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### ROLE OF GENDER IN BPO INDUSTRY IN INDIA

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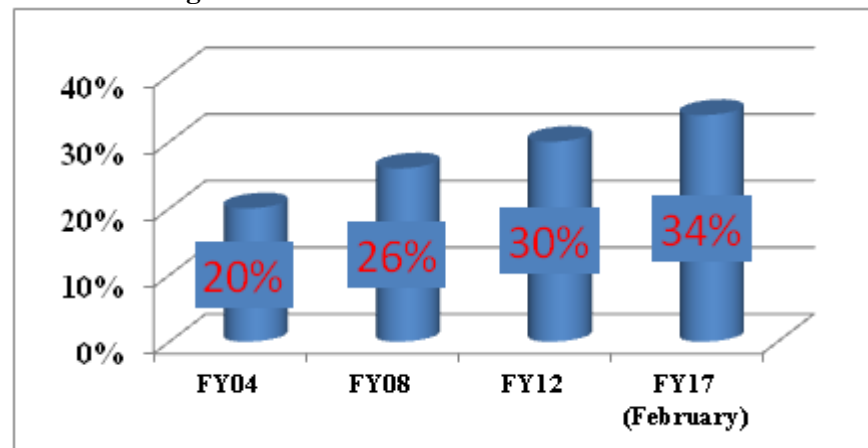
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#### ABSTRACT

*It is observed that Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is one of the sectors, which has witnessed high growth of women representation in recent years. This article focuses on BPO sector with special emphasis on women workers as female workforce provides significant contributions to the sector in several ways. The article examines gender diversity in the industry and analyses the challenges before women employees from both professional and personnel point of view; which includes employee's health problems owing to BPO work culture. The last part consists of an analytical discussion on the initiatives by BPO organisations to address the challenges women face caused by BPO work nature, to accelerate the diversity and inclusion across the industry at large and for recognizing, implementing and supporting woman oriented work policies.*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian IT- BPO industry has always been an equal opportunity employer and is strongly focused on hiring women. Currently (February, 2017) women constitute 34% of the IT-BPO workforce (i.e. over 1.3 million women employees)-an increase of around 1.8 times since FY2009. Nearly 10% of these women are in senior management roles (approximately 1% in the C-suite). Further, around 28% of the women employees in the sector are primary breadwinners, thereby indicating the changing trend of women's employment and inclusion in the sector (PwC, 2016: 8).

**Figure 1.1. Share of Women in BPO Workforce**

Source: Women Safety 2013, Nasscom and Nasscom Diversity and Inclusion Summit 2017

As shown in figure 1.1 the share of women participation in BPO sector in 2004 was 20 percent, which increased to 26 percent in 2008. In the financial year 2012, the percentage of women participation was 30 percent and as per Ms Sangeeta Gupta, Senior Vice President, Nasscom, India's IT-BPO industry currently (February, 2017) employs nearly 3.9 million people, of which more than 1.3 million or over 34 percent are women (Nasscom Diversity and Inclusion Summit, 2017). The findings in the above figure revealed that women participation have gone up a mere 14 percentage points from 20 percent in 2004 to 34 percent in 2017, indicating that women are constantly rising as a proportion of Indian IT-BPO workforce.

## **2. GENDER DIVERSITY CHALLENGE IN BPO INDUSTRY**

In compare to other traditional job profiles, for example-teaching, nursing; 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. 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 the 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. Women as well as the educated society have started accepting it as a decent career option. Beyond that, in recent times, BPO sector is even considered as an agent of empowering women by making them financially independent at an 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.

