to implement woman oriented policies and to promote women empowerment. The article also tries to explore the significance of work-life balance by female workers at workplace.*

**Keywords:** *Women Empowerment, Business Process Outsourcing, Gender, Equality, Multinational Corporation.*

### **Introduction**

During the initial stage of the establishment of BPO in India and till few years back this sector was not considered to be a well suited and convenient career option for women. Most of the BPO female workers generally face this question-why are you working in a BPO? The root of this question is the complete unawareness of the existent nature of work profile, working environment and culture of an international BPO. Working in a BPO for general society means working in a call center where employee's job profile is the interactive communication with the client or customers over phone. But the reality is quite different from the general view. BPO industry is no longer confined to calling process.

In compare to other traditional job profiles, BPO job was considered as a less respectable profession for women in India; caused by the call center's night shift, western culture and lifestyle and an image of young workforce. This judgement made it difficult for the society to welcome the non-conventional women status. BPO work profile was viewed as less dignified job profile for Indian women. Few years back BPO employment put question not only to the reputation of the women but also impacted her family's image in a negative way. In other words call centre's employment has created a wide-ranging social division within family and outside.

Though slowly but notably, with the changing time, the attitude of society towards BPO industry is changing and women are not seen with suspicious eyes as before. Women are now liberated and are more successfully leading and balancing a peaceful family life and contributing to its economic aspect as well. BPO employment no longer leads to social and mental isolation of female workers from their family and social network. It has been found during our survey that with the popularity of BPO jobs and specially the remarkable attention given by the government and the industry towards women employee's safety, security and as a whole to empowerment, the negative image of the industry is transforming and women as well as the educated society have started accepting it as a better career option. Rather in recent times BPO sector is considered as an agent of empowering women by making them financially independent at young age, providing them an opportunity to utilise their potential and introducing them to a bigger world. As a whole, the industry is gradually becoming an attractive and preferred career goal for Indian women.

### **Gender Diversity and Challenges of Woman Employee in BPO Industry**

In order to commence research on women representation in the industry, some percentage of women participation in a few leading IT-BPOs is collected from various sources. In a landmark for India, the number of female employees at Tata Consultancy Services has crossed the one-lakh mark, making it India's biggest employer of women in the private sector (Times of India, 2014). Rajiv Krishnan, partner and leader at consulting firm EY said, "This makes it the largest employer of women in private sector, overtaking even banking and retail sector, which have traditionally had more number of women" (Mint, 2014). TCS employed 42,500 women employees out of its total headcounts 142,000 employees in 2009 (The Economics Times, 2009) and on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 TCS had 98,122 women employees out of its 305,431 consolidated workforce (Times of India, 2014). Importantly and notably 40% of TCS women employee are either new recruits or at junior level; while about 11% are in the senior management (TNN, 2014).

Wipro employed almost 28,000 women in its total headcounts of 97,000 employees in 2009 (ET Bureau, 2009) and in 2014, it has 45,276 women employees out of its 1,47,452 total staff (TNN, 2014). Wipro Joint CEO Suresh Vaswani says that the male to female employee ratio is almost 50:50 at fresher level. But the percentage of women employees drops to about 15-20 percent at middle management levels and further 5-10 percent at senior management level (ET Bureau, 2009).



Infosys Technologies has 33.4 percent women employees in 2009, though among 232 title holders (position at assistant vice president and above), less than two percent are women (ibid) and in 2014 of its 1,61,284 total staff 54,537 are women employees (TNN, 2014).

Amit Kumar, Head of Human Resources (HR), Convergys India, shares “Female employees are approximately 30 percent of our employee population in Convergys India today” (Dataquest, 2014). In terms of those in leadership positions, he noted that females are 30% of those in supervisory/managerial and above roles in Convergys India, same as the ratio of female to male total employee population. Additionally, one of the two Senior Directors for Operations in Convergys India is a female. In fact, she heads the operations teams responsible for Convergys largest technology client (Dataquest, 2014).

According to Mukund Menon, Director HR for India& Singapore, Steria India says, women account for about 35 percent of their total workforce in 2012 (Hindustan Times, 2012). Mumbai-headquartered BPO Company Aegis has a workforce of around 24,000 employees of which, 20% constitute women (TNN, 2012).

