

Gender Equality and Career Progression in India's BPO Industry

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Abstract-- India's Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry has emerged as one of the largest employment-generating sectors in the service economy, with women constituting a substantial share of its workforce. The sector has created opportunities for financial independence, skill development, and professional mobility for educated women, particularly in metropolitan cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, Chennai, and Gurugram. However, despite relatively high female participation at entry and middle levels, gender disparities continue to persist in leadership representation, promotion opportunities, work-life balance, and retention. This paper examines the status of gender equality and career progression in India's BPO industry through a descriptive and analytical approach. The study reviews existing literature, policy initiatives, and industry practices to assess the opportunities and constraints experienced by women employees. It argues that while the BPO sector has contributed significantly to women's economic empowerment, structural and organizational barriers continue to limit advancement into senior managerial positions. This study examines the status of gender equality and career progression in India's BPO industry, highlighting opportunities, challenges, and policy interventions. The study suggests comprehensive policy measures, organizational reforms, and skill development initiatives to enhance gender equality and facilitate sustainable career progression for women in the sector. The paper concludes with policy and institutional recommendations aimed at promoting inclusive career growth and gender-equitable workplaces.

Keywords-- Gender equality, Career progression, Women employment, Business Process Outsourcing, BPO industry, India, Economic empowerment, Workplace inclusion.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's Business Process Outsourcing industry has become a cornerstone of the country's service-led economic growth. Since the liberalization reforms of the 1990s, the information technology and business process management (IT-BPM) sector has expanded rapidly, positioning India as a global outsourcing destination. The BPO segment includes customer support, finance and accounting services, human resource management, healthcare processing, technical support, and knowledge-based services.

According to industry estimates, the IT-BPM sector contributes significantly to India's GDP and provides employment to millions of workers, with women accounting for nearly one-third to two-fifths of the workforce.

The BPO industry is distinctive because it recruits a large number of young graduates and offers relatively accessible entry opportunities compared with traditional formal-sector employment. For many women, especially from middle-income urban households, BPO employment represents the first opportunity for salaried work, financial independence, and professional exposure. Flexible recruitment practices, merit-based selection, and opportunities for skill enhancement have enabled women to enter the organized service sector in substantial numbers.

Despite these gains, the question of whether equal participation translates into equal career advancement remains critical. Women are highly visible at operational levels, but their representation declines sharply in supervisory, managerial, and leadership positions. Long working hours, rotational shifts, safety concerns associated with night work, career interruptions due to family responsibilities, and unconscious gender bias often affect promotion prospects. Consequently, the BPO sector presents a paradox: it has opened doors to employment for women, yet it has not fully eliminated barriers to career progression.

Although women have achieved considerable representation in the BPO workforce, their progression into senior management and executive positions remains limited. Gender disparities continue to exist in promotions, leadership opportunities, remuneration, and access to strategic roles. Consequently, examining gender equality and career progression within the BPO industry becomes crucial for understanding the broader dynamics of women's economic empowerment and inclusive development.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the status of gender equality in India's BPO industry.
- To analyse the career progression opportunities available to women employees in the BPO sector.

- To identify the major barriers affecting women's advancement to managerial and leadership positions.
- To review existing government policies and corporate initiatives promoting gender inclusion in the BPO industry.
- To suggest measures for strengthening gender-equitable career development in the sector.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a descriptive and analytical research design. It relies primarily on secondary data collected from government reports, NASSCOM publications, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology documents, International Labour Organization studies, corporate sustainability reports, and peer-reviewed research articles on women's employment in the IT-BPM sector. The analysis focuses on trends in female workforce participation, promotion patterns, leadership representation, workplace policies, and career outcomes within the Indian BPO industry. Data are interpreted using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The study is conceptual in nature and aims to synthesize existing evidence to understand the relationship between gender equality and career progression.

IV. GROWTH OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN THE BPO INDUSTRY

The expansion of the BPO industry has significantly increased women's participation in formal employment. Metropolitan centres such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, Pune, and Gurugram have become major hubs for female employment in customer service, finance, analytics, and back-office operations.

Industry estimates indicate that women constitute approximately 35–38 percent of the workforce in the IT-BPM sector. Their participation is particularly high in customer support, HR services, healthcare processing, and finance operations. The sector has therefore contributed to increased labour force participation among educated urban women.

V. EMPLOYMENT PATTERN OF WOMEN IN THE BPO INDUSTRY

Women today are employed across a wide range of BPO functions.

Functional Area	Level of Women's Participation
Customer Support	Very High
Human Resource Services	Very High
Finance & Accounting	High
Healthcare BPO	High
Insurance Processing	High
Recruitment Services	High
Technical Support	Moderate
Business Analytics	Increasing
Artificial Intelligence Operations	Emerging
Senior Leadership	Comparatively Low

VI. WOMEN'S SHARE IN INDIA'S IT-BPM WORKFORCE

Industry reports indicate a steady increase in women's representation within the IT-BPM workforce over the past two decades. NASSCOM has consistently highlighted that the Indian technology and IT-BPM sector has one of the highest proportions of women employees globally. Earlier studies reported women accounting for around **30%** of employees, while more recent estimates place women's share at approximately **35–36%** of the total industry workforce. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology similarly notes that women constitute about **36%** of the industry's employee base.

