

# Challenges of Women Workforce in Information Technology Sector in Kolkata: An Overview

Dr. Rupa Biswas<sup>1</sup> Prof. Tanmayananda Chattaraj<sup>2</sup> Manshi Chandak<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social Work <sup>2</sup>Department of Commerce and Management

<sup>1,2</sup>St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, India <sup>3</sup>Wipro Ltd Kolkata

**Abstract**— The workplace has always been dominated by male but with the evolution of the Information Technology sector in the 1990s which has exhibited a prospective employment avenue for women workforce in this sector. This paper explores to furnish a critical perspective on the various constraints confronted by women workforce at the Information Technology industries in Kolkata. It also highlights the safeguard adopted by the Human Resource Department in IT sectors in making workplaces identical and safe for women employees. The paper concludes with a policy recommendation, which if executed, could bring far flung repercussions in emancipating women workforce in Information Technology Industry.

**Keywords:** Women Workforce, Information Technology Sector, Gender Sensitive Measures, HR Policies

## I. INTRODUCTION

The information technology industries have been one of the potential forces for India's economic advancement. It is one of the gigantic private sector employers, which employed 3.7 million people and its contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased to 8% over the years (Avik Das, Shilpa Phadnis, Feb, 2021, TOI). Presence of female workforce in IT sector is higher in contrast to other sectors in the country. The IT sector employs 34 per cent women out of total 39.68 lakhs employees for Financial Year 2017-18 (Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, 2017–2018). However, there are further substantial instances of gender inequalities in the Information Technology industry. Gender disparities of employees leads to echelons and unfairness because men and women employees are appraised differently. A survey revealed that the years of work experience are almost exactly the same for male and female employees at the different career levels (Raghuram et al. 2017). While men and women begin their journey in IT companies in India at similar ages however, men at senior positions are often younger than their counterparts. This demonstrates that women with career breaks or part-time work take longer time to rise. Majority of female workforce working in the information technology industries are aged 30 years or below and are mostly single (Raghuram et al. 2017). A large segment of women tends to depart from the sector after their first five years into the job. Although IT Companies design their HR policies in a way to promote gender parity. Even now, the absence of equal pay for equal work, pay gap, paid maternity leaves; Internal Complaints Committee is a stark reality. Beyond that, the prevalence of glass ceiling in terms of promotion is still visible. This research aims to attain a better understanding of the constraints that women's workforce from various reputed information technology industries in West Bengal have been encountering. Further looking into how HR policies have been devised considering gender dimension.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It seems women employees experience inequality at work place in terms of pay and promotion. While on one hand, women are influenced to the high working performance systems, it is seen that the gender diversity in IT sector is escalating and the gender gap is not yet acknowledged (Kato & Kodama, 2017). Lack of vital facilities makes women employees more vulnerable to balance work and family life. Like paid maternity leave and therefore, childbirth often leads to attrition of women employees. This even instills fear of losing their job in them (Mittal, Sharma, & Srivastava, 2015). Even when they get a promotion, their job roles which often bring greater risk of failure. She has been assigned with risky task with higher standard of performance. She is also less likely to be assigned with a “stretch” assignment and developmental opportunity, which are both essential for promotional opportunity (Shin & Bang, 2013). They also have anxiety of transfer as it might hamper family life and domestic peace (Kumar & Sundar, 2012). IT sector is one of the most widely acclaimed fields which provide prospective employment opportunities for women. It has adopted several ‘woman friendly’ policies like provisions for part-time work, working from home, crèche facility and so on. Most of the companies grant paid maternity leave as mandated by law. While other companies have endowed distinct programs intended at mentoring women and addressing their specific concerns (Bhattacharya & Ghosh, 2012). The underlying factors for women's attrition are conventional gender role, undervaluing of women in traditional communication and leadership trait and organizational culture (Salas-Lopez, Deitrick, Mahady, Gertner, & Sabino, 2011). Frequently working women confront constraints like role conflict, family responsibility and life balance (Salas-Lopez et al., 2011). Women face inequality in the form of pay and promotions (Elmuti & Heather, 2009). Organizational cultures are predominantly male dominated and that can be instrumental as one of the reasons for women's workforce attrition (Marshall, 1991).

