

GENDER-NEUTRAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES AT WORKPLACE: AN INDIAN INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The gender-neutral policy at workplace is gaining significance all over the world and India is not an exception for it. The Indian industry is constantly coming up with many innovative women empowerment policies and practices like hiring more women employees, establishing women friendly work environment etc. But today many organizations have realized the need for developing gender neutral policies and practices at work place. The philosophy of gender neutrality is to encourage such culture which is not discriminative towards women; it is one which provides for gender equality and significant opportunities for women progression at work place. Many initiatives that are proposed to help women employees also found to be very effectively working out for men also. Thus policies and practices which were initially formulated keeping women's needs in mind were later found to be useful across both genders. In this backdrop this paper has been developed. This paper aims to present the concept of gender neutrality at workplace. Further the study also aims to present dilemmas in creating gender neutral work place in Indian Industry. Finally the paper presents the gender neutral policies and practices of business organizations.

Key words: Gender neutrality, Gender equality, Women empowerment, Gender sensitivity, Gender stereo typing, women friendly work environment

1. Introduction:

The gender-neutral policy at workplace is gaining significance all over the world and India is not an exception for it. The Indian industry is constantly coming up with many innovative women empowerment policies and practices like hiring more women employees, establishing women friendly work environment etc. But today many organizations have realized the need for developing gender neutral policies and practices at work place. The philosophy of gender neutrality is to encourage such culture which is not discriminative towards women; it is one which provides for gender equality and significant opportunities for women progression at work place. Many initiatives that are proposed to help women employees also found to be very effectively working out for men also. Thus policies and practices which were initially formulated keeping women's needs in mind were later found to be useful across both genders.

2. The Concept Of Gender Neutrality:

Gender neutrality is primarily about fairness and equality to all despite their background. It is a part of wider societal change that is meant to reveal the mechanisms of social injustice and to help with



implementation of true equality in all respects. But gender neutrality is not an attempt to remove gender from people. Even it does not mean that denying the differences between women and men but rather about realizing the differences between them and the implications of these differences on their life time opportunities.

3. Gender Neutral Workplaces:

Gender neutral workplace means creating an environment that enables both women and men to perform. The workplace environment should be such that where all employees irrespective of their gender must be treated in the same manner; they do not feel inferior, superior, less important or more important than others at any time. They should get the same attention and the same space and time in the work environment.

4. Review Of Literature:

A brief review of literature on gender neutrality and literature available on gender neutrality at workplace has been presented below:

According to Stockard and Johnson, 1980; Weitzman, 1979; the deep roots of gender differences are found in the socialization of sex roles in the childhood of men and women. Further their studies emphasize that society has encouraged the discrimination between boy child and a girl child, right from toys that they use for playing. They started rewarding the boy child if he exhibits a masculine behavior and punish if they act or behave as a girl and a vice versa with girl child. Hence this infers that strong foundation of gender stereotyping has been laid down in the childhood of men and women. Sheryl Sandberg in her book, "Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead," explains about the significant barriers that prevent women to occupy leadership positions. Further in this book an attempt has been made to present how a woman can overcome the gender stereotypes that inhibit her self-confidence and aspirations. She, in her book, discusses the role played by the corporate cultures and structures in impeding females to reach the top positions.

Ejaz Ghani, William Kerr, Stephen D. O'Connell, in their article viewed that despite of impressive economic development in India, the gender inequality is giving an alarming signal. The Women entrepreneurship and their participation in the various levels of job market found some of the lowest in the Business world. Hence one best way for the policy makers of India for achieving high growth rate in the country is gender equality and gender inclusivity.

5. Research Purpose: The purpose of the present paper is to discuss the dilemmatic situations prevailing in Indian Industry for creating gender neutral workplaces. Further the initiatives adopted by the reputed Corporates to promote gender neutral workplaces has been presented

6. Research Approach: The study is non-empirical in approach and relied on secondary data. The views and concepts presented in this paper may further help in conducting an empirical research.

7. Dilemmas in Creating Gender Neutral Work Place In Indian Industry: Today most of the organizations are facing a severe talent crunch. The smarter companies are valuing the talents not the gender. They have realized the latent talent of women and her potential hence started nurturing



and grooming them further. But in India the commitment of the management towards gender inclusion appears to be very meager. The various dilemmas in creating a gender neutral workplace have been presented below:

7.1. Socio-Economic set up in India:

Women in India were deprived of many things for quite a long time. During the past fifty decades, the socio-economic set up prevailed in India excluded women from many activities. A woman who is not encouraged by her family to study and work, for instance, will not even enter the workplace and therefore will not contribute to either social change or the economy. India is witnessing the confluence of dynamic forces such as liberalization, identity politics, religious tension and threats to national security etc. These forces have transpired into new challenges for the country thus prompting India to redefine its social norms. India while redefining these social norms realized that if women are not included in this national discourse, any stability that arises will be understandably precarious. Women at workplace have suffered exploitation, discrimination and inequality in India from a very long time.