The above numbers in the leading IT-BPOs reveal that women make up a considerable proportion of the workforce in the sector at the entry and junior levels. As Nasscom says, the percentage of female workforce in BPO-IT sector is close to 34 percent and majority of them work at entry level. This is basically due to the excellent employment opportunity that BPO sector provides towards Indian women. Today, BPO is on a steady growth rate and is offering wide and better opportunities to women than a lot of other traditional industries. Apart from employment, one of the attractive aspects of BPO sector is the good and higher starting salaries with regular raises every year. Typically, today in India, monthly income of an employee at entry level in this sector can vary between Rs.15,000 to Rs.30,000 or even higher. This figure at entry level is much higher than employees in most other traditional professions like teachers, nurses, armed forces, clerks etc. Apart from the salary, excellent remuneration package is also provided to the employees, which is missing in other industries. The employees with a few years of experience are in great demand and capable of switching their jobs to a competing BPO organization for a better position and salary.

The requirement of minimum educational qualification to get an employment is another factor that leads more women towards the sector. To get a BPO job a candidate requires neither higher academic education nor technical qualification. Rather, majority BPO jobs need a bachelor degree like BSC, B.COM or BA, good typing skills and fluency in English (for calling process in particular). Command on other languages like German, Spanish and French and having technical knowledge certainly can add to employee’s advantage. Though the sector needs minimum educational qualification for employment but it opens the way for larger scope and lays the foundations for higher growth for women. This is the only industry in India that provides a woman with limited education, the opportunity to earn more money, confidence, self-respect, career growth and achievement, higher economic and social status like any other highly qualified individual in the society. BPO culture is vibrant, dynamic and women friendly. It renders women a scope to explore a better world, to understand western culture, self professional improvement, to work overseas and many more. In addition, the door to door pick up and drop down facility, safe and secured workplace, medical insurance, bonus, allowances, gratuity, provident fund, recreational activities like gym, library, games, excellent infrastructure etc are added attraction that motivates women towards BPO employment.

Thus, it is clear that due to many advantages in the sector, women participation is significantly increasing in recent years and well represented in entry and middle management roles. At the same time, it is important to mention that while women participation is quite satisfactory at entry level, there is still lack of female involvement across all jobs functions. That indicates fewer women engagement in senior levels than men within many organisations. To get more clarity on this and to examine how are the companies faring in terms of treatment towards female employees in senior position of authority; the number of members of Board of Directors and Executive Officers of few Indian leading IT-BPO companies are collected.

The percentage of women participation both in Board of Directors and Executive Officers at Infosys Ltd is significantly low. The Infosys Board of Directors consists of 9 members and 3 of whom are female. There are 8 Executive Officers at the organization and none of them are women (Infosys Annual Report 2015-16 and Infosys Website<sup>1</sup>). Likewise, TCS has eleven members in Board of Directors with no female director in it. The report also lists a Leadership Team consist of three members and woman does not hold a leadership position at the same (TCS Annual Report 2013-14). This demonstrates a highly poor participation of women at top level. Similarly, Wipro’s Board of Directors is made up of thirteen members,

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<sup>1</sup> [www.infosys.com](http://www.infosys.com)



which provides direction and guidance to the organization. Out of the 13 Directors only 1 director represents women workforce. On the other hand, there are 17 executive leaders in their Executive Committee, and only two of these individual are female, which is again a cause of disappointment on the part of women participation (Wipro BPO Annual Report 2013-14).

Identically, as per WNS Global Services Annual Report 2013-14 it has 10 Board members, only one of them are women director. Further, WNS website lists 17 individuals in their management team, one of whom is a female member (WNS Annual Report 2013-14 and website<sup>2</sup>). Mphasis Ltd Annual Report 2013-14 says that there are nine members in the Board of Directors without a female employee. Organization's website lists 10 Executive leaders in their management team, only one of whom is a woman (Mphasis Limited Annual Report 2013-14 and website<sup>3</sup>). In the same way, according to Automatic Data Processing website, it has 10 Board members, two of whom are women. Website reports, Executive Profile of 12 members and two of whom are female (ADP website<sup>4</sup>). This report is definitely a cause of concern in regards to women workforce representation.

By the same token, a completely male dominated Board of Directors and Leadership Team is found at Capita India Pvt Ltd, where female employee holds neither a position of director nor an executive leader. Board of Directors and Leadership Team is consists of 3 and 8 male employees respectively (Capita India Pvt Ltd website<sup>5</sup>). Likewise, at Convergys India Services Pvt Ltd, there are total 10 members in Board of Directors and one of them (not Indian) are female holding the position of Chief Executive Officer (Convergys Annual Report 2012-13). As of 28 January 2015, with two Non Independent Directors and eight Independent Directors, there are total ten employees in Convergys's Board of Directors. Two of them are female members; but not Indian (ibid).