Apparently it is clear from the review of literature that there is a dearth of research works regarding women employees and their challenges in software industry in Kolkata and research is needed to analyze it, principally from the perspectives of women employees.

## III. OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the study were two-fold:

- To explore the constraints confronted by women employees working in Information Technology industries in Kolkata.
- To identify the nature of gender sensitive measures with reference to HR policies which were adopted by different Information Technology industries.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

This study followed descriptive research design to analyze quantitative data. Kolkata and North 24 Parganas were selected as our study area. The major IT industries in the city were located under the Bidhannagar subdivision especially in Salt Lake area which is a hub of commercial offices and in the recently emerging satellite city of New Town. Both of these falls under the North 24 Paraganas of West Bengal. Besides, Kolkata was also a major area of the study as it is also a home of different IT companies. Hence, the study was based in two major districts of West Bengal such as North 24 Paraganas and Kolkata. The Sample chosen constituted 100 women employees from 9 distinct IT companies in the age group of 20-50 years working at different levels of hierarchy and with varying levels of experience. Disproportionate stratified random sampling technique was used to select the sample. Respondents were also assured about their anonymity and only after obtaining consent their interviews were recorded. Key functionaries like HR managers from 5 different IT companies were also approached to understand gender centric HR policies and practices adopted by them. The study used a structured interview schedule to obtain data.

#### V. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The following study is divided into 3 sections. Section I describes the profile of the women employees. Section II highlights the constraints confronted by women employees working in the Information Technology Sector in Kolkata. Section III presents the nature of gender centric approach with reference to HR policies which were adopted by different IT companies.

##### A. Section I

##### 1) Sample Profile

##### Analysis of Demographic Profile

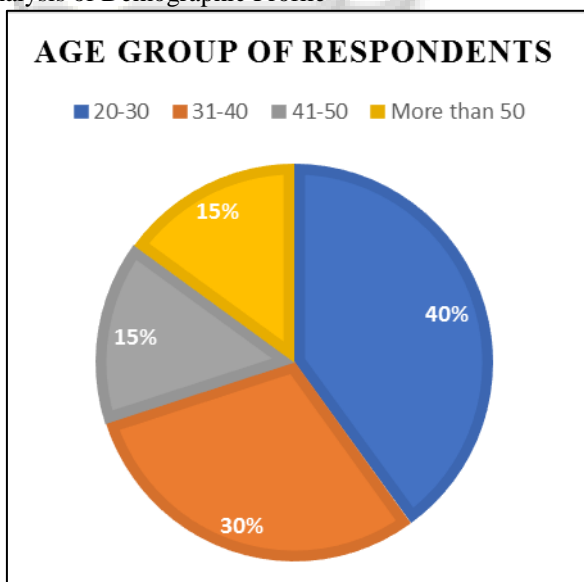


Fig. 1:

Broadly, it can be concluded from Figure 1 that respondents were mostly from a young age group, specifically forming a majority of 70% from the sub-40 age levels, while only 30% of the respondents were above 40 years of age.

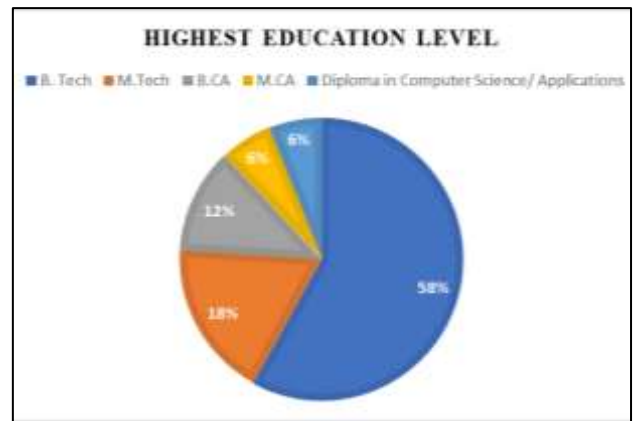


Fig. 1:

Figure 2 reveals that only 6% of the respondents were working in the IT industry having completed a Diploma in Computer Science or Applications, whereas most respondents (70%) had attained an Undergraduate Degree (B.Tech./B.C.A.). The remaining 24% of the respondents had a Postgraduate Degree (MTech. /M.C.A.) as their highest education level.

