

Talent & Career Issues of Female Executives in the Indian IT Industry

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This article addresses the employment and career issues facing female professionals in an emerging economy context and tries to address the limited gender perspective in Talent Management studies. The study critically examines the extent to which women employees face social and organizational barriers and explores the role of Indian IT organizations in supporting female workforce. Through an exploratory case study research, the authors develop propositions with regards to social and organizational barriers, as also organizational facilitators to enable female talent's career progression. While social factors such as gender segregation and gender role expectations affect female talent's career progression, organizational performance appraisal practices and culture could act as barriers to the career progression of female talent.

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Introduction

Talent Management (TM) can be described as the activities and processes that involve the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement, retention, and deployment of those talents which are of particular value to an organization in order to create strategic sustainable success (e.g., Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005; Scullion, Collings & Caligiuri, 2010). Talents are seen as unique strategic resources and organizations use TM to capture, leverage and protect these resources (Sparrow & Makram, 2015; Bhalla et al, 2018). Talent-related issues continues to grow in importance as organizations seek to respond to the unprecedented uncertainty and complexity of today's global business environment and also to the challenges arising from broader socio-economic, geopolitical and demographic changes (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016; Cappelli & Keller, 2014). Organizations are increasingly recognizing the need to manage talent effectively to meet their strategic objectives, and talent and leadership

development was highlighted as key challenges facing both HR and CEOs (Groysberg & Connolly, 2015). However, many organisations report problems in the implementation of TM systems and lack of availability of skills and capabilities was highlighted as an important constraint to the growth of their organisations (PWC, 2017).

The field of TM has grown rapidly since the publication of the McKinsey War for Talent Report (Michaels et al, 2001; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). The early TM literature was largely practitioner based and was not well grounded in research. The concept of talent management has lacked precise definition, and while some advances have been made, weaknesses in conceptual frameworks in the area still persists (Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). Questions also arise related to what happens in TM practice as surprisingly there is little knowledge about how TM is conceived, implemented and developed within organizations in specific contexts.

Recent work has provided some clarity to the conceptual understanding of TM. Two themes dominate TM in large enterprises – one, an exclusive approach to TM which emphasizes the importance of high potential talent and second, the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage (Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Krishnan & Scullion, 2017). An important critique of TM is that it adopts a unitarist and managerialist orientation and fails to pay enough attention to wider

stakeholder groups (Thunissen et al., 2013; Swailes & Blackburn, 2016). Also, more attention needs to be paid to changes in the psychological contract where in recent years organizations' employment practices show reduced commitment to long term employment with employees also offering less commitment to the employer (Holland & Scullion, 2019). The rapid growth of contracting and freelancing for skilled talent in the labor market poses further challenges for TM (Friedman, 2014).

Sparrow et al. (2014) highlighted the need for TM to bring in additional insights from related fields and the growing diversity of research topics linked to TM over the last decade includes strategy, supply chain and risk management. Surprisingly however, the links between gender and TM are not well developed (Ozbilgin & Tatli, 2011; Syed, 2017), and it has been suggested that the social construction of talent has been mostly gender blind (Makarem et al, 2019). Our study focuses not only on the organizational perspective but also highlights the individual experiences and perspectives of female professionals in India IT sector, and gives voice to Indian female professionals on their talent and career concerns in this context. Our study also helps to explain why the issue of untapped female potential still persists in India and in the wider Asia Pacific region and what can organizations do to encourage female career progression.

Our focus on emphasizing the voices of the Indian women contributes to addressing a gap in the TM literature as

gender issues are generally excluded from mainstream TM discourse (Makarem et al, 2019). Our literature review identifies some research gaps in this area and two exploratory case studies are used to draw unique insights into the challenges and multiple barriers facing female professionals in the Indian IT sector. In addition, we examine the organizational and individual strategies which are used to address these barriers in this specific context. Finally, based on our analysis we develop some propositions and highlight some areas for future research.

