

Women in the IT Profession in India –The Millennium Scenario

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Abstract

This article presents women's status in the IT sector in India from two approaches: Gender in IT (GIT) and Gender and IT (GAIT) (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1993, Cockburn & Ormond 1993). The former approach highlights the absorptive capacity of IT, and the latter approach looks into the gender segregation and gender sensitivity of the IT organizations. These two approaches generated such parameters as (i) proportion of women in the entire IT sector ; (ii) women's status in the core and peripheral regions of the IT organizations; (iii) women's representation in the organizational hierarchy; (iv) working conditions; (v) training facilities; and (vi) levels of career path. Against this backdrop this article portrays the gender situation of the IT sector in India.

In India, IT is viewed as an important segment for the economic growth, giving rise to millions of new jobs and opening a gateway for women and men with right skills and aptitude to make inroads into this industry (Manu 2000). It may be interesting to note that India has been sought as a port for software production and software marketing in the last five years by the global IT companies. Most of the top 10 software companies, including Wipro, Satyam and Infosys, get 70% or more of their revenue from the North American Market. This trend has generated an acute demand for Indian IT professionals (Kripalani 2001). This IT revolution has also changed the gender calculus in India, one of the world's most traditional societies. In Indian society, the majority of women in the rural economies are still in the midst of poverty, illiteracy and lack bargaining power. However, the invasion of IT is offering new liberties to a small but influential group of women. These women are commanding unusual respect from family members, who grant them "male" privileges such as exemption from housework and a say in household finances (Yee 2000) Women in India make up 31% of the official workforce and according to December 2000 estimates by HinduBusinessLine.com, women comprised 19% of the information technology work force in India, primarily within the software industry (AED 2000). It is estimated that the prospects of employment in the software sector amounts to 2 million jobs in software production and another 2.2 million jobs in the IT enabled services by the year 2008 (NASSCOM 2000). It is predicted that the male-female ratio in information technology jobs will be 65 men to 35 women in the years to come.

The Indian software industry is broadly grouped into three different categories depending on their areas of work: (i) industries in product development; (ii) offshore services; and (iii) onsite

maintenance and implementation services. It is to be noted that both on-site and offshore development are specifically dependent on customer needs and generate new jobs in the service

Sector. The software product is the most vibrant of the three areas and involves a substantial amount of R&D as well as marketing (Heeks, 1998). Survey reports have shown that women are employed in larger proportion in the second and third categories of work. A high concentration of men (39.6%) as against women (21.6%) are placed in the high-end firms that involve software production, while a higher proportion of women are found in the low- end and IT enabled services that consist more of 'body shopping' and 'offshore software development'

An analysis of software professionals on the basis of their job positions have shown that fewer women are in higher-level positions such as project managers (5.56%), consultants (25%), and programmers/software engineers (45.31%) and there is a disproportionate representation of women in the IT-enabled services like the call services (60%) (Rothboeck 2001). Similar such findings are seen in other studies also (Arun & Arun 2002, Kelkar 2001). There is a definite preference for men in senior management positions in IT. Women themselves opt for other parallel career tracks in the IT areas such as quality control, training, marketing and so on. In IT industry where workaholicism is more the norm than the exception, women have had to work harder at achieving a good work-life balance which restricts women's choices in terms of better job opportunities.

There are tremendous opportunities abroad for the Indian software professionals causing greater mobility. The estimated migration rate in the Indian software industry is 38% and the mobility is towards the industrialized nations. The mobility rate of women IT professionals has also increased in the last five years. A survey report reveals that economic needs, social and cultural issues are pushing Indian women into taking jobs abroad. It is observed that two out of five applications that the US-based IT recruiters received are from Indian women.

Studies show that the visibility of Indian women in technology is still low compared to a lot of other professions. In India, of IBM's 170,000 plus technical workers, about 20% are women. Women account for 11% of the engineers at IBM, six IBM Fellows, 20 distinguished engineers and 35 members of the IBM Academy of Technology. On the international level, eight IBM women are members of the Women in Technology International (WITI) Hall of Fame and there is no Indian women representation in this forum.(Newindpress 2003). Though the IT field has offered new opportunities, the beneficiaries are the urban youth. Many rural women communities areas have yet to reap the benefits of this technology in India. Though potential benefits for women from the IT industry are substantial, they are determined by intersections of class, caste, age, ethnicity, and race interests among women themselves. However, there is a positive trend in IT education over recent years. Until the last decade, the percentage of women engineers was very low. Currently the numbers have overwhelmingly increased from 1% in 1975 to 10% in 1990 (IIT 2000). There is a spurt in the number of women entering the primary and the tertiary level of IT education in India. The proliferation of IT institutions, and the growing IT labor demand attribute to women's advancement in IT (Suriya 2002). Government initiatives and financial support from banks and other funding agencies encouraged young males and females to gain access to computing technology, which serves to bridge the gap between the gender groups in IT education and IT employment. Since the demand for technical professionals continues to be

strong in the IT industry, women are not seen as competitors to men. Skills and experiences have come to matter more than anything else in the software sector.

A gendered perspective of the IT sector in India shows that it creates opportunities for women though it also has reproduced gender inequalities seen in the broader fabric of society. Although women are equally qualified and equally capable, they do not appear to compete on equal terms even in a modern 'high-tech' sector. Such a situation warrants a reform in the gender policy framework. Where IT based policies are planned and implemented, a gendered perspective is required. Only then, it is likely that IT policy will help tackle and transform the asymmetry in social and economic power relations, enhance the quality of women's lives both in household and the labor market, and create a true process of development.

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