##### 2) Analysis of Family Profile

The numbers of married vs. single/never married respondents shows an equal distribution, where both categories have a 47% presence, while 6% of the respondents were either divorced or separated from their partners. Of the 47% never married respondents, almost one-fourth claimed to be involved in live-in relationships with their partners.

Among married respondents, 40% women did not have any child of their own. Of the remaining women, 40% had only one child, 42% reported to having two children, and the remaining 18% had more than two children.

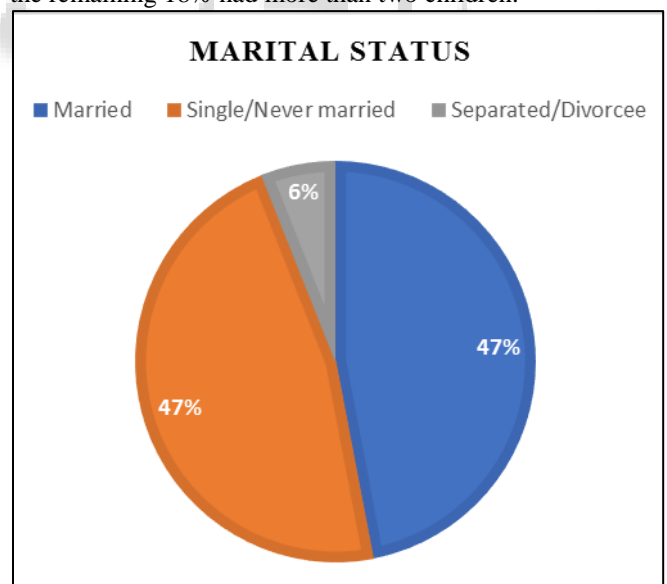


Fig. 3:

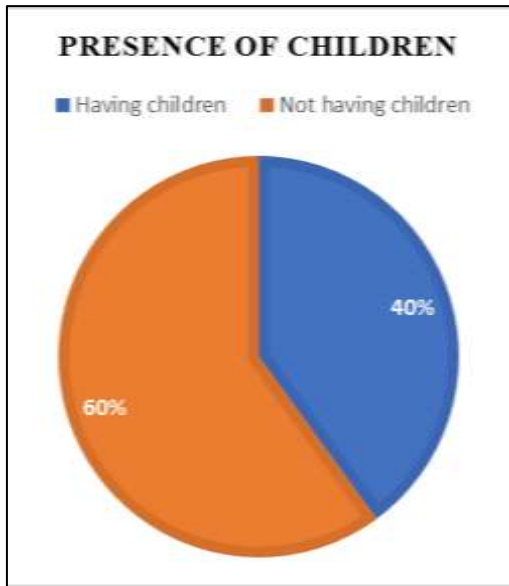


Fig. 4:

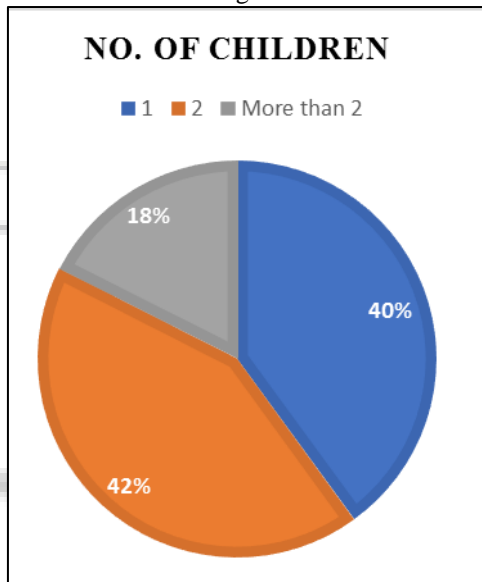


Fig. 5:

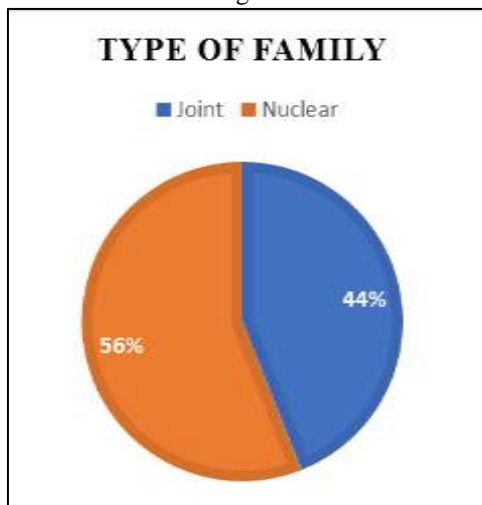


Fig. 6:

The insights from the respondents' family/social profile reveals that a majority of 56% of the respondents was

from nuclear families, while the remaining 44% said to have belonged from a joint family background.

### 3) Analysis of Employment Profile

Our respondents represented 9 companies having their offices in Kolkata. The representation was balanced, and mostly obtained from IT majors such as Wipro, TCS, Accenture, and so on. On the other hand, a few respondents were from relatively smaller companies/startups such as Impact IT Pvt. Ltd. and Telematis Global Solution.

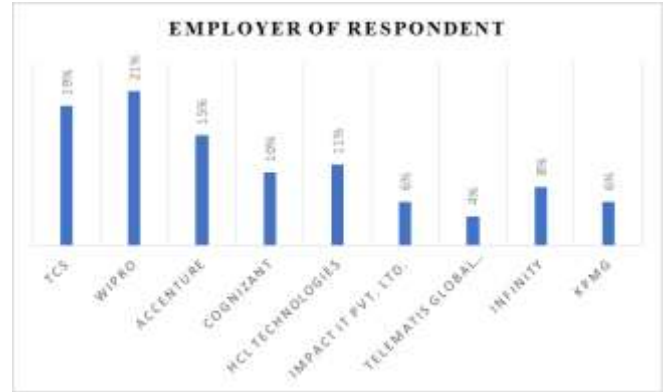


Fig. 7:

72% of our respondents were in regular employment, while the remaining 28% served in contractual roles. There were mixed job roles among these respondents, with maximum representation of 32% from the 'Software Developer' profile, followed by the 'Customer Service Executive' profile (with 19% representation) which generally caters to the BPO segment. Analysts comprised of 23% of our respondents. Remaining 26% of our respondents were either 'System Architects' or 'Project Managers'.

From a hierarchical standpoint, 18% of our respondents identified themselves as entry level staff, 44% were middle level operatives, whereas 38% belonged to the management cadre.

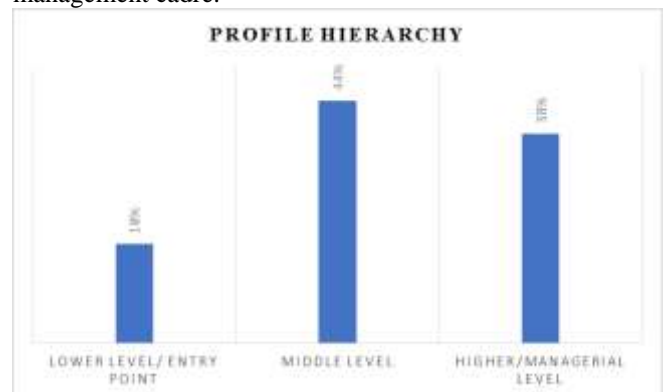


Fig. 8:



Fig. 9:

The work experience of our respondents was varied across levels, with 1-3 years as the modal category, followed by senior and experienced personnel representing 25% of our respondents. The remaining levels had a 13-16% representation each in our sample.