Talent Management in the Emerging Markets

While research in TM has moved beyond the focus on North American scholarship which dominated early studies in the field (Brewster, Mayrhofer & Farndale, 2018) there is a need to seek further insights from a wider range of cultural and institutional contexts (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries & Gallo, 2015). In particular, there is a need for more research on TM in the emerging markets (Horwitz & Budhwar, 2015; Skuza, McDonnell & Scullion, 2015). Research highlights the more complex and acute nature of TM challenges in the emerging markets (Doh, Smith, Stumpf & Tymon, 2014; Skuza, McDonnell & Scullion, 2015; Chatterjee, Nankervis & Connell, 2014). The growth of new emerging markets and the rapid growth of emerging market multinational companies (EMMNCs) have intensified the competition for talent between foreign based MNCs, local players and

EMMNCs (Ramamurti, 2012). The growth of the emerging markets has considerable implications for TM including an increasing demand for a distinctive type of managerial talent which can operate effectively in culturally complex and geographically distant markets (Li & Scullion, 2010; Vaiman, Sparrow, Schuler & Collings, 2018).

A scarcity of high-level knowledge talent persists in these markets despite the slowing down in growth rates in some countries (Li & Scullion, 2010). Acute shortages of leadership, managerial and professional talent have become a major problem for firms operating in the emerging markets (Dragoni et al., 2014). However, efforts by MNCs to develop a positive reputation as an employer of choice can be problematic in some emerging markets as segmentation and exclusive approaches to TM can have negative consequences for how the organization is seen from a fairness and equity point of view in countries which have more egalitarian cultures (Bjorkman et al., 2007).

The retention of knowledge workers and professionals has emerged as a key TM challenge for many organizations in the emerging markets (Tymon, Stumpf & Doh, 2010) due to the intense competition for talents in these dynamic markets (Tung, 2016). Developing talent internally is often seen as the best option to address both organizational needs and individual needs for emerging market organizations (Ready & Peebles, 2015), as research highlights the problems associated with buying talent from the external market.

Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in senior management positions in the emerging markets.

Finally, managing highly diverse employee groups is a growing challenge facing companies operating in the emerging markets (Allen, French & Poteet, 2016) reflecting the increased level of ethnic, cultural, generational and gender diversity within organizations (Festing & Schafer, 2014; Claussen et al., 2014). While there is some growth of female participation in lower levels of management in some emerging markets such as India, the female labor participation rate remains very low at 35 % (McKinsey, 2017). Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in senior management positions in the emerging markets and an important challenge is to increase their participation in the pipeline which feeds those positions (Linehan & Scullion, 2008).

Talent Management in India

India, a state-regulated economy until the early 1990s, has responded to various internal and external reforms and is now considered one of the strongest emerging economies with foreign domestic investment playing an important role in economic development (Leavy, 2014) which in turn has influenced TM challenges and strategies. India was a key strategic destination for foreign direct investment in the first decade of the 2000s and continues to be the leader in IT

outsourcing and is a major destination for many top companies setting up their IT innovation centers. India has developed global strengths in IT, software, outsourcing and information and communication technology related services and has become the world's fastest growing start up eco system (Thakur & Bhatnagar, 2017).

India is undergoing significant shifts in terms of workforce demographics with the younger entrants into employment having different expectations. The challenge of managing millennials is particularly significant as India has the highest millennials in the world and there is a rapid shift in workforce demographics towards a younger workforce. Millennials in India increasingly seek opportunities for learning and personal growth and organizations in India are developing new TM strategies to attract and retain this new workforce (Gulyani & Bhatnagar, 2017).

For both local Indian companies and MNCs operating in India TM is becoming increasingly important (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Krishnan, 2015). It has been argued that as Indian companies globalize, the demand for global talent will increase, increasing India's importance in the global value chain (Thite, Wilkinson & Budhwar, 2016). A recent review has highlighted the importance of finding the right balance of global and local practices to manage talent in India and to understand the India specific factors influencing TM strategy (Bhatnagar & Budhwar, 2018).

A good proportion of the population underrepresented in the talent pools from which senior management personnel are selected, will lead to organizations losing their best talents (Collings, Scullion & Vaiman, 2015). In addition, performance benefits arise when the companies pursue effective diversity policies combining complementary competences and ways of thinking of male and female employees (Barsh & Yee, 2011).