Importantly the above brief data on Board of Directors of few leading IT-BPOs reveals that though all these organisations promote and follow the policy of gender equality and no discrimination on the basis of gender is entertained at any level, but the Indian IT-BPO sector continues to be almost entirely male-dominated at senior levels and women representation is clearly fewer; which is really a big concern for the women employees at this stage when BPOs are booming (Hindustan Times) and is being recognized as a specialized sector in India.

To many women employees, belonging to middle and upper-middle class families BPO job is only a supplement to the family income but neither an economic necessity nor their primary career option. Therefore, they take it as only "for time being" and they continue their job as long as it does not hamper their family life. So naturally they have less desire to get promoted or for upward mobility. Many female workers join BPO right out of class XII or graduation and start earning. Some of them used this opportunity solely to save up money for higher education or marriage purpose. This intention simply leads to decline of promotion or other growth ladder within the organization. This tendency basically prevails among relatively young workers, who prefer to work at entry level and unwilling to take further responsibility at workplace. These are definitely a few reasons why women participation is insufficient at senior level. However, still a few questions that remains are- what are the barriers that prevent women employees to deliver their best potential, when they have equal emerging opportunity and desire to show their excellence in the field. On the basis of the existing literatures and survey, the following stress-generator factors for women employees in the BPO sector can be identified. These are the challenges that prevent a dedicated and competent employee to grow within the organization and to get a responsible and challenging position. These challenges are the prime reasons of inadequate women representation at senior and top levels. Those are discussed below:

#### **Dual Accountability of Women**

BPO organization works 24 hours in a day, seven days a week. An employee needs to stay at office for minimum eight to nine hours in most of the companies and in some companies like TCS the shift timing is of 10 hours. Apart from long working hours, many spend at least two hours commuting; which means leaving home for ten to twelve hours a day. This hectic schedule most of times becomes the first and foremost barrier and stress generating factor.

While young bachelors finds a social life in office and that often works as a motivating factor to stay late but many women do not wish to or incapable in putting as many hours as their male counterparts. Sometimes they fail to work with the same passion or devotion in compare to male co-worker. There are numerous instances of women not being promoted despite successful performances because, "she had the flexile timing" (Murty et. al, 2012: 73) to balance work and family

<sup>2</sup> [www.wns.com](http://www.wns.com)

<sup>3</sup> [www.mphasis.com](http://www.mphasis.com)

<sup>4</sup> [www.adp.com](http://www.adp.com)

<sup>5</sup> [www.capita.com](http://www.capita.com)



commitments. Often due to their personnel obligation, when there is work pressure or priority to meet deadline, women are criticized by their fellow worker for being absent or inadequate contribution in the team. Survey data suggested that a considerable proportion of women employees prefer to continue at entry level. They are not enthusiasm and keen to progress to higher levels of pay, skill, responsibility or authority. This is mainly due to the need of balancing work-life and personnel bindings. Promotion with greater authority and duty, with less flexibility is not a preferable proposal for them.

### **Child Care**

Child care is observed to be the biggest barrier in raising women participation at higher positions in the sector. The dominant role in childcare is admitted to be the mother and this responsibility affects the working life of women more than a men in a distinct way. Many employees find returning to work difficult after having responsibility of raising a child. In well paid and demanding BPO job profile, it becomes a challenge for female employee to serve sufficient childcare and hence ends up leaving employment.

In re-entering office after child birth, women get trouble in getting promoted. On the subject of promotion to the higher level, employer always considers employee's current performance and dedication towards work. A potential and efficient women employee after child birth is bound to shift her commitment and preferences towards her child. Her child becomes her priority. The change of direction of loyalty and devotion acts as an obstruction in her professional progress. A higher position needs a fully committed employee with less flexibility and more responsibility. An employer generally finds it difficult to expect the same from an employee with a child. Thus the employer tends to see the employee as less than fully committed and less potential for promotion. Hence, question mark comes to women's professionalism and competence after child birth and many times child care turns to be an obstacle on the way of their career furtherance.

### **Requirement of Professional Travelling**

Professional travel requirement has been a challenge for women workers in this sector. While in general, onshore or onsite assignment is a desired proposal for male employees and single women, the same works as a cause of professional disadvantage and personnel concern for married women. Many times they prefer and sometimes they are bound to deny onshore assignments due to domestic responsibilities. Though in the industry, organization is not authorized to direct or influence any employee to accept onshore assignments but refusal of such initiative is unfavourable for her career enlargement and leaves an imperfect reputation on her record. Thus repetitive declination for such project results in her slow career growth, which can be referred as one of the reasons of fewer women involvement at senior levels.