## B. Section II

### 1) Constraints Confronted by Women Employees

#### a) Key Findings from HR Commentary

A number of HR Managers were approached by us to share their views on the subject of challenges faced by women at the workplace.

A section of the manager respondents was of the opinion that IT, being a technical sector is characterized by challenges, and that holds irrespective of gender of the employees. A contrarian view from another section of HR Managers acknowledged the daily struggle faced by women in balancing their work and family lives. They further added that female employees have been seen effectively managing both the dimensions of their lives.

An attempt was made to know about the perspective of HR Managers on gender neutrality when determining positions of executives/high managerial positions. It was seen that all the key informants were positive in this regard. They held an identical view and stated that when determining promotion at their company or when there is a need of promoting someone to executive or some senior level positions, equality is maintained and only the most deserving candidate is given this position irrespective of one's gender. Some HR managers felt that their women workforce was more sincere and self-motivated towards their work than their male counterpart. This was further supported by another observation made by the HR managers that female employees were found to outperform their male counterparts, and that most of the 'Employee of the Month', 'Best Employee', 'Stand Out Performer' and other labelled recognitions as a part of the performance appraisal system are bagged by female employees of the company. Most of the HR Managers were of the view that promotions were gender-neutral, and were taking place predominantly on the basis of one's competency and merit.

When asked about the basic HR Policies in their company, we observed that all the key informants held an identical view that their policies are gender neutral and are altered from time to time if any trace of inequality or bias is found. It was seen that most of the companies follow a feedback-mechanism, where the employees are given an

opportunity to honestly rate the policies and voice their suggestions toward improvement. It was opined by the HR managers that this feedback system helped a lot to come to a non-biased gender-neutral formulation of policies at workplace.

With regards to attrition rate, bearing of dual responsibilities and the role of career breaks in hampering women's professional growth, it was seen that the opinions of the HR managers differed from one another. Some of them opined that the attrition rate is not significant while others stated that attrition rate among women has increased over the past few years. They further added that the reason for this increase, they felt, is primarily marriage and maternity and the patriarchal mindset which does not encourage female employees to work after marriage. They also felt that even if women work, due to excessive strain on both spectrums of professional and personal lives, their efficiency level at work is reduced eventually due to which they are not able to rise above a particular level at work. The challenge of bearing dual responsibilities was seen as a major challenge by the HR Managers too. They cited instances where female employees had to remain absent from their workplace due to their domestic responsibilities. Services such as work from home were cited as an aid in case of emergencies to employees to facilitate sustenance of both personal and professional lives.

With regards to career breaks, most of the key informants held a view that indeed career breaks have a negative impact on professional growth of females. They stated that it was generally seen that even the most efficient female employee lagged behind after going on a career break. In order to cope with this problem, the HR managers stated that policies were designed in a way that the females who avail the career breaks have to undergo a training after rejoining where they are given a boost to cope with the workload and work stress and how to overcome them and work efficiently. Moreover, they are constantly motivated to work harder.

Altogether it was seen that the HR Managers were of the opinion same as the employees regarding the HR Policies being gender neutral. They focused on the challenges and how their policies help to reduce these challenges and make working for women in their company easier.

b) Key Findings from Women Employees' Perspective  
Our respondents were asked about their opinion on various kinds of workplace challenges specifically across 7 categories as mentioned in the diagram below. While the presence of every type of challenge was ruled out by a majority of the respondents in each case, there were variations in the percentages of respondents who felt the presence of each type of challenge.