Women in Indian Workforce

A World Bank report (Klasen & Pieters, 2015) highlighted the low participation of women in the labor market in many countries in Asia which has socio-economic consequences both in terms of economic development and empowerment for women (Chawla et al., 2016). India has one of the lowest female labor market participation rates in Asia, a trend which has deteriorated over the past decade (Klasen & Pieters, 2015), a major concern for the Indian economy and society. Married women's participation rates is particularly low remaining below 20 percent despite economic growth, decline in fertility rates, and rising wage and education levels (Klasen & Pieters, 2015). The low participation rate also affects women with higher education levels. Out of the 42 percent of female graduates in India only 29 per cent progress into entry-level professions (McKinsey, 2012).

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Further, career progression for women in India is different from those of men (Chakravarty & Bhatnagar, 2017) because of the high level of domestic responsibilities of women that reduces the likelihood of their accepting more demanding jobs which would reduce the time spent with family (Krishnan, 2017; Dhar-Bhattacharjee & Richardson, 2018; Adya, 2008; Buddhapriya, 2009). In order to balance work and family duties they would rather not seek more professional responsibilities or promotions (Rashid, 2010). Another significant deterrent to women's work and life choices depend on their safe access to and through public spaces (Mahadevia et al., 2016; Borkar, 2017), a distinctive challenge for female professionals in the Indian context. The lack of adequate facilities in terms of crèche and suitable transport to support women in employment exacerbates these concerns.

Organizational and family support are key to overcoming the above challenges. Nath (2000) highlighted family-parental and spouse-support as critical to successfully launching and progressing women's careers in India. Employers and government agencies may need to play a major role in increasing the participation of women in the workforce and enhancing the quality of women's workforce experiences by addressing cultural, social, and economic issues (Syed & Metcalfe, 2017). Also, it would be important for women in India to be more effective in communicating both their contributions to the organization and their career aspirations (Collins & Abichandani, 2016) which may lead to a more positive

environment for women returning to the labor force.

Women in Indian IT Sector

The IT sector in India is one of the largest employers of women in the organized workforce as employers seek to utilize untapped female potential to address acute talent shortages in the industry. The growing participation of women in the talent pipeline is slowly impacting on women's participation at the board level. Women's representation at the board level in the IT sector at 11.6 % is the second highest (next only to telecom) (The Diversity Scorecard, 2016). According to a report by NASSCOM (2020) there has been a two times growth in number of women at the executive level in the Indian tech industry. The IT sector in India has opened up a plethora of job opportunities for Indians. Nevertheless, challenges for professional women in the sector remains distinct from other sectors (Dutta Gupta, Raychaudhuri & Haldar, 2015).

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The growth of females in the IT sector has been associated with the expectation that IT companies need to provide a safe environment for women when travelling to work and at the workplace (Gupta, 2015). Factors such as long work hours, domestic responsibilities, safety and other cultural aspects hinder women

progressing their careers in the IT sector (Shanmugam, 2017). Some other issues for developing high potential female professionals in the IT sector has to do with the allocation of male mentors to female staff, often not acceptable in India (Woszczyński et al., 2016) due to the high power distance. High level women mentor can be more effective, but the scarcity of the same may lead to missing out on career and professional development opportunities because they lack mentors, role models or access to appropriate networks (Tatli et al., 2013).

The participation of women in career roles has been more accepted in the Indian IT sector as it is a new industry with less organizational barriers to mobility (Klasen & Pieters, 2015). The IT sector in India has experienced acute skills shortages which has encouraged employers to introduce more gender inclusive and diversity approaches to talent issues (Chakravarty & Bhatnagar, 2017). While organizational policies have emerged which have helped change attitudes to women in the Indian workforce, there are still important challenges to enhance female participation in talent pools.

Case Study Findings

In order to gain greater insights into the perception of female talents and their experiences in navigating their career, we conducted two exploratory case studies of IT companies where we interviewed HR Managers and women line managers in these organizations. We also did a content analysis of the TM policy documents of these two companies. There is

little research examining the experiences of female professionals in the context of the Indian IT industry and our study contributes rich data and original insights into understanding the multiple barriers and facilitators to career progression experienced by Indian women in this context. The criteria for selection of the companies were longevity, size and positive employer brand image. Both the companies were well established, ranked in top 5 of the Indian IT services industry and had been in operation for more than a decade and a half.

