



DEVELOPING FEMALE-FRIENDLY WORKPLACES IN INDIA: THE ROAD AHEAD

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ABSTRACT

Gender discrimination and incidence of sexual harassment against women have been matters of concern across the globe especially when they are coming out in a big way to occupy positions of power, privileges and significance at the contemporary workplaces. Female employees brave all the odds to contribute their mite in augmenting organizational excellence. However, flip side of the story is that they are withdrawing and sulking in the wake of insatiable and male-dominated work environment not so conducive for them to optimize their potentials and be equal partners in progress. Hence it is imperative that the organizations start reflecting on the measures to ensure safety, security and equality for their female employees. Already a number of corporate houses have taken some bold steps towards developing female-friendly workplaces. Thus there are a few best practices on developing female-friendly workplaces. But a lot more is desirable as a larger number of companies of all hues are yet to make their first moves. This article provides razor-sharp insights from the best practices to inspire the practising managers who might be interested in this particular theme.

KEYWORDS : gender discrimination, sexual harassment, inclusive workplace, India

INTRODUCTION

Women have increasingly become a decent part of the workforce, but the bias and discrimination in the workplace make them dropout in large numbers (Bhathena, 2017). According to a survey published by Times Jobs, 70% of female employees in India that their workplaces are not friendly for them (Kaushik, 2017). Interestingly, 90% of female employees feel that equal opportunities for men and women do not exist in reality (Kaushik, 2017). The survey also revealed that 55% of female professionals complained of having hostile co-workers, 75% of them shared that learning and development opportunities for them were dismal while 80% of them mentioned about the difficulty of finding mentors at their respective workplaces (Kaushik, 2017).

The above scenario is quite a disappointing phenomenon in 21st century knowledge-driven society. No wonder, growing incidence of gender discrimination is a slur on contemporary and so-called progressive civilization. It is important, therefore, to arrest all sorts of gender discrimination and make concerted efforts towards developing an inclusive society in general and inclusive workplaces in particular so that women may contribute their mite to make the world prosperous in an environment of fearlessness and equity. Leaving behind a good chunk of female employees under duress due to prevalent male chauvinism may not be in the best interest of businesses or society anywhere in the world.

A few companies in India have already made their first moves in creating inclusive workplaces conducive for female employees. However, such endeavours are sporadic, random and limited in scope as well as impact. Now the #MeToo movement has further necessitated urgent intervention to ensure safe and secure work environment for female. But magnitude of success of such interventions depends on change in the mind-set of the people. Appropriate policy framework for female-friendly workplaces in India without commensurate attitudinal change may not work at all. It is important that organizations start sensitizing both male and female employees regarding gender equality and prevention of sexual harassment at workplaces.

It is not at all easy to change the deeply rooted social attitudes towards women. For centuries, we have lived with the perceived notion that a. the public sphere belongs to men, the private sphere to women, b. men are family's breadwinner, c. women are there for raising children and d. household chores are the responsibility of women (Eltig, 2017). As a result, office culture has turned hostile to women, and it purposefully denies women professional growth opportunities for promotion or career development, devalues their contributions, silences their voices, underestimates their abilities, and penalizes them for behavior men get rewarded for (Eltig, 2017). Further, Eltig (2017) passionately observes: 'And the truth is that making the workplace environment more conducive to women's success isn't just some feel-good lefty idea; the current environment has absolutely massive real-world consequences, making it hard for women to establish and maintain financial independence and care for their families (more and more

households today *require* two earners, and that's failing to take into account single-mother households)'.

It is unfortunate but true: people *don't* know how to create workplaces that aren't at least passively hostile to the women who work there (Eltig, 2017). HJowever, there is always a bit of optimism. Bhathena (2017) has suggested seven measures to develop female-friendly

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1. Target gender ratio to maintain certain percentage of female employees in the organization;
2. Equal treatment of all employees that may translate into providing basic amenities like separate restrooms for women and well-equipped medical facilities that suit women's needs;
3. Safety of women employees that may entail provision of adequate security staff, surveillance and security within and around the office premises and transport facilities for female employees who are expected to stay late in evening/night due to shift timings;
4. Female-oriented policies such as zero tolerance for sexual harassment at workplace, mechanism for prevention of sexual harassment at workplace like Internal Complaints Committee;
5. Increased maternity leave for new and adoptive mothers;
6. Well-planned re-joining programs that might help women reorient themselves to the demands of corporate life;
7. Breaking the glass ceiling.

Many of the best practices are in sync with the above measures. Genuine efforts aimed at ensuring gender justice at the workplace are most likely to yield phenomenal dividends for the corporate houses as well as society at large. After all, women are equal partners in global progress and recognizing this fact may be the most welcome step by pre-dominantly male-driven society. Currently only about 29% Indian women work as compared to 82% of Indian men, however, if rate of women in workplace jumps to 40% by 2025, the country can add up to \$700 billion to its GDP (Cardwell, 2018).