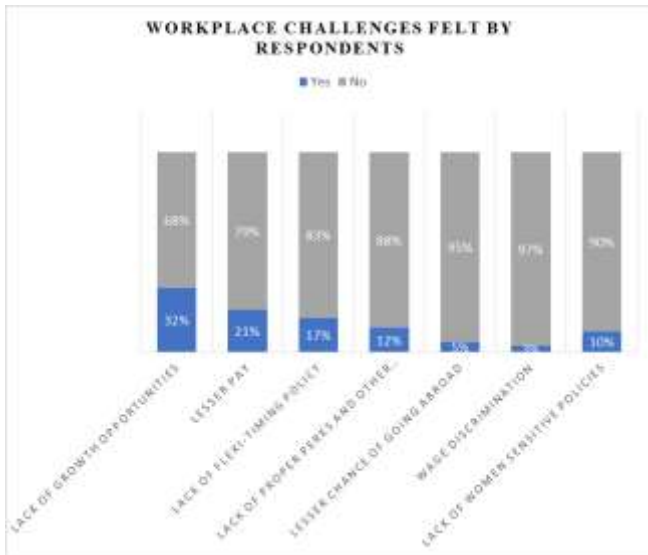


Fig. 10:

Across categories, it was found that the biggest challenge was faced by respondents (32%) in terms of lack of growth opportunities, followed by 21% who felt they were underpaid, and 17% who felt that there a lack of flexible work hours. Gender-centric discrimination related challenges such as wage discrimination and lack of women-sensitive policies were among the least ranked challenges as per our findings (3% and 10% respectively).

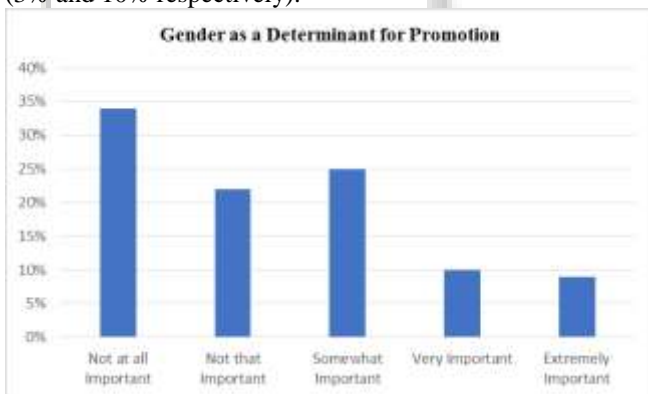


Fig. 11:

From the viewpoint of promotions and career progression, there were concerns raised by 19% respondents who felt that gender either played a very important or an extremely important role in determining promotion. However, a majority (56%) of the respondents did not view gender as a significant determinant of promotion.



Fig. 12:

On the subject of attrition and attrition rates, only 42% of our respondents felt that a higher attrition rate is seen among women in the IT Sector of Kolkata. When asked to share their views on factors driving turnover in the women workforce, the extent to which our respondents felt workplace related challenges (such as night-shifts, travel, workload, and inconsistent/irregular working hours) drove attrition among women employees was limited in the range of 4% to 17%, while family related concerns (such as childcare, marriage, and domestic responsibilities) were among the higher rated drivers in the range of 9% to 23%. Hence, more respondents attributed family-related concerns to women attrition over workplace challenges.

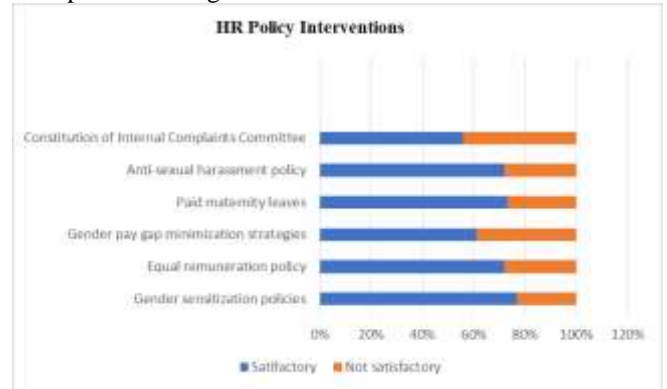


Fig. 13:

On the issue of gender-based policy initiatives taken by the employer keeping in mind the interests of women employees, responses were sought on the satisfaction level of our employee respondents on the effective presence and execution of policy interventions towards areas such as gender sensitization, equal pay, maternity leaves, anti-sexual harassment, and constitution of Internal Complaints Committee. The results revealed that more than 60% respondents felt that there were adequate HR policy initiatives in each category, with the only exception with regards to the constitution of Internal Complaints Committee, which as per the survey response was found satisfactorily aged by 56% of the respondents.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Information Technology industries can generate an enabling and women-friendly workspace that can address constraints of female employees with the right will and resources. Flexible schedule is crucial to women with care giving obligations. Specific measures such as flexi working hours options, work from home, transportation, accommodation facilities etc. to be adopted as a vital element of gender centric policies. It should have a certain amount of flexibility pertaining to the interests of pregnant women and lactating mothers. Provision of crèches to be ensured. Reasons for female employee's absenteeism from the workplace should be assessed and addressed prior so that this factor does not come in between when determining their promotion to higher positions at the workplace. Feedbacks to be focused on their strengths to accelerate improvement. Companies should introduce programs exclusively for mentoring women employees and addressing their specific difficulties. Mere presence of gender centric measures like equal remuneration, gender pay gap minimization, paid maternity leaves are not

sufficient unless the companies effectively implement them. The industries need to adhere to all the statutory provisions made by the government for women without fail. Open to offer relocation to the city of their choice (where spouse/parents stay). Presence of the Internal Complaints Committee should be made mandatory. Moreover, organizational policies such as the facility of parental leave, medical leave, equal wages, fair method of promotion, equal opportunities, no discriminatory culture, providing of right opportunities and environment should be an essential component of every IT industry.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The above discussion gave us a fair idea on the challenges confronted by working women in the IT Sector in Kolkata. It was observed that a majority of the respondents felt challenges emanating from domestic responsibilities outweighed workplace-specific challenges. Career progression was not found to be a gender-centric issue as per the view of a majority of our respondents. However, domestic responsibilities bearing a higher incidence on women over men seemed to pose a limiting factor. It was observed that the primary challenge for the women in the Kolkata-based IT Sector was the lack of opportunities for professional enhancement and lesser pay in relation to the workload. One major reason behind this could be attributed to the fact that the IT Sector employs the workforce in a bulk for entry level works but the managerial or high-level work have limited seats and positions and hence most of the employees' professional enhancement remains stagnant. Even attrition rates were attributed by our employee respondents to challenges emanating from their family and domestic constraints to a greater degree than workplace issues.

Another dimension this study set out to address was the nature of gender centric approach with reference to HR policies which were adopted by different IT sector companies. The preceding discussions suggest, in this regard, that the HR policies and practices among the sample workplaces were responsible for both creation and maintenance of Women Equality at the workplace as suggested by Joan Acker (2006). Gender-based disparities are always found to exist despite having numerous plans and policies to maintain gender equality and achieve goals of the organization by giving equal treatment to all its employees regardless of their gender. Gaining an idea from the secondary data and previous research it was seen that gender inequalities especially in relation to women do exist in various forms even in the most developed nations too.

However, a majority of respondents expressed satisfaction with women-centric interventions of their respective HR functions. The HR Managers were also partly appreciative of the daily challenges faced by women in balancing their roles between family and work, and were of the view that women employees were as efficient as their male counterparts, if not more. The HR Managers cited the importance they place on having women-centric policies. Altogether, it was seen that the HR Managers were of the opinion same as the employees regarding the HR Policies being gender neutral. They focused on the challenges and

how their policies help to reduce these challenges and make working for women in their company easier.

However, the absence of, or dissatisfaction among female employees, as regards the constitution of the Internal Complaints Committee could be seen as a noteworthy departure from the general belief in and satisfaction with the women-centric HR Policies in workplaces among at least 60% of our respondents.

## VIII. AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study was carried out during pandemic. Hence, the sample size was small and scope of the study was focused on only Kolkata, West Bengal. Qualitative methods that would have aided to assess various dimensions of the phenomenon under the study were not carried out.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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