The researchers contacted the HR head in the two companies and gained their agreement to participate in the research. The interviews were conducted by two members in the research team in English. All the respondents were women. In the first company (Company A), two focus group interviews with four HR managers and seven line managers were conducted followed by an interview with the Head of HR. For the second company (Company B), two focus group interviews with three and five HR managers respectively were conducted. All respondents were females, held family responsibilities and had professional experience of 4 – 11 years. While both companies did not have a formal and explicit form of identifying talent, it was suggested that the women line managers who are good performers should be viewed as talent, seen as an acceptable alternative in the absence of formal talent identification.

The data highlighted that social and organizational factors were the major

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barriers limiting women' participation and career progression in the company. We present our aggregate analysis of the cases based on the key themes that emerged and present our propositions for each of them. We use labels to refer to the respondents for privacy measures (A1, A2, ... and B1, B2, ... for companies A and B respectively).

Social Barriers

The social factors affecting women participation relate to gender based segregation and gender role expectations. Gender based segregation begins well before women enter the workplace which creates considerable challenges for women to integrate effectively in the workplace. B8 expressed how women face challenges of a mixed gender workforce when they first begin employment as the Indian education system follows a largely segregated pattern where interactions between genders are often limited and discouraged. Both B1 and B8 highlighted the impact of cultural segregation of women and men in India. Hence, women may feel uncomfortable on joining the company highlighting the need for organizations to support the integration of female employees.

The gender role expectations and traditional values influenced how women had to cope with conflicting family

responsibilities and professional roles, which placed considerably greater challenges on women than men in India. A dilemma for female respondents in the study was that they did not want to be excluded or left out professionally due to family responsibilities, while at the same time did not want to neglect their domestic responsibilities. Even where women held managerial and professional positions in the company, they were still expected to assume the major responsibility for family activities (Shanmugam, 2017). A4, a line manager, explained how she coped with work and personal life balance conflicts only by taking an extended work break for 7 years when her children were young. When she returned to work, she was better able to manage the conflicting demands of career and family.

The particular demands of the job in the fast changing competitive IT industry context often requires women to work late in the evening which was often seen as conflicting with meeting family commitments (Shanmugam, 2017). Though high paying IT positions have increased the acceptance for women to stay away late for work (Rashid, 2010), our study suggests that late work schedules conflicted with married women's familial responsibilities, and posed a threat to family harmony resulting in a common reason for not seeking promotion (Nayak, Bhatnagar & Budhwar, 2018). A5 outlined the difficulties of managing a team of fourteen staff along with family and parenting responsibilities (Shanmugam, 2017). In India women need to prioritize and achieve a balance between work and family; family harmony is often a priority. B1 sug-

gested that women faced gender discrimination in several spheres including the continuing traditional notion of men as the main bread earners of the family, which was a barrier to women's employment. Women's capabilities were underappreciated in many organizations and they were expected to make a larger contribution to enjoy the same success as men. Women were usually expected to move to support the job transfers of men which reinforced their secondary status in the labor market and had negative impact on their self-confidence and expectations. Our data also suggest that women's return to former jobs after some time out of the labor market is a challenge, and lack of support from the organization, particularly men, adds to the women's difficulty. Our findings support the literature which suggests that on returning women take up low profile jobs to avoid relocation away from family. Managing these tensions is a major challenge for Indian organizations who seek to attract and develop female talent and highlight the need to pay attention to both individual and social aspects of managing female talent in Indian organizations. Hence we propose that:

P1: Social factors such as gender segregation and gender role expectations create barriers to female talent's career progression in Indian organizations.

Organizational Barriers

Organizational factors relate to the impact of work patterns and organizational culture on appraisal and promotion deci-

sions, which in turn impact career progression of female employees. Promotion is based on behavioral assessment as well as role maturity-the number of years spent in a particular role. Though the organizations had well developed appraisal systems, the behavioral assessment tend to lack objectivity and transparency, a cause of concern for female career development. Some IT companies introduced specific policies to limit late working for females to help address work-life balance issues. A practice of senior management approval for female staff when working late was introduced. It was interesting, however, that the women in our study showed considerable ambivalence about taking advantage of the provisions to limit late working. Some women felt that showing unwillingness to work late shifts would damage how they were seen in the company and they felt that being left out of late night calls could damage their promotion and career prospects.

