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A Study of Managing Stress among Women Employees in BPO Sector in India

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Abstract: Industries including BPO were at first somewhat slow in recognizing the significance of the demographic shift. Women made their way into the corporate workforce, but without priority of full development of their talents and rise for leadership positions. But in the past ten years, especially since 2003-2004, corporate interest has been changed about 'Gender – Diversity'. Initiatives are being taken which aimed at capitalization of 'Female Talent Pool' which is easily available and who are eager to accept the challenge. Globalization of economy have forced our corporate workforce to concern more in winning the 'War for talent' and India's educated professional women are a significant asset that should no longer be undervalued and under-utilized. This paper is based on findings from research studies on Indian BPO Industry. It provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities facing by professional women in India. Changing social expectations both at work and at home have made this more complex. Here discussion is about what changes are required to manage stress among women and what is being done to get the best practices for BPO industry in India. Paper highlights the coping strategies that can be selected to further continue corporate journey to gender inclusion and the advancement of women in the organizations

I. INTRODUCTION

Stress is a wide phenomenon as it seems to have universal spread. Stress exists in human beings, animals and even in metals. Stress is also related with providing quality services

to human beings depend upon their stress levels. However, the present study is related to women stress with special focus on the work stress in BPO sector in India. Stress is complex and often misunderstood. The Indian BPO industry known as BOSS- Burn Out Stress Syndrome., which is seen commonly among women working in this sector. Technological and regulatory changes in the BPO sector in India created a sharp and fairly sudden increase in the demand for female workers, Therefore stress among women employees in BPO industry is a contemporary issue to discuss and to hit upon on elucidation of this problem.

Hans Selye, defines stress in General Adaptation Syndrome which consists of three phases:

A. Alarm Reaction
B. Resistance
C. Exhaustion

Stress has become a major concern of the modern times as it can cause harm to employee's health and performance. In the contemporary world, women no longer lag behind in terms of career. It has been noticed that BPO is one of the industry , which has witnessed high growth for women and helped them more. However, even today women are expected to do multi tasking. Technological and regulatory changes in the BPO sector in India created a fairly sudden increase in the demand for female workers. Recent Data

from official Government of India and private industry sources.)But the Dataquest survey reveals that in the career pyramid, women are clustered in the bottom hierarchy. Even the few women who have struggled to reach the status of managers, have not been placed in the vital areas of work, but are found in administration .

Specially in case of working women, situation is worst. Though women have equal emerging opportunity to show there excellence in this field but the following issues act as a Stress -Generator:

The term 'glass ceiling' is used to describe a perceived barrier to advancement in employment based on discrimination, especially sex discrimination. It is defined as an upper limit to professional advancement, especially as imposed upon women because women are allowed limited roles in the workplace. The United Nations have acknowledged that women often experience a 'glass ceiling' and there are no societies in which women enjoy the same opportunities as men. In its report, it recommended affirmative action, which is the consideration of an employee's gender in hiring and promotion decisions, as a means to end this form of discrimination.

Women only outnumbered men as public relations managers, financial managers, and human resource managers but not in other field.

NASSCOM-Mercer study on women in BPO which is a six-week study of 40 organizations, with special emphasis on gender discrimination shows, that we are traveling beyond inclusively towards empowerment. The report shows how gender inclusively has its drawbacks for an enterprise. Adequate representation of women in the workforce enhances creativity, productivity and the ability to manage change.2007 statistics shows that more women are recruited at the entry level, but fewer progressing towards the top positions. There is a talent leakage in middle management levels among women in their thirties. Marriage, family, children, relocation and other personal reasons diminish women's ability to reach the top. Support systems are required for women at work. Current measures such as crèches, flextime, refresher programs, and orientation on company policies only scratch the surface of the real problems.

High profile companies like Wipro, Converges, EDS, Infosys, EXL use these cabs which are not owned by them but outsourced. Background check and references are the weakest link . Officials of Nasscom, and HR executives defend themselves by pointing out the measures they have taken to tighten the security. But still incidents have been occurring frequently which shows the loop-holes in the women

In some areas ,classification of jobs are as male typed or female typed. Salary gaps between men and women is one difference in corporate sector, which is generally overseen by the management. Some jobs in BPO sector is mainly male dominated that intimidate women employees. If a woman managed to capture an important decision- making position ,she is not entitled for the independent working. Employer do not completely trust on them for the challenging jobs. They only want to make them responsible for administrative or a pre-defined format of job without any liberty of changes and then this affects compensation packages and salary.

