

MAKING WOMEN MATTER– BEST WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PRACTICES IN CORPORATES IN INDIA

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Abstract: Women empowerment is the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions on their personal development as well as shine as equals in society. Women face various issues at workplace. Although India is moving towards creating more empowered workplaces for women, some facts and figures can be really alarming. Various agencies like the United Nations, Government of India have put down policies, schemes and guidelines for women empowerment at workplace. Referring to these, the women empowerment practices followed in some Indian companies are elaborated here. The Indian companies looked at include Infosys, HCL, Tata Steel & Tata Group, Mindtree Consulting, Intel Technologies, Accenture and Fiserv India. It is clear from the study that there are a number of Indian firms working towards empowering women at workplace. However, there is also a need to look at smaller and lesser-known firms, which are also workplaces for women employees. These firms can also achieve the goal of empowering women by following proactive human resource policies and programs prescribed by Society of Human Resource Management.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Workplace, HR Policy

Introduction: Women Empowerment is the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions on their personal development as well as shine as equals in society[5].

A formal definition of Women Empowerment is - "Capacity of women to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognise the value of their contribution, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth"[6]

The concept of empowerment flows from power. It is vesting where it does not exist or exist inadequately. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in development activities. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision-making.[7]

As per the guidelines on Women Empowerment issued by United Nations [8], Women's empowerment has five components:

- women's sense of self-worth
- their right to have and to determine choices
- their right to have access to opportunities and resources
- their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home
- their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally Thus, it can be seen that women empowerment can assume various forms in the different aspects - economic, social and political.

As social values change, Indian women are entering the workforce as seen in the past couple of decades. As opportunities for women in management in India slowly increase, women are entering professions previously seen as the domain of men in the corporate world:

advertising, banking, civil services, engineering, financial services, manufacturing, police and armed forces, and emerging fields such as IT and communications. India is realizing the importance of having women at workplaces[9]. The key strengths[10] of women at workplace are:

- Ability to network with colleagues
- Ability to perceive and understand situations
- Strong sense of dedication, loyalty and commitment to their organizations
- Ability to multitask
- Collaborative work style—solicit input from others, with respect for ideas
- Crisis management skills
- Willingness to share information (interactive leadership style)
- Sensitivity in relationships (e.g., compassionate, empathetic, understanding)
- Behaving in a gender-neutral manner Now when we look at women empowerment at workplaces, we can look at it in multiple facets. It encompasses not only economic empowerment of women at individual levels but also equal opportunities at workplace for women. We all expect to be judged on our merits at work—to be recognized for our accomplishments and our unique talents, insights, and efforts. But does that actually happen? When women are considered, the situation seems to be even more biased.[11]

Research suggests that men get more of the critical assignments that lead to their advancement than women do. On an average, men's projects had budgets twice as big and three times as many staffers as that of women's[12]. Don't these figures indicate biasness?

The fact remains that as we move up the hierarchy in an organization the number of women reduces considerably popularly known as the 'glass ceiling'. The 'Glass Ceiling' concept refers to the barriers faced by women who attempt or aspire to attain senior positions

in corporations, government, education and non-profit organizations[13]. The major reason for this 'glass ceiling' is that women tend to put their families as the first priority. The traditional caretaking role assigned to women further impedes their career ambitions and success. Weighed down by the dual burden, women are forced to make undue compromises. Many of them choose to give up their jobs leading to a professional compromise for them and loss for their employers[14]. However, women empowerment at workplace, the issues to be handled are not limit to 'glass ceiling' alone. Women face various other issues at workplace - Sexual Harassment, Unequal Pay, Lack of Family Support, Poor Security and Insufficient Maternity Leaves. Hence, when we talk about Women Empowerment the scope to be considered is widespread.