Women showed considerable ambivalence about taking advantage of the provisions to limit late working.

The length of working time required by the companies was a greater challenge for women seeking to balance work and personal life in the Indian context. A3 added how the work time requirement of 9.25 hours emphasized quantity over quality as some employees might be able to attend to the required tasks in less time than the others. The length of working time requirements was a factor limiting the promotion prospects for women due

to perceptions that women spent less time at the workplace than their male counterparts. A7 was also of the view, typical among female IT workers, that women who are allowed to leave early due to family reasons could be seen as less committed and less reliable than men, which could lead to their being offered less work than men. However, some “flexibility” arrangement initiatives introduced by employers such as home-working or part-time working for women, in practice, may be double edged in the Indian context as they are seen as atypical because they differ from male norms. Women taking time out for childcare is considered career limiting reflecting the low value placed on women’s experience in the household. Previous research has noted that from a career development perspective, many women in India are judged not so much on their abilities and achievements but on the assumptions about their family life and domestic responsibilities (Rashid, 2010).

Additionally, organizational culture could be a significant influence on female career progression in India. A7 shared how the perception of quality which often was equated to more hours of work, can limit women’s position and status in the workforce. Such perceptions have a stronger impact on women than men as women are less able to work late shifts and may need to leave work earlier than men to fulfil their domestic duties. Our research suggested that the existing corporate performance policies requires to be adapted to suit the multiple roles required of female employees. In summary, under the existing corporate culture

women who place more emphasis on family commitments risk limiting their career enhancement. Hence it is proposed that:

P2: Organizational performance appraisal practices and culture could influence the career progression of female talent in Indian organizations

Organizational Support

Due to the increase in female employees in the IT sector and the increase of female participation in management, companies have gradually recognized the need for greater organizational support for women in the form of TM policies. Interviews and secondary data analysis highlighted that both companies in the study increasingly offered support for female career development, which could be classified into three types: Inspirational, developmental and facilitative.

Inspirational programs typically consisted of a variety of activities designed to motivate women employees to aspire senior positions within the company. A strong focus of these programs was on balancing work-personal issues. A major part of this were events which involved interaction with successful women leaders, internal and external to the organization, who shared their experiences in overcoming personal, professional and work life balance issues. A key objective was effective coaching and mentoring for aspiring female talents and to encourage them to better understand and manage work life balance challenges they faced. The female high potentials

highly valued the opportunity to draw on the experience of senior female leaders as role models and the female leaders inspired and motivated them to manage these issues creatively. A7 reported that she was highly motivated by a talk by a female leader which led to the reversal of her decision to quit the organization.

The low numbers of females in senior management positions limit the availability of female mentors in the Indian context.

Developmental programs specifically focused on high potential women aspiring to leadership positions and included peer mentoring and coaching, and supports for female development including platforms for women to learn and exhibit leadership capabilities. Traditionally, female professionals in India were hindered in their attempt to obtain mentors due to interpersonal and organizational barriers. Also, the low numbers of females in senior management positions limit the availability of female mentors in the Indian context (Nayak et al., 2018). Our findings support previous research that highlights the importance of mentoring for women (Rashid, 2010). However, our findings highlight positive developments regarding female mentoring in the Indian IT sector. According to the Diversity HR Head, individual coaches and senior female mentors were increasingly assigned to work with high potential women and forums were introduced where female talent can exchange experiences about the gender discrimination and work-life balance chal-

allenges they face hence increasing the role of female voice in female career development. Networking and group mentoring, activities which are seen as important for developing female talent in Europe (Linehan & Scullion, 2008), were also on the increase in the Indian IT sector but more research is required on its role in the Indian\Asian context (Chakravarty & Bhatnagar, 2017).