Multigenerational living is still common, the usual pattern being that the daughter in-law comes to live with her husband's family, and is expected to be subservient to her mother-in-law. In this family model, women have little autonomy with regards to their personal lives and aspirations. A young woman moves from being a daughter to being a wife and never has a period of time when she is independent on her own. According to Amite Kabuki, Deloitte WIN leader for U.S. India offices,"Despite gaining higher education, historically, Indian women have faced a stressful situation owing to issues of family support for working women, raising children, and home responsibilities. Also due to late working hours women face difficulties in managing balance between work and their personal lives. In recent times, this has changed with families being more supportive and the concept of external child-care centers becoming increasingly popular, in a growing consumer economy.

Women themselves support the concept of men as a leader which can not be broken by the women to make a position in the male-dominating corporate world . Some jobs lend a more to gender imbalance (engineering, IT, etc) than others (banking and finance, teaching, etc).

Stereotypes affect the experiences of women growth, because our culture equates stereotypically 'masculine' behaviors and traits with effective leadership, and women have to constantly

prove that they can lead. These perceptions are even more salient when women try to advance in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as IT and engineering. Gender stereotypes also create different standards for evaluating women compared to their men colleagues. The perceptions inhibit women's advancement because 'taking charge' skills and stereotypically 'masculine' behaviors, problem solving skills often are seen as prerequisites for top-level positions. Gender stereotypes held by men are especially problematic in occupations where women are outnumbered and men's views predominate. This stereotype shows that women have to work even harder to get their followers to buy into their plans and instructions.

Thus following are the factors responsible for women stress:

A. Glass- Ceiling
B. 24 X 7 work Pressure
C. Prolonged working shifts
D. Gender Biasness
E. Social constraints

A 2015 survey by the ASSOCHAM reported significant ill health impacts from the stress of balancing a work life of long hours and deadline pressures with daily home responsibilities

which still fall largely on the shoulders of women. Hossfeld (1990) offered the 'triple shift' whereby women are involved in paid labor in the formal sector, paid labor in the informal sector, and the uncompensated labor associated with their personal households..A survey conducted by the National Sleep Foundation of America shows that women who do night shifts do not just miss out on family time but can expose themselves to medical problems related to lack of sleep. The physiological, emotional and biological needs of a woman are based on a rhythmic pattern of sleeping and awakening. A Survey conducted by Dr Gauravi Mishra Consultant, Tata Memorial Hospital, Bombay revealed that smoking among women employees in the BPO and media sector is on the rise. The study conducted during a period of one year on 800 employees between four BPO units, found that 8% of BPOs' women employees were smokers , this new culture has made an adverse effect on the natural reproductive power of the women . Excessive stress and late marriages are the two main reason of today's major gynecological problems among women. BPOs' independent life is providing them an attractive living but is failing to provide them a balanced life.

There are some psychological differences in regard to how problems are dealt with and emotional perceptions and reactions which may relate to their hormones. Women start out very energetic in the morning, but towards evening when they return home and they find that the family too is waiting for her to sort out their problems, that is when she loses her temper.

Studies found that different parts of the brain activate in different gender with performance-related stress, says J.J. Wang, professor, Neurology, Stress responses may be fundamentally different in each gender, sometimes characterized as 'FIGHT or FLIGHT' in men and 'TEND and BEFRIEND' in women. Thirty-two healthy people received (functional MRI) scans .In men, it was found that stress was associated with increased CBF in the right prefrontal cortex and CBF reduction in the left orbit frontal cortex. Thus stress responses are different so, different strategies are required to de-stress and unwind women employees.

Despite a common assumption that equalitarian households are Gender Matters , many women have to sacrifice their career. Work stress could also result in the breakdown of marital relationships. Difficulties are particularly acute for women with child-care. Thus women are under pressure to maintain their work - life balance. A women has to struggle with the idea of leaving her career to be a full-time mom. To get ahead in industry , a seventy-hour work week is the new standard. These work hours disturb the work–life balance. And employers put an question mark on women's commitment and their efficiency without considering other responsibilities on her part.