INSIGHTS FROM BEST PRACTICES

Considering the importance of gender diversity at workplace, a number of companies have made conscious choices to induct female employees. For example, Pegasystems has set definitive targets for hiring female employees in each department and this initiative has resulted in demographic shift where 30% of the employees are women (Venkatesh, 2018). GE Appliances also prefers female candidates while selecting potential employees through campus placement programmes and makes their lives easier by offering work from home option merit-based promotion schemes. HERE Solutions India has a unique employee referral programme titled 'She Matters' in which existing employees are encouraged to refer female talent for various open positions and interestingly and currently the company has 40% women on their staff (Outlook Business, 2018).

There are companies that set inspiring examples by facilitating return of those talented women who took longer breaks to take care of their

kids. ReNew Program of American Express provides a way out for women who desire to get back to work after maternity and childcare breaks. Tata Communications has a unique programme titled Tata Second Career Internship Programme to enable female employees to join the organization after a long break with multiple choices as to when they desire to start working, where they wish to work and which project they intend to get involved with. They are also allowed to set their own pace of work. Besides, Reach Out programme of Tata Communications provides a networking and peer-learning platform for female employees. 'Intuit Again' programme of Intuit India aims at helping female employees who desire to come back after career breaks by way of identifying roles in line with their competencies (Outlook Business, 2018). MomEY is an interesting program of EY India that ensures employment for working mothers who take breaks to look after their kids within five years of their leaving company and they are provided with maternity coaching and transitional support (Tripathi, 2017).

Accenture provides 22 weeks' paid leaves as maternity benefit and 4 weeks paid leaves if a woman employee falls ill due to pregnancy while female employees adopting children are entitled to 8 weeks' paid leave (Tripathi, 2017). Inorbit Mall helps the expectant mothers among their staff by way of two interesting programmes viz. Anchal that provides for additional transport allowance as well as flexible working hours and Saheli that keeps them updated on any development taking place at work during maternity breaks (Venkatesh, 2018). Besides, the company also has a range of policies revolving around training, leadership development, grievance redressal and child care support (Venkatesh, 2018) that make Inorbit Mall a nice place to work for female employees. PayPal India supports expectant mothers in terms of cab fares to commute to office during third trimester (Venkatesh, 2018). SAP Labs India has Run Mummier buddies (volunteers) who stay in touch with new mothers so that when they come back to join the office, they do not feel left out. Kronos has a mentoring programme for female employees returning to organization after maternity breaks. Interestingly, Jones Lang Lasalle Property Consultants (India) organizes a welcome party for female employees returning to job after maternity break (Outlook Business, 2018).

Women, even when they perform at the highest levels, are more likely to get passed over for promotion due to implicit bias, the sense that women "aren't as good" at leadership (Eltig, 2017). Career Development of women in organizations has been a matter of concern especially when they have to face glass ceiling irrespective of where they work. The issue is well addressed by SEWA Rural that provides one-year fully paid sabbatical for further studies. This organization has enabled several women to become members of the Board of Trustees rising from the ranks. SAP Labs India has 'Strive to Lead' and 'Headway' programmes that help female employees develop leadership competencies. 'Disha' programme of HP aims at preparing women for leadership roles through a structured six-month blended experience.

Marriott Hotels has an ambitious 'Diverse Ownership' initiative which is in sync with the organization's goal of having 25% of global hotels run by minorities and women (Outlook Business, 2018). This implies commitment of Marriott to help women grow within the organization without any bottlenecks which usually comes with proverbial glass ceilings. Deloitte provides opportunity to high-performing women professional to build their profile under senior leadership program in addition to formal flexible work options (Tripathi, 2017). IBM India runs a leadership development program –Tanmatra especially for female employees while Morgan Stanley offers tailored development programme, including orientation, technology training and informal lunch with seniors to its women employees under 'Return to Work' theme (Tripathi, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Workplace discrimination is an expensive problem that also hurts the companies that perpetrate and permit it (Eltig, 2017). Sooner the companies realize this fact, the better for both industry and society. While women-friendly industries such as financial services and aviation have made in-roads in hiring women, India needs to create rapid policies to encourage growth in other sectors (Samuel, 2016). Road ahead for bring in gender parity in India workplaces is still quite challenging. Current piecemeal practices may not go a long way in cultivating a gender-inclusive workplace culture. It is important that glass ceilings are broken so as to make some significant place for

women in the board rooms of all sorts of organizations. If the corner room remains pre-dominantly a male bastion, there can be no hope for any real time change in the scenario vis-à-vis gender-discrimination at Indian workplaces.

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