As per the Catalyst Survey[15] - Women in management in India face many challenges. Studies have found:

- women have to work harder to prove themselves;

- men do not respect women bosses (and prefer to have them as subordinates as opposed to superiors);
- women are excluded from informal networks

Some Facts and Figures

Women in India have received attention right from 1951 i.e. from the first five-year plan. The plans have progressive increase in the outlays over the last six decades of planned development to meet the needs of women. There are various legislative measures and policies that the Government of India has implemented for women empowerment in India which include programs like 'The Swa-Shakti Project' - a scheme for Rural Women's Development and Empowement; 'Swadhar' - Scheme for Women in difficult circumstances; 'Rashtriya Mahila Kosh' which provides credit for Women etc. Statistics related to women at workplace in India are shown in the table below:

Development Indicators	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
* Work and Employment						
- Work Participation Rate (1971 & 2001) (%)	14.2	52.8	34.3	25.68	51.93	39.26
- Organised Sector (No. in lakhs in 1971 & 2006)	19.3 (11%)	155.6	174.9	51.21 (19%)	218.72	269.93
- Public Sector (No. in lakhs in 1971 & 2006)	8.6 (8%)	98.7	107.3	30.03 (16.51%)	151.85	181.88
* Decision Making						
- Administrative						
IAS (2002 & 2006)	535 (10.4%)	4624	5159	571 (11.9%)	4219	4790
IPS (2005 & 2006)	142 (4.4%)	3056	3198	150 (4.7%)	3059	3209
- Political						
PRIs (No. in lakhs in 1997 & 2009)	8.14 (31.3%)	17.84	25.98	10.38 (36.83)	17.79	28.18
Legislative Assemblies (No. in 1985 & 2000)	141 (5.1%)	2632	2773	229 (5.6%)	3838	4067
Parliament (No. in 1989 & 2009)	47 (6.1%)	721	768	80 (10.12%)	710	790

From these statistics, it is clear that the percentage of women working in various sectors/industries in India is very low even in the 21st Century.

A report by Swayam[16], an NGO working for empowering women, says - In no Indian State do women and men earn equal wages in agriculture. In addition, Female share of non-agriculture wage employment is only 17%. Women's wage rates are, on an average only 75% of men's wage rates and constitute only 25% of the family income.

As per a report on Women in the Labour Force in India by Catalyst[17] - a non-profit organization for women, says:

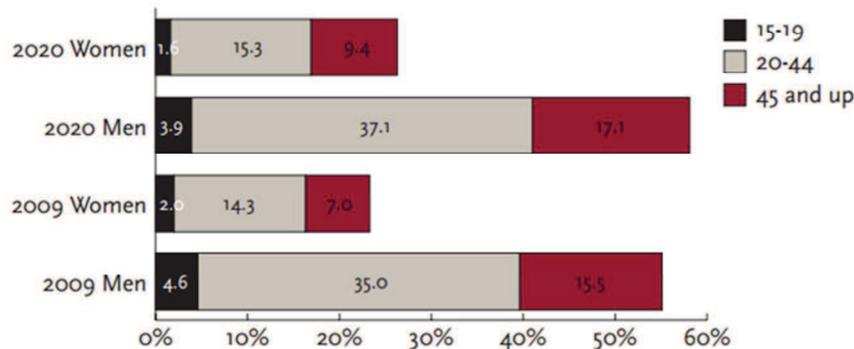
- In 2009-2010, women were 26.1% of all rural workers,

and 13.8% of all urban workers

- Women are just 3% of legislative, management, and senior official positions
- Despite occupying small percentages of leadership positions, 97.2% of women (compared to 95.6% of men) aspire to jobs with increased responsibility
- 54% of companies on the Bombay Stock Exchange 100 have no women board directors Further ahead the report says - According to Gender Diversity Benchmark, 2011, India has the lowest national female labour force and the worst leaking pipeline for junior to middle level position women -
- 28.71% of those at the junior level of the workplace
- 14.9% of those at the middle level

• 9.32% of those at the senior level
 Based on another statistical report[18] the trend of percentage of people in workforce (% of total

population) across various age groups In India is shown below -



These statistics show that overall India has definitely progressed in terms of women employment but the fact remains that women at workplace still face a number of problems at workplace. Hence, the issue of workplace women empowerment becomes greatly important. In organizations, the Human Resources department is the policy-making authority and has the prime responsibility of ensuring that women are empowered. The following guidelines can help formulation of women empowerment policies in organizations.