Though, gradually BPO sector is becoming more and more women-centric, the existence of gender biasness in the sector cannot be underestimated. In order to analyse gender diversity in the industry, first we have to examine the proportion of women participation in the industry and their ratio of representation at various career levels of an organisation. The career levels at BPO sector can be defined as Entry Level, Manager Level, Director Level and Top Level (Nasscom-Mercer, 2008). Graduate employee without a supervisory role belongs to the entry level. This career stream ranges from entry level through to technical or subject matter experts in the IT space. The Manager Level consists of employees with a supervisory role. Supervisory level is ranging from Team Leader to General Manager. They may provide mentoring and coaching to less-experienced staff. Process Trainer and Quality Control<sup>1</sup> belong to the Manager Level. Heads of programmes, divisions and functions occupy the Director Level. Top Level refers to Executive Team, senior Vice Presidents and Vice Presidents of the organisation (Nasscom-Mercer, 2008).

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. The number of female employees at Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) 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 (people and organisation) at consulting firm EY<sup>2</sup> said, "This makes TCS the largest employer of women in private sector, overtaking even banking and retail sector, which have traditionally had more number of women" (*Live mint*, 2014). "We have a lot of female talent in India, especially in the technology space. It's great to see that the company has been able to attract them. From 10,000 to 1,00,000, that is a growth of about 10x in 10 years," as quoted by N Chandrasekaran, CEO and MD, TCS (*Times of India*, 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). Speaking on the sidelines of the company's June quarter earnings, Ajoyendra Mukherjee, Executive Vice-President and head of global human resources at TCS said, "We are on track to hire 55,000 this year. We made 25,000 campus hires of whom 3,000 joined us this quarter, with the rest slated to join us in subsequent quarters. About 38-40% of campus hires are women" (*Live Mint*, 2014). Importantly and notably 40% of TCS women employee are either new recruits or at junior level; while about 11% are at the senior management level (*TNN*, 2014).

From a dedicated Web site to mentoring programmes aimed at engaging women employees, HCL Technologies has been rolling out initiative to recruit and retain

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<sup>1</sup>Quality control (QC) is a procedure or set of procedures intended to ensure that a manufactured product or performed service adheres to a defined set of quality criteria or meets the requirements of the client or customer (<http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/quality-control-QC>).

<sup>2</sup>EY (formerly *Ernst & Young*) is a multinational professional services firm headquartered in London, United Kingdom. EY is one of the largest professional services firm in the world and is one of the "Big Four" accounting firms. The organisation operates as a network of member firms which are separate legal entities in individual countries. It has 231,000 employees in over 700 offices around 150 countries in the world. It provides assurance (including financial audit), tax, consulting and advisory services to companies (<https://corporateinteractive.com.au/portfolio/ernst-young/>).

women. Earlier, in 2011, it organised a ‘women only’ recruitment drive across Delhi NCR, Bangalore and Chennai and received an overwhelming response-over 2,500 walk-ins (*Business Line*, 2011). Ms Robin Abrams, a board member at HCL Tech says that the company has reached a tipping point. In 2011, 24.5 Percent female workforce is a significant achievement-compared to 21 percent in 2009 (ibid). She adds About 80 per cent of the women who work in the company are at entry level, and the other 20 per cent are spread through the ranks. Within this 20 per cent, about 15-18 per cent are first or second level managers; the rest are senior managers (ibid).

Amit Kumar, Head of Human Resources (HR)<sup>3</sup>, Convergys India, says that, “Female employees are approximately 30 percent of our employee population in Convergys India today” (Vasudevan, 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).

As per 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 major IT-BPOs show that women make up a considerable proportion of the workforce in the sector at the entry and junior levels. According to Nasscom, the percentage of women workforce in BPO-IT industry is close to 34 percent and majority of them are at the entry level (Nasscom, 2014). What is evident here is that, the percentage of female employees steadily increased from 35 percent in 2006 to 36 percent in 2008 (Nasscom-Mercer, 2008) especially at junior levels. It can be said that woman employment has become decisive part in BPO sector as they constitute 51 per cent of entry level recruitment and have a 50 per cent higher chance of getting job offers in the sector (Nasscom; Diversity and Inclusion Summit, 2016). This is due to the outstanding employment scope that BPO sector provides towards Indian women.