Professional travel requirement is a big concern for many women who occupy a top position in an organization. At higher position, frequent professional travel is an inevitable part of the work profile and an employee simply cannot stay away from such accountability. For a married woman, especially with children frequent travel disorganizes her personnel life and children's upbringing. As we have discussed above BPO job is demanding and the expectation of professional commitment at top position is much more demanding and challenging. So, at some point, it becomes tough and inconvenient to keep a smooth balance between work and life and sooner or later woman has to come down in favour of either one of them. Generally, in most of the cases women decide to sacrifice career plan and ambition for the sake of family adherence.

### **Relocation**

Another factor that affects women's careers is the husband's career (Murty et.al, 2012:75). Women usually leave their job when they get married, due to family responsibilities, childcare and due to relocation specially when the husband moving. In case of husband's transfer or overseas assignments the priority is usually given to husband's job, which results in wife's career or opportunity breakdown. If preference is given to wife's career, they have to leave apart which again adds to the stress on women. In order to get relocated every time their husband gets transferred, many women simply fall off their career track and resign themselves and put their own careers at risk.

The Leaking Pipeline Report<sup>6</sup> showed that across globally, the percentage of working women in the 30-plus age group is significantly lower than that of women in their 20s, indicating that this is the stage when women tend to leave the workforce. This is true of India as well, where women often leave the workforce due to the inability to achieve a strong work-life balance. Women who choose to take a break at this stage typically miss the critical step that takes them to the next level of management. And when they do choose to return to their careers, they find that they have lost leadership roles to their peers who remained in the workforce (Mercer-Nasscom, 2008).

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<sup>6</sup> A landmark study by PwC6 in 2008 called the depletion of female talent the "leaking pipeline" (Nasscom-Mercer, 2008).



### **Initiatives at Organizational Level**

Despite the fact that many women leave the workforce as they progress through the ranks, data shows that women are more loyal to their employers than are men and leave for very different reasons. While men leave for career opportunities, women tend to leave for personal reasons (Nasscom-Mercer, 2008). The reduction in the quantity of female talent is a global phenomenon, which prevails across industries and countries. As Wipro Joint CEO Suresh Vaswani says “It’s a loss for us when a trained and talented women employee leaves us” (The Economic Times, 2009).

One of the key challenges on the part of BPO sector is to improve the number of female members joining the sector, retain them and enable them to become leaders in the industry. In order to do that, it is of vital importance to observe and catch out the obstructions and address them through a structured policy. The efforts undertaken by organizations to get rid of the challenges of women at their workplace are highly impacting and make it possible and easier to build an inclusive workplace. Women employees usually look for an organization, where it is possible for them to deal successfully with both work and life. The industry now clearly understands the significance of work-life balance for a woman worker and therefore has started implementing policy that promotes adjustable work environment for women involved in bring up children. This attempt is definitely going to restraint drop-out rates and will encourage female worker’s involvement in mid-level and senior management positions.

Smita Gaikwad, Global Head, Marketing and Corporate Communications, Firstsource Solutions Ltd, stated that the sector offers HR benefits such as flexibility in work timings, work from home options, sabbatical policy to study further and return to work post maternity policies help women manage a work-life balance. Forums are created to help women employees grow their career and reach leadership levels. Overall the industry focuses on providing a safe and secure work place (Times jobs.com, 2014).

InterGlobe Technologies has special forum called "Women in Leadership" for counselling and leadership coaching program for women. This session allows women employees in the organisation to connect, collaborate, discuss and learn from women leaders across the industry. Such programs go a long way in fostering a sense of belongingness and making women feel cherished in the organisation (Times jobs.com, 2013).

A survey on gender inclusivity conducted by HR Consulting firm Mercer and IT Association Nasscom revealed that HR practices such as transportation policy of a company besides flexible working hours and leave policy play a major role in attracting women in an organisation. Other practices that women workers appreciate are anti-harassment policy, healthcare and awareness programs, women's lounge or recreational activities (The Economic Times, 2009). The availability of a creche or day care centre at office premises enables a women to balance both work and child care in an effective manner. The provision of a quality day-care center at office premise, where children are engaged, cheered up and exposed to a positive attitude motivates women employee to re-enter and deliver their best at workplace.