Policies and Regulations on Women Empowerment:

Some guidelines for Women Empowerment are listed by United Nations[19]. These Women's Empowerment Principles offer seven steps to guide business on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community. These seven principles are:

1. Leadership promotes gender equality
2. Equal opportunity, inclusion and non-discrimination
3. Health, safety and Freedom from violence
4. Education and Training
5. Enterprise Development, Supply Chain and Marketing Practices
6. Community Leadership and Engagement
7. Transparency, Measuring and Reporting

India has also framed a national policy for women empowerment[20], which is as follows:

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

The goal of this Policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy will be widely disseminated to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Specifically, the objectives of this Policy include

- (i) Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
- (ii) The de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human

rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil

- (iii) Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation
- (iv) Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
- (v) Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
- (vi) Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- (vii) Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- (viii) Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and
- (ix) Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

Further ahead the policy gives prescriptions of how women can be empowered. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001, is an attempt to institutionalize the gains of women's movements across the country[21]. Thus, the crux of women empowerment is that it is rooted in the idea of basic human rights for everyone, which in turn emphasizes on equality for all.

Now after having looked at frameworks, rules and regulations; we can now see how effectively these women empowerment practices are implemented in organizations.

Reality Check – Practices followed by Corporates in India

To nurture the needs and value of the female staff, some top companies have crafted a mélange of initiatives dealing specifically with women-centric issues and are committed to making efforts for the well-being of their female employees[22].

A working document by the United Nations titled 'Companies Leading the Way: Putting the Principles into Practice'[23] has put down some of the practices

followed by various companies to enable women empowerment at workplace. The document looks at 100 organizations across the world and evaluates women empowerment practices at these organizations on the 7 Women empowerment principles stated above. Taking inputs from the document then women empowerment practices followed in Indian companies are elaborated here.

Infosys: Consider a case of Infosys. Infosys is an Indian IT company that puts a focus on gender diversity. It has been said that it follows the principles of:

Principle 2 - Equal opportunity, inclusion and non-discrimination

Principle 3 - Health, safety and Freedom from violence

Principle 6 - Community Leadership and Engagement

Infosys believes in: 'A global company must reflect the diversity of the world it serves.' The workforce comprises of 34.7% women on board and a multi-generational representation.[24] Infosys has established the Infosys Women Inclusivity Network to promote a gender sensitive work environment. It works towards works towards creating a gender-sensitive and inclusive work environment for women employees. The Family Matters Network at Infosys provides support to employees on parenting matters and promotes work-life balance among young parents. Infosys' commitment to gender diversity has been widely recognized and it won the NASSCOM Corporate Award for Excellence in Gender Inclusivity in 2007 and 2008.

Additionally Infosys also works for the women community. In 2008 on International Women's Day, Infosys launched SPARK - a unique two-day event for women students in their fourth - sixth semester from engineering colleges across India[25]. The event helped girl students garner perspective on IT industry, IT business and understanding work environment and an opportunity to interact with women leaders at Infosys. Thus, the initiatives at Infosys show how the three principles of women empowerment are implemented.

HCL: Consider another firm - HCL. HCL is a leading global technology and IT enterprise and is comprised of HCL Technologies and HCL Info systems. HCL is known to be following the principles of:

Principle 2 - Equal opportunity, inclusion and non-discrimination

Principle 3 - Health, safety and Freedom from violence

Principle 5 - Enterprise Development, Supply Chain and Marketing Practices

HCL's 'employee first' philosophy help women succeed at work[26]. HCL firmly believes that fostering gender diversity helps an organization bring in a fresh perspective to an already existing situation or problem and come out with never-thought-of solutions, which in turn enhances the value offered to its global customers. HCL provides multiple facilities to women employees like flexible working hours, maternity, innovative forums to its employees such as work-life balance chats, where employees discuss their personal/work related issues. HCL has special blog for women named

'BlogHer', which is a work-life continuity blog where employees discuss a range of issues affecting women at the work place or in a social sphere. HCL also offers life-counseling programs for women and there are special policies in place to ensure a safe and secure work environment for employees. HCL also hold interactive session called 'Feminspiration' where eminent female leaders from different walks of life share their experiences and motivational messages.