Women participation in BPO sector is remarkably increasing in recent years and well involved in entry and middle management roles. But, at the same time, while percentage of women is quite satisfactory at the entry level, there is still lack of women representation across all jobs functions. That indicates fewer women engagement in senior levels than men within many organisations.

As Preeti Singh and Anu Pandey (2005) have rightly pointed in their study ‘Women In Call Centres’ most of the women employees are unmarried. They take up the jobs and drop out of their jobs to get married or bear children. Although Singh and Pandey’s study is entirely dedicated to the women employed in the call centre business, during the survey for this study, it was clearly visible that the above mentioned inclination towards work is still applicable and prevails throughout the BPO industry. A good deal of women employees join BPO right after completing class XII or graduation merely to save up money for higher education or marriage purpose. So naturally they

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<sup>3</sup>Human resources are the people who work for the organisation; human resource management is really employee management with an emphasis on those employees as assets of the business (<http://searchcio.techtarget.com/definition/human-resource-management-HRM>).

have less desire to get promoted or for upward mobility within the organisation. This trend is basically popular among relatively young workers, who are at entry level and unenthusiastic towards further responsibility at workplace.

Above mentioned are definitely a few factors why women participation is insufficient at senior level. But apart from those, there are a few obstacles that prevent women employees to deliver their best potential at workplace. These stress-generator<sup>4</sup> factors are the main reasons of inadequate women representation at senior and top levels.

### **2.1. Dual Accountability Of Women Employees**

The responsibility of a married female employee can be divided into two parts- household responsibilities and office accountability. Apart from that many of them simultaneously have to perform childcare liabilities and thus bound to face additional constraints, which is not the case with married men.

Thus, a number of women professionals cease to continue their career development at the early stage. It often becomes a challenge to balance work, family, society and self and stand against professional plan and determination.

### **2.2. Child Care<sup>5</sup>**

According to Harsh Manglik, the chairman of National Association of Software and Services Companies one of the major issues facing the IT-BPO industry is that women wanted to raise their families at some stage (*The Economic Times*, 2010). Child care is observed to be the biggest barrier in raising women participation at higher positions in the sector. The same challenge was exhibited during a telephonic conversation with an ex BPO employee, who was a promising employee of a reputed BPO. In the words of the respondent, "After completing my maternity leave of 3 months I resumed to work leaving my child with her grandparents. But within a week I realized that it had become difficult for both me and my daughter to stay apart for more than 10 hours. Finally, I decided to find out a solution and spoke to my manager regarding the same. Within an hour my line manager arranged a meeting with Vice President, Assistant Vice President and HR. After a discussion they granted me unpaid leave of 3 months on the basis of my written promise to resume to work on a specific date. But after 3 months also the challenge was the same and I decided to put an end to my work".

Maternity leave also may work as a hindrance in their professional progress and personnel advancement as many women find it hard to cope up for the loss of learning process and working experience during their maternity leave period. In their professional life, due to the rapid changes in technology, employees need to keep themselves in a row with the new technological developments. Hence, the gap or interruptions in woman's career due to child birth or child bearing forced her to be lag behind and thus have adverse impact particularly on her professional growth.

In re-entering office after child birth, women get trouble in getting promoted. For example, one of the interviewed employees refused her promotion to the Training Team Manager, as her 19 months old child became her priority. She denied the extra professional responsibility which is bound to come with the promotion as she did not want to compromise on her son's care. Thus, the change of direction of loyalty and devotion acts as an obstruction in woman employee's professional progress.

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<sup>4</sup> Stress-generator factor is a common term in BPO work culture. It refers to those circumstances that prevent an employee to deliver their best potential at professional and personnel levels.