Facilitative programs seek to provide support, flexibility, convenience and care for all employees but are most attractive and beneficial to women. Many of these initiatives are available to either gender and employment types like those working from home, part-time workers and telecommuters. In IT companies one aspect of this approach was the introduction of family friendly policies such as the provision of day care facilities, option to work from city offices rather than the far-flung IT parks, investment in technology for safety at work and during commute. Information Technology has also made a positive difference through the use of digital services that have relieved women from some domestic responsibilities. One of the women managers A3 highlighted that e-commerce has enabled them to buy groceries and attend to shopping and daily needs more conveniently. Various online intranet forums also provided avenues to discuss issues relating to women's safety, sexual harassment, work-life balance issues and more general issues related to female working life. In order to meet the growing aspirations of Indian women in the workplace, we suggest that organizations develop HR and talent policies

and practices which are in line with emerging concerns of women in the workplace. Hence our third proposition is:

P3: Organizations providing greater support in the form of inspirational, developmental and facilitative programs could create larger opportunities for female talent's career progression in Indian organizations

In summary, our exploratory study brings up important conceptual themes which are likely to act as both barriers and facilitators in Indian organizations. While the extent of these hurdles and catalysts could vary as per the organization, the broad directions could still be relevant for most organizations irrespective of the national context.

Conclusion & Future Research

Despite the increased participation of women in the workplace, one of the major challenges in the labor force in recent years (Linehan & Scullion, 2008), gender issues still play little role in TM discourse (Rashid, 2010). The links between TM and gender are not well developed. Our study of talent related issues for female professionals in the emerging market context of the Indian IT sector contributes to addressing this research gap (Tatoglu, Glaister & Demirbag, 2016) by focusing directly on the voices of Indian women. The study contributes to our understanding of the nature of the gender barriers faced by female talent and organizational initiatives supporting to advance their careers.

Gender diversity has emerged as a key issue in leadership research.

Gender diversity has emerged as a key issue in leadership research (Baker & Kelan, 2017) and is of growing importance in India with its shortages of leadership talent, resulting in women being unrealized in the talent pool (Shanmugam, 2017; Hewlett & Rashid, 2011). Despite the growing participation of women in the workforce in India and a modest increase in women in management and in professional roles, the highly limited role of women in senior management levels persists (Rashid, 2010). Therefore, a key challenge for Indian organizations and society is to increase female representation at executive and board levels (Haq, 2012). The pandemic and the ensuing lockdown and the work from home facilities extended by many organizations are likely to bolster efforts to have more women in the workforce.

Further research is required on the individual strategies which women can develop when pursuing careers in the Indian context based on their lived experiences from their perspectives. This would allow a deeper understanding of what the women believe is holding back their career progression and allow them to tell their stories in their own words. Findings from this research could be valuable to Indian companies seeking to introduce diversity approaches to unleash the potential of female talent (Hewlett & Rashid, 2011).

Future research is needed to explore the impact of Indian culture and tradition on female employment and career progression. The role and awareness of diversity approaches of both Indian organizations and foreign owned MNCs could also be examined in this context. In particular, more research is needed on the extent to which employers in India are tapping into the rich reservoir of the underutilized female talent pool (Hewlett & Rashid, 2011). Previously lack of education was seen as a major barrier to female empowerment but today more women than men graduate from universities in India.

There is a dearth of research on the effectiveness of TM policies and practices in Indian organizations, particularly in relation to the attraction, development, motivation and retention of female professionals. New research could examine the ways India based organizations identify female talent with leadership potential and how women in India progress in talent pools to create a more inclusive corporate culture through balancing organizational and individual goals (Farndale, Scullion & Sparrow, 2010). Further research is needed on individual female talent issues such as personal and career development, work-life and welfare. There is also a shortage of research on the challenges faced by MNCs in shifting their diversity initiatives to emerging market contexts like India (Haq, 2012). The dearth of research on the challenges organizations face in retaining female professionals in India also needs to be addressed, and the role of CSR should be examined in this context as research suggests that employees in

India identify more with the companies where meaningful CSR activities exist (Bhattacharya, Sen & Korschun, 2008). Issues relating to mentoring and networking for female professionals in the Indian context require further research including the applicability of cross gender mentoring, a sensitive issue in India (Nayak et al., 2018).

Finally, our study offers some lessons for practice for both organizations and for women seeking to develop their careers in the context of Indian IT sector. The study has enhanced our understanding of the barriers female professionals face in developing their careers in the Indian context and points to both formal policies and informal practices which could be used by employers in India to enable women to be empowered to expand their professional development and career horizons. The study also provides some insights into the challenges facing Indian employers in attracting and retaining female professionals and highlights the challenges of developing high potential females and female talent pools.

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