Tata Steel and Tata Group: Another firm Tata Steel is also known to have multiple women empowerment initiatives. Tata Steel is known to be following the principles of:

Principle 3 - Health, safety and Freedom from violence

Principle 4 - Education and Training

Principle 5 - Enterprise Development, Supply Chain and Marketing Practices

Principle 6 - Community Leadership and Engagement

Tata Steel believes that businesses should provide and maintain equal opportunities irrespective of caste, creed, gender, race, religion, disability or sexual orientation[28]. Tata Steel has initiatives such as 'Women Empowerment Cell', which monitors women's issues and organizes need-based training for female employees. It also has a Legal Awareness Programme to create legal awareness for the working woman on the home-front and in the work place. Another notable initiative is Project Tejaswini, which provides women employees at Tata Steel with a platform to unleash their potential, who otherwise would have lost their jobs due to a surplus in labour. As part of Project Tejaswini, these women were first encouraged and then extensively trained to master the art of heavy machine drivers and their caretakers[29].

Tata Group as a whole has various programs and policies such as Tata Code of Conduct clause of Equal Opportunity employer and Sexual Harassment Redressal Committee. Tata group offers an innovative Tata SCIP (Second Career Internship Programme) to encourage women to restart their careers after having taken a break[30]. Tata Groups also provides flexible schedules and mentorship programs to women.

For women empowerment in general, Tata Steel has initiatives such as Basera, which is a Trust for Women Empowerment, which is targeted at the wives and daughters of employees. It has the SAFE (Safety Awareness for Everyone) initiative which aims at creating awareness about safety for the masses in its areas of operations. It also has an Employability Training Programmes to provide training in driving, nursing etc. for rural and tribal women.

Other Firms

Other firms in India which are known for their women empowerment practices are:

Fiserv India- which is a leading global technology provider serving the financial services industry. It focuses on improving the work-life quality of their female employees through various flexi-time arrangements and work from home option on need. It

also provides extended maternity leave to strike a balance in their family and work life[31].

Yet another firm **Intel Technologies** conducts career-development workshops aimed particularly at retaining its most at-risk populations - mid-level female engineers. Intel has programs such as the Global Diversity & Inclusion (GD&I) Team, Intel Women's Leadership Council (IWLC) and Women at Intel Network (WIN) which try to make Intel a great place to work for women. These programs help women strike a perfect work-life balance[32].

India Today has reported five best places for women to work in India[33] which include Mindtree Consulting, Ernst and Young, Infosys, Accenture and Silver Spark Apparels. Talking about some of these companies - **Mindtree Consulting** started as an IT firm but now provides services such as Banking, Capital markets, Consumer services, Media and entertainment, Travel, Hospitality and Logistics. Mindtree has Toddlers Park, a day-care centre, and an infrastructural facility, called Baby's Day Out, from where mothers can work while taking care of their child. Special leaves are granted by Mindtree for maternity, caring for dependent family members etc.

Accenture has a formal community of women employees, called Vahini, to bring about inclusiveness in the organisation, and make them good parents, empowered citizens and fine financial planners. Expecting mothers can enjoy regular visits by a gynecologist and special cabs for their smooth travel. There is also a dedicated 24x7 emergency helpline for women. It also has Women's Mentoring, a program that pairs female leaders with Accenture leadership mentors, employees can take advantage of virtual workshops and networking tips to help guide their careers at Accenture. In addition, Accenture Women's Network is an online forum offers women a place to share experiences, advice and insights, while finding inspiration from others[34].

Conclusion: Thus, it can be seen that there are a number of Indian firms working towards empowering women at workplace. The needs, duties, roles and responsibilities of women are special and hence there needs to be special attention given to women at workplace. The firms listed above may be some of the top firms in India. The practices reflect the mature stage of the organizations. But there is also a need to look at smaller and lesser known firms which are also workplaces for women employees. Some practices that are necessary in an Indian context to create better places for women employees to work include providing basic facilities like appropriate washrooms and restrooms, flexibility and sensitivity towards women employees' needs.

Some practices that can help create excellent women friendly organizations as cited in an SHRM article 'Perspectives on Women in Management in India'[35]are:

- Senior management commitment to gender issues
- Career development programs for women
- Exposure of women to top management
- Leadership development programs for women
- Job rotation for women
- Recruitment of women at senior-level positions
- Regular survey of women to assess job satisfaction
- Mentoring programs for women
- Child care facilities at work

While traditional Indian cultural viewpoints are slow to change (and not all women want a career in management), positive change for women in the business world in India is moving forward. Hence promoting diverse management practices and opening doors to women in management—through proactive human resource policies and programs—is one way for Indian organizations to expand their talent pool and, ultimately, their leadership pipeline.[36]

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