### 2.3. Requirement Of Professional Travelling

Here, it will be appropriate to mention the story of Ratna Kumar, who discontinued her role as project manager at a top IT firm in Gurgaon, where she had been working for the last 14 years. “The issue was not the firm but the sector”, says the 36-year-old mother of two school going children. She relinquished her six figure salary. The job also involved a trip to Europe every quarter because her choices ran down to the wire: job or home (*The Economic Times*, 2009).

Professional travel requirements are a big concern for many women who occupy a top position in an organisation. At higher positions, frequent professional travel is an inevitable part of the work profile and an employee simply cannot stay away from such responsibilities. For a married woman, especially with children, frequent travel disorganizes her personnel life and children's upbringing. 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. Thus, there are examples of hundreds of Ratna Kumar who do not hesitate to give up bright career in order to lead a smooth personnel life.

### 2.4. Relocation

**Table 1.1. Top Reasons for Leaving Organisation**

Woman	Man	Common
Marriage	Better job profile	Growth opportunities
Family/children	Better compensation	Education
Relocation		

Source: Mercer-NASSCOM Gender Inclusivity In India: Building Empowered organisation study, 2008

Another factor that affects women's careers in BPO sector is the husband's career (Murty et.al, 2012:75). The top reasons for men quitting organisations are to get better job profile, better offers or growth opportunities; on contrary women usually leave their job when they get married, due to family responsibilities, childcare and due to relocation specially when the husband moves (See Table 1.1). An interviewed employee, who had six years BPO work experience moved to Delhi from Pune as her husband got better professional opportunities in Delhi. While asking about her future work plan over the phone, she said, "I was working as a Process Trainer and my plan was to join a BPO here in Delhi. But now I am expecting my twins. My parents and in-laws are in Pune. So for the next 2-3 years there is no planning to resume work". Another ex BPO employee also shared her experience. In her words, "I had been working in a call center prior to my marriage and continued even after marriage. Recently we moved to our native land as my husband got a government job here in Assam. In Assam, there is hardly any scope for a BPO work. So, I am forced to switch my profession and currently looking for a teaching job".

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. This situation was experienced in the interview of an employee, a Senior Group Manager of a renowned BPO and the mother of two school going children. She found it difficult to maintain a work-life balance after her husband got transferred to Bangalore. Therefore she decided to shift to Bangalore and joined as a Team Manager

(one level lower of her previous position) at the Bangalore branch of her organisation (Field Survey, April-September, 2016, Pune). Thus, 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.

### 3. Health Issues Of Women Employees In Call Centres

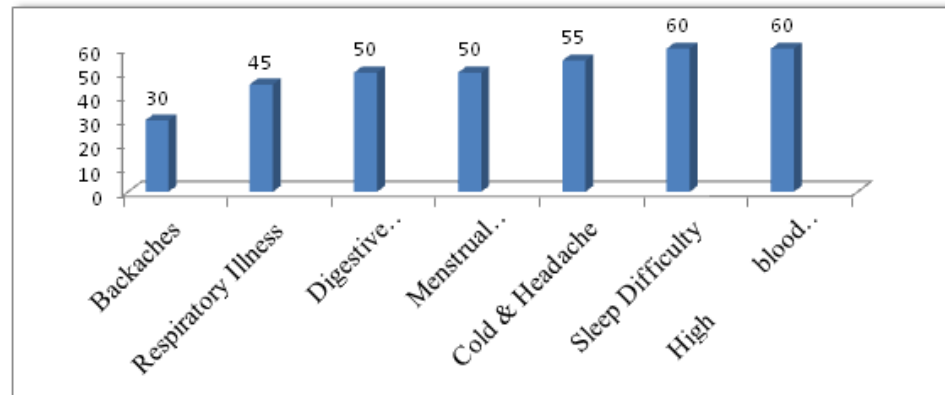
While discussing women participation in BPOs, it becomes essential to discuss the health issues of BPO women workers with especial reference to those who work in call centers or calling processes in the night shift. The calling or voice processes recruit most BPO staff today, has brought little risk to the health of thousands of employees working in the wee hours for clients or customers half a world away.