The high attrition rate in the middle and senior management levels, less than a decade ago directed TCS to thoughtfully design its gender diversity programme by facilitating women to get the right work-life balance. The TCS management under the leadership of CEO Chandrasekaran, went all out to ensure that their women force stayed on. The company offered extended maternity leave, flexibility on the kind of roles one would like to opt for and even long leave during their kid’s Class 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> exams (Business Today, 2014).

Executive Women In leadership (WIL) founded in 2001 as a grassroots organization of senior-level executive women at ADP, a leading BPO. WIL promotes leadership and career advancement opportunities for women executives. “ADP is proud of its long-standing commitment to diversity and the advancement of women in the workplace,”(ADP Press Releases, 2012) said Pam Durkin, division vice president and general manager, ADP Employer Services and chairwoman of ADP’s WIL group.

Wipro BPO also launched the “Women of Wipro” programme in 2008 with its CEO T.K. Kurien being recognized as a recipient of the 2014 Women’s Empowerment Principles Leadership Award for the company’s commitment to gender equality (Bagchi, 2014). Wipro aspires to create a sensitive organization where men and women alike can flourish and grow in their careers with holistic approach towards performance and work (Wipro’s Women Focused Initiatives, 2012).

Meanwhile, the “Infosys Women’s Inclusivity Network” program says that it “works towards creating a gender-sensitive and inclusive work environment for women employees and trains them for managerial and leadership roles” (Mint, 2014).



Sopra Steria Ltd promotes women's education, training and employment, and is taking steps to facilitate their integration and protection, including creating workplace creches (for children aged three months to five years); education programmes dedicated to girls through the Steria India foundation community initiatives (Steria: Corporate Responsibility Report, 2014). Sopra Steria Ltd believes in building a relationship with its extended family-the family of its employees. To envisage the same and to achieve a work-life balance a crèche facility is provided in the office premises for the working parents/mothers. This policy is applicable to all Steria India employees working in Noida & Pune location.

In this endeavour, organizations like, Nasscom and Mercer are providing meaningful and effective efforts. The Nasscom Corporate Awards to companies for excellence in Gender Inclusivity is a key component of the Nasscom Gender Inclusivity initiative, to celebrate best practices in gender inclusivity in the work place and showcase the winning companies. The Awards serve in supporting the industry-wide mission of enabling women leaders and creating a culture in which women employees are supported and encouraged to seek and achieve their highest potential.

Likewise, most of the larger organisations, for example, Infosys technologies, WNS, Convergys, ADP, Capita, Sopra Steria, TCS, Wipro etc have launched initiatives that encourage gender diversity. These organizations have included and implements specific policy against gender discrimination. The policies are owned by the group Human Resource, who is responsible for its effective implementation and regular review. Gender discrimination is considered to be a very sensitive and delicate matter and any such action is investigated as possible disciplinary offences and dealt with in accordance with the company's disciplinary procedures.

Thus the reality of BPO's endeavour in nurturing women leadership and women-friendly corporate culture cannot be denied. The several forums and platforms initiated by the sector for the growth and grooming of women employees to the next level of leadership demonstrated the fact. Adequate support on the part of the employer to female employees through motherhood is eye-catching. Employees returning to work post a maternity break can choose shift timings that are comfortable for them. To encourage female workers to continue with their job after having a baby, BPOs are offering creches in their office premises so that mothers can concentrate in their job knowing their babies are playing next door. The sector recognizes the benefits of flexibility in working arrangements. BPOs offer flexibility in work timing in order to enable women to increase their efficiency and to achieve greater work-life balance. Avoidance of women recruitment in night shift (wherever possible) is one of the important efforts taken by the industry. Part Time Policy is adopted by many organizations to introduce flexible working pattern. The industry provides equal opportunities for growth and development to all its employees. Relevant training and constant upgrading of employee skills is provided in line with job responsibilities. BPOs conduct forums to help to grow career and reach leadership levels.

### Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussion and the initiatives taken by the industry for its women workforce in India, it can be said that the IT-BPO sector has recognised the contribution of women in the workforce as an influential and empowering factor for the continued development of the industry and has remained fairly gender neutral from the onset, providing equal scope for both man and woman. It has been noticed that, acknowledging the immense contribution, potential and increasing significance of this emerging workforce, IT-BPO sector has prepared itself to act as a catalyst in the enlargement of female workers. The industry has taken a lead in adopting best practices in all the possible areas to nurture the growth and strengthen employment of women.

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