7.2. Workplace practices: Indian industry became conscious regarding the potentialities and capabilities of women employees thus focusing more organizational sensitivity to deal with women at workplace issues with effectiveness at the ground level complementing the various constitutional laws meant for women at workplace. India is still putting its efforts to bring the changes in the mind sets of the people in the society with regard to women and their capabilities. In spite of all these, gender mainstreaming is posing a greater challenge to the country. There are many reasons for the prevalence of the current scenario because the percentage of women employees working in a particular firm is found significantly low. This indicates that how far a company is actively pursuing a gender neutral hiring process across various work categories and positions. Moreover the percentage of women employees at senior management positions is also found very marginal. Apart from the above aspects in Indian workplaces gender stereotyping is very much apparent. Hence India has to take a long way to see gender neutral workplaces.

7.3. Under representations of women in senior management levels and in Boards:

The concept of glass ceiling was identified 25 years back by Wall Street Journal. Unfortunately even now this concept does not lose its popularity. The strength of this statement can be reflected if we take a look at the representation of women at various levels. In the senior management levels and leadership positions are still women are under represented. Many global studies emphasized that those boards with significant number of women out performed than a male-dominated board. Moreover for many companies gender inclusion is a fad. Though they include women in their boards their ideas, suggestions or opinions are not well taken and respected. Just they want to showcase that there is perfect gender ratio in their boards. In some other situations a tendency is observed to bring more women on to the board



with a clear intention to fill those women quotas but not for improving the performance of the organization. In India the increase in the number of highly educated women is not showing significant impact on gender inclusion aspect especially in executive committees the representation of women is marginal. These are some of the dilemmas in creating a gender neutral boards and workplaces in Indian Industry.

7.4. Self limiting notion of women: These are the barriers which arise due to some personal traits of women which are not very much appreciated in business. Such traits like avoidance of risk, not being assertive, not showing much interest in building networks are presumed to be undesirable for business organizations. Another point to be understood here is many of these traits are not only imbibed by her from the society and from corporate culture, but also from women themselves. In fact, women often perceive certain traits in a negative fashion; very often women stereotype certain traits as unfeminine and thus consider them undesirable. Hence the glass ceiling effects certainly will be on women as long as she herself comes forward to pierce the glass ceiling and climb the career ladder. Therefore in India this self limiting notion of women itself is acting as a dilemma in creating gender neutral workplace policies in an organization.

8. Gender Neutral Policies And Practices Of Business Organizations:

The organizations need not perceive women's issues as women's problems, rather they may be perceived as just as one of the various issues of business organizations. Gender equality is not about highlighting women issues. Hence the concept of "Gender neutrality is a business issue, not a women's issue or a diversity problem. Gender neutral workplace may be understood as creation of environment which provides equal opportunities for both men and women to perform. Few such practices of business organizations have been presented below:

8.1. Project Tejaswini of Tata steel: Tata steel has initiated project Tejaswini, which is aimed at motivating women workers to move from gender stereotyped roles such as sweeper, attenders, servers etc to become drivers of dumper trucks, bulldozers, forklifts, ambulances and security trucks. Women workers were given proper training so that they can perform these new roles efficiently. Moreover in the process, the women learnt interpersonal skills, team building and positive thinking. Ultimately these women are holding a record for accident-free driving and earn more than double of their earlier salaries, thus changing their lives and that of their families, significantly.

8.2. Celebrating a birth –An innovative initiative of KPMG: This international accounting firm initiated a gender neutral workplace practice wherein **an employee who is** an expectant mother, informs KPMG's about her pregnancy and wishes to take maternity leave, immediately the HR of

the company communicates about its various parental leave benefits. Along with this kind of information certain gifts such as a shower gift, a new-parent kit is sent to the employee's home. These gifts also include a rattle, a baby bottle and a toddler-size t-shirt that says, "My Mom Works at KPMG." Same kind of policy is also exercised for expectant dads who are working for KPMG.

8.3. Deloitte & Touche -Training to retain: This is one more interesting policy of gender neutral workplace. A programme called Personal Pursuits is being practiced, where in the company will allow partners and employees to take an unpaid leave of absence but continue to get the training needed to keep their skills and licenses current. They are expected to return to the company within five years. Thus training is considered as an important element of the extended-leave.

8.4. GE India Exports- Practice of Build and retain diverse talent: This Company has initiated a gender neutral recruitment policy. The company has developed a diversity recruitment strategy, including recruiting from specific diverse colleges and most effectively, through their existing employees' referrals. This policy also concentrated on bringing back diverse alumni translating into their recruitment strategy.

8.5. Focus InfoTech- 'Re-join' practice for women and men: This practice has helped women and men who want work for the company but could not continue with the company due to their family or other personal challenges/needs. One more interesting practice of the company is an option of working as a "consultant", when women employees are not in a position to work in regular employment due to family/ personal reasons. This re-hiring practice has been beneficial to all concerned parties.

Conclusion: Creating a gender neutral workplace is becoming one of the thrust areas for business organizations in specific and for the country in general. Hence there is an urgent need to probe deeply into this aspect by corporate India and to assess their internal company culture and practices. The business organizations may take all possible measures to nurture gender neutral cultures. The government has to recognize and encourage such business organizations that are taking an initiatives and conscious steps to follow best gender neutral practices at the workplace. The social agencies should also come forward to assist, suggest and support these organizations in building gender neutral workplaces.

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