“BPO workers face heavy workloads backed by performance targets combined with tight rules and procedures, all this enforced via electronic monitoring”, senior ILO researcher Jon Messengersays (ILO, 2010). “This type of high-strain work organisation is well known to produce high levels of job-related stress”, he adds (ibid). Heavy and variable workloads along with performance targets, salaries and hikes, relatively low levels of job discretion (particularly in call centers), loss of identity, odd timings, strict rules, reading pre-scripted conversations on the phone endlessly-often to irate customers from across the world, repetitive nature of work, need of concentration on listening, watching and talking simultaneously, performance monitoring, limited breaks etc together puts enormous stress on the employees.

The Department of Health (India) conducted its own study in 2012, where 1,500 call center agents underwent a ‘bio impedance analysis’. The DOH found that 60% of the respondents have higher metabolic ages than their actual chronological ages, which is attributed to their bodies being under a lot of stress. That means their bodies are older than their real age (Ricardo Saludo, 2013).

A study conducted by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry in India (ASSOCHAM) in 2006 among 272 women working on night shifts found that high percentages of the women were found to have the problem of high blood pressure accompanied by sleep disorders (60 percent). The other health issues revealed by the study are cold and headache (55 percent), digestive and menstrual related problems (50 percent), respiratory illness (45 percent) and backaches (30 percent) (see Figure 1.2) (ASSOCHAM, 2006).

Women do not get enough sleep during daytime as majority of them have to perform their domestic liabilities, family or social obligations and additional bindings. It is not possible for women with young kids to get proper sleep during daytime as children need mother’s attention and child’s demand keep them busy. The sleep for short periods throughout the day is inadequate to make up for a night’s sleep. Sleep deprivation increases *risk* of many problems for women. Insufficient sleep affects vigilance, can make drowsy and body feels tired, increase irritability, making it difficult to interact with family and friends and thus disrupts social life. The night shift also disrupts body’s eating schedule. It becomes difficult to continue with the regular schedule or to adjust with a new one during weekends. Disruption to regular schedule may have painful results and affect health in the long-term. Because of the time differences, the natural order of things is reversed and working against the cycle of the sun and having an irregular lifestyle affects body’s ability for lifetime.

**Figure 1.2.** Health Problems Faced by Women Employees of Call Centres

(Source: ASSOCHAM, 2006)

Studies on the physical, psychological and medical effects of night work comes on a consensus that if night shift work regularly performed, causes negative effects on the health, social and family life of workers (Amrita Gupta, 2012:10). Night shift workers face physiological, emotional and biological problems, based on disturbed rhythmic patterns of sleeping and waking. While hormones and chemicals are produced when a person is awake, body organs are at rest and are at their lowest during sleep (ibid: 11). A change in the working schedule effects all this balance and leads to sleep deprivation, disturbing the rhythm of the body and negatively affecting the concentration, job performance, social interactions and general health (ibid).

A 2012 survey of 34 studies published in the British Medical Journal shows that shift work raises the risk for vascular diseases. Shift work was defined as evening shifts, irregular or unspecified shifts, mixed schedules, night shifts and rotating shifts. According to the survey, whose reports covered more than 2 million people combined, shift work was associated with a 23% increased risk of heart attack and a 24% rise in coronary events. Night shifts were linked with the highest increase of 41% for coronary events (Ricardo Saludo, 2013).

Another study led by Dr. Christopher Morris of Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School concluded that people who work at night have an increased risk of developing Type 2 diabetes (ibid).