Table 1. Illustrative Trend in Women's Employment in India's IT-BPM Industry

Year	Estimated Women Employees (%age)
2205	22
2010	28
2015	32
2020	35
2025	36

Source: Compiled from NASSCOM reports and Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology publications.

VII. GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Gender equality refers to equal access to employment, remuneration, training, promotion, and leadership opportunities irrespective of gender. The BPO industry performs relatively well in recruitment because hiring is largely qualification- and skill-based. Women and men often enter at similar salary levels for comparable roles.

However, equality at entry does not automatically translate into equality in career outcomes. Differences emerge in promotion rates, access to high-visibility assignments, international exposure, and leadership development opportunities. Many organizations have introduced diversity and inclusion programs, but implementation remains uneven across firms

Table 2. Gender Representation by Organizational Level

Level	Women (%)	Men (%)
Entry Level	48	52
Team Leader	41	59
Middle Management	31	69
Senior Management	18	82

Illustrative representation based on industry patterns reported in diversity studies.

VIII. CAREER PROGRESSION OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES

Career progression in the BPO sector generally follows a structured hierarchy from customer service associate to team leader, assistant manager, manager, senior manager, and business unit head. Advancement depends on performance, communication skills, domain expertise, and leadership capability.

Women employees often demonstrate strong performance in operational roles; however, progression slows after the middle-management stage. Several factors contribute to this pattern:

- *Work-life balance pressures:* Rotational shifts and extended working hours make it difficult to combine professional and family responsibilities.
- *Career interruptions:* Maternity, childcare responsibilities, and caregiving duties may lead to temporary withdrawal from the workforce.

- *Limited mentorship:* Women have fewer mentors and sponsors in senior leadership positions.
- *Stereotypical assumptions:* Managers may perceive women as less available for demanding leadership roles involving travel or night operations.

As a result, many women remain concentrated in operational and support functions rather than strategic leadership positions

IX. MAJOR CHALLENGES AFFECTING CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Shift and Safety Issues

Rotational and night shifts are common in the BPO industry due to global business operations. Although many companies provide transportation and safety measures, concerns about personal security and commuting continue to discourage some women from accepting night shifts, travel assignments, or client-facing roles. This can limit their exposure to career-enhancing opportunities and affect promotion prospects.

Work-Family Conflict

Balancing professional responsibilities with family obligations remains a major challenge for women in the BPO sector. Long working hours, shift duties, and household responsibilities often make it difficult to take on overtime, travel, or leadership roles, which may slow career progression and reduce advancement opportunities.

Attrition and Unconscious Bias

Many women leave the BPO industry during their late twenties and early thirties due to marriage, childcare, or family commitments. In addition, unconscious gender bias in performance evaluations and promotion decisions may restrict access to leadership roles, contributing to the underrepresentation of women in senior management.

X. EXISTING POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES

- *Code on Wages, 2019:* This legislation promotes gender equality by ensuring equal remuneration for equal work, preventing wage discrimination between men and women in the BPO industry.
- *Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017:* The Act provides **26 weeks of paid maternity leave** and mandates crèche facilities in eligible establishments, enabling women to balance their professional and family responsibilities.



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- *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013:* This Act requires organizations to establish **Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs)** to prevent and address workplace harassment, ensuring a safe and secure working environment for women.
- *State Shops and Establishments Acts:* Various state amendments permit women to work **night shifts**, provided employers ensure adequate safety measures, secure transportation, and workplace security.
- *Digital India and Skill India Initiatives:* These government programmes promote digital literacy, technical skills, and employability, enabling more women to access career opportunities in the BPO and IT-enabled services sectors.
- *Corporate Diversity and Inclusion Policies:* Many leading BPO companies have adopted gender-inclusive practices such as flexible work arrangements, leadership development programmes, mentoring initiatives, return-to-work programmes, and equal opportunity policies to support women's career progression and leadership development.
- *Develop Women's Leadership Skills:* Organizations should conduct regular leadership training, managerial development programmes, and skill enhancement workshops to prepare women for higher-level positions.
- *Conduct Regular Gender Audits:* Periodic assessments of pay equity, promotion rates, employee retention, and leadership representation should be undertaken to identify and address gender disparities.
- *Strengthen Industry Collaboration:* The Government, NASSCOM, and BPO companies should work together to promote diversity and inclusion through common standards, best practices, and policies that support women's long-term career progression.

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XI. SUGGESTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Implement Transparent Promotion Policies:* Organizations should establish fair and transparent promotion systems based on merit, competency, and gender-neutral evaluation criteria to ensure equal career advancement opportunities.
- *Strengthen Mentorship Programmes:* Companies should introduce structured mentorship and sponsorship programmes that connect women employees with senior leaders to support their professional growth and leadership development.
- *Promote Flexible Work Arrangements:* Expanding hybrid work models, flexible working hours, and work-from-home options can help women balance professional responsibilities with family commitments.
- *Enhance Childcare and Family Support:* Providing workplace crèches, childcare assistance, and family-friendly policies can improve employee retention and enable women to continue their careers without major interruptions.

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