Studies suggest that in consideration of women reproductive function, the excessive stress should be continuously disallowed specially for pregnant and nursing mothers. According to M. Orioli, president of Essie Systems, a stress management consulting firm, no matter how healthy individual employees are when they start out, if they work in a dysfunctional system, they'll burn out. NASSCOM, shared the study on gender inclusively that IT-BPO industry has set high standard in gender inclusively. "Women are key and vital part of our workforce, and their participation in the workforce must be seen as a critical enabling factor for continued growth of the industry," said Sangeeta Gupta, VP, NASSCOM. On the whole , the programs and policies which different corporations are experimenting ,reflects the fact that there can be the solutions that seem to work to lessen the women stress. In the past, women often found it more difficult to maintain balance due to the competing pressures at work and demands at home. But today's women ,if given to the proper chance can manage all responsibility effectively with time and task management and some strategies enlisted as follows:

Managers must be given proper counseling and training to change the behavior permanently so that managers and employees can be educated about the origin and consequences of gender stereotype . This training program must be able to guide them and impart skills to recognize biasness and deviation between the oral values and the actual behavior. Such activities are necessary to highlights the causes and effects of gender inequality in the workplace. This would be that first step to change the organizational environment. Education can be the way to reduce the influence of gender stereotypes on managerial judgment. Specialized conferences diversity and this will increase the awareness of stereotypes. Organization must implement different programs that help in breaking the barriers to women's advancement including career advancement programs, new diverse selection panels and performance evaluations schemes whose objectives must be to speed unambiguous environment.

Mentoring sessions must be designed and run by female heads to advise about time – management at home and office. Importance of time management must be taught to them. Planning and distribution of work is required to finish all essential task on time which can be helpful in stress management . Also, training about to sped up the work is also necessary .They must be told to assign task to other household members to lessen domestic overload which had been traditionally the wives concern in Indian society. The key to work life balance lies in time- management and setting realistic goals. Thus these mentoring sessions will help women about their career growth stability and to reduce stress from their life.

It is the management responsibility to change such environment in the firm and opportunities must be provided to the women to perform as a successful leader. Though professional / leadership skills of women needs to upgrade, thus training must be organized

by management , these programs will help women working in BPO to fulfill criteria for the empowerment of women . Women stereotype mentality that they cannot compete with males in certain fields is an impediment. Women must accept that if they want equal opportunity ,they need to perform equally. Women have natural strength about emotional sensing of the situation and association with the people informally which can be useful in getting willing acceptance of subordinates. Organization needs to create a nurturing environment for women.

Management must provide women career counseling programs and higher education provision along with the job, This will help them to have a definite career path and higher opportunity in their jobs. Such programs will also change their conventional mind set that they are second earning member of family and there is no requirement of upgrading themselves. Small groups must be framed and coordinators or mentors of groups must be designated who can interact with the employees informally and can understand the problems of group members by intermingling with them and this will help employees to distress by sharing their problems and finding solutions.

Security of BPO women employees requires a serious attention from management and Industry, Society and the Police. The solution of this problem needs participation from everyone and it needs to be handle not only at institutional level but socioeconomic level . Industry must provide a guard in very cab for female employees and firm can go for small mini buses to make a group of 15-20 people traveling together. Centralized technology can be used to monitor the speed and movement of cab drivers. Thus new Transport system must be introduced to provide more security to the women employees.

Succession candidates are then presented at 'talent calibration sessions' where teams of executives explain why they have identified specific individuals as succession candidates. Other than this, wage systems must be made more transparent and different component of remuneration should be based on employees eligibility ensuring that all employees' condition and benefits are equal, such policies must be introduced .Also adopt policies that will make it less difficult for women to simultaneously manage their professional work and their family obligations. Employee welfare and safety policies must measures women-specific welfare and safety needs. Anti-discrimination legislation must be enforced ensuring that women have equal independence and equal access to jobs, provision must be there to educate about punishment under sexual harassment policies.

II.   CONCLUSION

The focus on women by the IT-BPO industry is an acknowledgement of their growing role in India's economy. Analysts state that there is a direct correlation between the employment of women and the economic well being of a nation. IT-BPO companies must further refine their policies and processes to strongly influence the participation of women in key leading projects and must identify procedures that can be restructured to encourage participation of women in organizational decision making activities. Companies have to understand the requirement of managing stress among women to make the environment conducive which can retain skilled talented women. Management must provide continuous learning, mentoring, coaching, counseling, opportunities for self development , time management to handle their responsibility at home along with office to encourage them to take higher responsibilities of onsite projects. BPO companies need to roll out today to give incentives to women workers and make the industry , as a whole an attractive and preferred carrier destination for them.

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