An April 2012 study, published in Chronobiology International surveyed 1,206 Brazilian poultry-processing plant workers aged between 18 and 50. It found a higher prevalence of overweight (42.2% vs. 34.3%) and abdominal obesity (24.9% vs. 19.5%) than in day-shift workers. Another article, on the same month available at the Laborers' Health and Safety Fund of North America explains why night-shift work causes obesity. Because they are up when people normally sleep, shift workers end up consuming more high-calorie sugary food (ibid). A study conducted by Singh and Pandey in 2005 on women employees of the transnational Call Centers in Delhi, Gurgaon and Noida has also found the adverse impact of the Call Center employment on the health of the women. In this study, a total of hundred women employees of call centers were interviewed (Amrita Gupta, 2012:11).

What is clear in all these studies is, though the employment of women in call centers has several advantages like attractive pay packages, the health hazards from working in the night shifts outweighs the benefits. Some of the respondents in the studies also considered themselves as security guards who stayed awake all night to attend to their



duties and slept the whole day through, and in doing so they suffer from health problems like sleep disorders and indigestion. In order to keep awake against the body's natural rhythm, they start smoking and drink innumerable cups of tea, coffee and cigarettes, which subsequently lead to more health problems (ibid: 12).

#### **4. INITIATIVES AT ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES**

Shruti Jain, Chief Communications Officer and Global Head of Corporate Social Responsibility<sup>5</sup> at EXL Services, believes, "a pronounced emphasis on internal job rotation ensures employees settle in for long-term relationships with the organisation" (*Hindustan Times*, 2012). The women-friendly nature of her organisation was revealed when she shared that EXL is an equal opportunity employer and has a sizeable women workforce that constitutes 35 per cent of the total workforce. The organisation has taken several initiatives to make the company a woman-friendly. Women employees are allowed to extend their maternity paid leave by one month. They also have a sabbatical policy that allows employees to go on leaves of up to six months, which can be used to take care of different scenarios such as education, training and family responsibilities, she adds. EXL has a policy that allows employees to work in flexible time arrangement or from home if the situation so demands. For expecting mothers, institution provides them the option of a program by United Health Care that covers education, counseling and engagement for expecting mothers (ibid). Thus the implementation of these special facilities can be considered as promising and friendly strive towards woman workforce.

Ajoyendra Mukherjee, Executive Vice President and Head, Global HR, TCS, says that they have always believed in hiring people who grow with the organisation and when women began to drop out at the mid-management levels, it was not just difficult but also an expensive proposition (ibid). TCS has iExcel, a specialized executive education program for women employees, grooming women managers for leadership roles (*Livemint*, 2014). The company also has interactive forums, mentors and women discussion circles that address the aspirations and needs of the women employees (Bagchi, 2014).

The Executive Women in Leadership annual meeting provides an excellent forum for senior-level executives at ADP to exchange insights and ideas, hear from outside experts, and participate in meaningful dialogue that can help groom future women leaders at ADP<sup>6</sup>.

"Women of Wipro" is Gender Equity program that has spearheaded several programs to enhance capability building, capacity building and retention of talented women employees at Wipro (Wipro Annual Report 2013-14). Wipro aspires to create a sensitive organisation 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). Apart from these Wipro has provided day care facility at their large campuses. In addition, if husband gets a transfer to another location, they

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<sup>5</sup>Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to business practices involving initiatives that benefit society. A business's CSR can encompass a wide variety of tactics, from giving away a portion of a company's proceeds to charity, to implementing "greener" business operations (Aluvala, 2013:52)

<sup>6</sup>ADP Press Releases, February 15, 2012, <http://mediacenter.adp.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=853359>

try to relocate their women employees there. As a motivation to stay back, Wipro offers women overseas assignments too.

In order to control drop-out rates of women engaged in child care, WNS Global Services has recently launched a new maternity leave policy based on the employee's length of service in the organisation. Every female employee in WNS is entitled to Maternity Leave for 84 calendar days. An employee working with WNS for last 1-2 years, is eligible to avail 120 days of leave for maternity purpose. 2-5 years of employment in the organisation, enables a woman to resort to 150 days of maternity leave. For availing maternity leave of 180 calendar days, the qualifying criterion is the continuous employment in WNS for more than 5 years (See Table 1.2).

**Table 1.2.** WNS Global Services Pvt Ltd's Business Rules of Maternity Policy

Tenure	Statutory Leave	Additional Leave	Total Leave (Calendar Days)
Up To One Year	84	0	84
One-Two Years	84	36	120
Two-Five Years	84	66	150
More Than Five	84	96	180

(Field Survey, April-September, 2016, Pune)

In WNS, maximum of six calendar weeks (42 days) leave for miscarriage is granted in accordance with the Maternity Benefit Act/ESI Act<sup>7</sup> to female employees.

The Parliament of India has recently approved a Bill granting women working in the organised sector paid maternity leave of 26 weeks, up from 12 weeks now, a decision which will benefit around 1.8 million women (*The Times of India*, 2017). This law will apply to all establishments employing 10 or more people and the entitlement will be for the first two children. For the third child, the entitlement will be 12 weeks. The bill provides for 12 weeks of maternity leave to a woman who legally adopts a child under three months of age and a commissioning mother (defined as a biological mother) who uses her egg to have a surrogate child (ibid). The bill also requires every establishment with 50 or more employees to provide creche facilities within a prescribed distance. The woman will be allowed four visits to the creche a day. This will include her interval for rest. It has also made a provision under which an employer can permit a woman to work from home, if the nature of work assigned permits (ibid).

The Government of India has also notified The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2016 Act on 28th March, 2017. The Amendment Act received the assent of President of India on 27th March, 2017 (*Live Law news Network*, 2017). India's new Maternity Benefits (Amendment) Bill, 2016, is a welcoming note for every BPO woman employee and can be considered as a wide reaching social and moral transformation. The new law entitling a six-month or one-year break (subject to two children) will result in more constancy, more output and more commitment from women in the sector. The amendments have allowed a woman to provide full maternal care to her infant during the most important, formative six months of the child and will encourage more women to re-join the workforce.

<sup>7</sup> The promulgation of Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948 envisaged an integrated need based social insurance scheme that would protect the interest of workers in contingencies such as sickness, maternity, temporary or permanent physical disablement, death due to employment injury resulting in loss of wages or earning capacity. The Act also guarantees reasonably good medical care to workers and their immediate dependants (Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India).

The Bill definitely is going to reduce the drop out percentage of women owing to child birth or child care and aids the employer in retaining talent and promoting diversity within the organisation. By making the provision of creche facility mandatory within a prescribed distance, the bill has offered woman with much needed work-life balance at a time when she is most likely to opt out of the profession. This would surely help in raising women's representation in the workforce.

The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), a joint initiative of UN Women and the UN global Compact<sup>8</sup> can be considered as pronounced initiative to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

The Women's Empowerment Principles contribute on advancing gender diversity in the BPO industry's management and executive ranks and empower women by maximising their potential, development and ambition and also overcoming challenges. HCL Technologies, a leading global IT services company, received the 2014 Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) Leadership Award–7 Principles. This Award salutes HCL for their exceptional championship of gender equality and support of the WEPs, in particular Principle One, which urges companies to establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality<sup>9</sup>.

The larger organisations, like, Infosys technologies, WNS, Convergys, ADP, Capita, Sopra Steria, TCS, Wipro etc have also launched initiatives that encourage gender diversity. These organisations have included and implements specific policy against gender discrimination. The policies are owned by the group Human Resource (HR), 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. On the occasion of launching of the joint report conducted by Nasscom and Mercer on gender inclusivity in India titled "Gender Inclusivity in India: Building an Empowered Organisation", Ms Sangeeta Gupta VP, Nasscom said, "The Indian IT-BPO industry has set high standard in gender inclusivity. Women are a key and vital part of our workforce, and their participation in the workforce is seen as a critical enabling factor for continued growth of the industry" (*Business Standard*, 2009). At an interview with Smita Vasudevan; Amit Kumar, Head of Human Resources, Convergys India says, "We do not discriminate against gender, age, religious affiliation or educational institution, starting from hiring and all the way to the environment we maintain for our people. Anyone who has a graduation degree and with good communication skills, customer-centricity, analytical and decision-making skills, and who pass our recruiting requirements have an opportunity to work for Convergys" (*Dataquest*, 2014). T. K. Kurien, CEO-Wipro Ltd says, "We have always been in the forefront of promoting equality. It is imperative that organisations prove to be equal opportunity employers both in spirit and practice. At Wipro, we make sure there is no bias whatsoever. And this helps us do business better" (Wipro Sustainability Report, 2012-13).

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<sup>8</sup>The United Nations Global Compact is a United Nations initiative to encourage businesses worldwide to adopt sustainable and socially responsible policies, and to report on their implementation (UN News Centre, 2015)

<sup>9</sup> HCL Technology Website, 2014 (<https://www.hcltech.com/press-releases/hcl-technologies-recognized-champion-women%E2%80%99s-empowerment-principles>)

The existence of gender inclusivity both in spirit and practice is also revealed during the survey in Pune BPOs. Similar kind of practices were experienced both by BPO and non-BPO interviewed employees. At workplace fair treatment is provided to women without any bias towards male employees. Women get an equal opportunity to show their calibre in the promotions and performance evaluation processes. During the survey, instead of gender oriented approach, respondents emphasized on the existence of performance based proposition to get promoted, for salary increments, annual increments, incentives, reward and recognition, retention bonus and other benefits from employers. But importantly, concerning promotion to the next level, most of the respondents agree to the fact that, there are few factors like, performance, fixed numbers of years (minimum 3-6 years in most of the cases), management outlook, behaviour, relation of the employee to the immediate supervisor or team leader or manager (to some extent) play vital role.

Still, 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 crèches 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 organisations to introduce flexible working pattern.

Few BPO have broadened job prospects for women by enabling them to work from home, depending on project and the requirement of the work with the availability of adequate infrastructure and bandwidth issues. This policy is an opportunity for employees to increase more flexibility and greater control over life and schedule. This option made women more willing to work for BPOs and thus results in reduction in attrition.

It is mandatory for all international BPOs to implement and follow the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013<sup>10</sup> and Vishaka Guidelines<sup>11</sup> and the rules made there under. Similarly, the

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<sup>10</sup>The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 is a legislative act in India that seeks to protect women from sexual harassment at their place of work. It was passed by the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian Parliament) on 3 September 2012. It was passed by the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of the Indian Parliament) on 26 February 2013. The Bill got the assent of the President on 23 April 2013. The Act came into force from 9 December 2013 (Adv Jayakar, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>The undersigned is directed to say that in the case of Vishaka and Others Vs. State of Rajasthan and Others (JT 1997(7) SC 384), the Hon'ble Supreme Court has laid down guidelines and norms to be observed to prevent sexual harassment of working women (<http://dpe.nic.in/sites/default/files/Glch02f15.pdf>).

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.

The sector provides Health Care Centres for regular health check up. There is also the provision of psychological counselling to deal with stress or other related problems. The facilities of 24 Hours help line for women in distress and Doctor on call in emergency situations are also in place. Separate relaxation zone or rest room or sick room and separate washroom for women employees are provided by all international BPOs so as to secure privacy.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that, apart from finding their employment as a source of income, the BPO women workers consider their job as an opportunity that creates right set of circumstances to make their life better. Along with the large scale of employment, the sector has given more confidence and freedom to Indian women. As the employment in a BPO does not require a higher level of formal education, women of all ages who may not have been working earlier but are educated and have good communication skills can look forward to working in this industry. BPO sector has given them income, exposure and a platform to prove their skill and talent without formal educational qualification and age limit.

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