

A decent work framework: women in the ICT sector in India

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Balwant Singh Mehta

Institute For Human Development, India

Abstract

It is argued that the ICT sector offers greater ease of access to employment for women than traditional sectors. This is reflected in the high representation of women employees in the ICT sector in India. Considering the importance of the ICT sector in India, policy makers and industry leaders are continuously debating on women's work and working conditions in this sector. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the critical issue by using a modified version of the decent work framework and discussing both favourable and unfavourable results of women's employment in the Indian ICT sector.

Keywords

decent work, information and communication technology, women's employment, working conditions, call centres, India

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There is a dire need for creating more favourable working conditions for women in the Indian ICT sector.

Introduction

Historically, the entry of women into the labour market signified the need for extra hands and supplementary income for the households. In the process of development, women who had hitherto worked as family labour in 'traditional' agriculture are drawn into 'modern' industry as wage workers (Sen, 2001). This development agenda was supported by the women and development organizations, propagating paid employment as the most effective route to empowerment and demographic transition. Nevertheless, beyond this development agenda, many could read the market agenda of the new industries springing up in the developing countries. They need a cheap labour force to cut down their costs and a 'flexible' labour force, which could be drawn into and expelled from employment in response to changing levels of demand (Standing, 1989; Kabeer, 2008).

The globalization process in India since 1991 has rapidly increased the cross-border flows of goods and services. This process has further been boosted by large scale technological innovation and its widespread use

in various economic activities. This phenomenon has greatly increased job opportunities for educated people, particularly women, in the service sector of developing countries like India, which recorded a consistent growth rate of 8.5% annually during 2004-05 to 2011-12.

It is argued that modern sectors such as information and communication technology (ICT) services have played a significant role in India's services sector growth (Eichengreen and Gupta, 2013). The Indian ICT sector includes two sub-sectors, namely, the information technology (IT) and information technology-enabled services (ITeS) sectors. The availability of a large pool of qualified people at comparatively lower cost and effective government policies have made India one of the favourite outsourcing destinations for IT and ITeS services for many global companies

Corresponding author:

Balwant Singh Mehta, Fellow, Institute For Human Development, 3rd Floor NIDM Building, IIPA Campus New Delhi-I 10002, India.
Email: balmehtalko@gmail.com

(Ministry of Finance, 2013). In 2011-12 this sector provided direct employment to around 3.9 million people and indirect employment to nearly 10 million (Sarkar and Mehta, 2013).

It has been argued that the ICT sector offers greater ease of access to women employees than other traditional sectors, which has resulted in higher representation of women employees in the sector. According to the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), which is a not-for-profit Indian consortium created to promote the development of the ICT sector in the country, around 40% of employees in the ICT sector in 2011-12 were women, as compared to 22% of the total workforce in the country. Further, the National Sample Survey (NSS) revealed that women employees in professional, technical and related jobs in the ICT sector increased substantially from 2004-05 to 2011-12, as reported in the India Labour Employment Report (2014). However, whether the growing participation of women in the ICT sector is materializing into decent employment is a matter of concern. Considering the increasing importance of this sector in the country, policy makers and industry leaders are continuously debating about the type of work and working conditions offered for women in this sector.

Literature review

The available literature argues that women in developing countries are mainly influenced by patriarchal notions – a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women – and are involved in never-ending caring responsibilities (Walby, 1991; Mitter, 2000). But globalization and new technologies have disrupted the traditional established patterns, opened up opportunities for women in the labour market and widened the scope for expressing women's agency, i.e., an account of their capacity for individualized choice and action (Wajcman, 2003). This has loosened the restrictions on women's mobility and provided them with the ability to take up employment opportunities outside the home (Copper and Weaver, 2003). This is also reflected in their higher representation in ICT-related jobs in developing countries in Asia and Africa (Wright and Jacobs, 1994; Wambui, 2002). Such outcomes are partly possible by focusing on the gendered nature of the concepts of skill and technology due to job flexibility under globalization. Flexibility is a process that involves a drive towards a greater variety of skills, numbers of hours

worked and nature of contracts in the labour market and a downward pressure on rights, wages and working conditions (Cook, 2000; Walby, 2000). Globalization helps firms in developed countries to start outsourcing ICT activities to low cost locations in the developing world. This may have disturbed the existing labour market conditions (Basat and Rani, 2004) and immensely benefited women in the developing countries (Kelkar and Nanthan, 2002).

However, some other studies argue that gender bias is likely to continue in the ICT sector with the emergence and progressive reinforcement of a masculine culture and a flexible and non-unionized workforce (Mitter, 2004). Women work at low-end, low skilled jobs as operators or programmers and executives in the non-managerial group (Panteli et al., 1997). They are employed in repetitive jobs with little opportunities for career advancement, recreating the pattern already observed in other traditional sectors like export-oriented manufacturing (Vijayabaskar et al., 2001; Gothoskar, 2000). In addition, the women in the ICT sector are mostly educated, are young women from the metropolis and belong to socially advantaged groups (Mitter and Sen, 2000; Upadhya, 2006; Vinoj, 2007). It is argued that outsourcing of ICT jobs from developed to developing countries has provided educated young urban women with a means of entry into the workforce. But concerns are raised about their being in a dead-end job, with poor working conditions and limited career promotional prospects (Mitter, 2000). This phenomenon has been referred to by some studies as 'cyber coolies', rating work as 'mind-numbing and de-skilling', working in adverse health conditions and without any rights or bargaining power, especially in the ITeS segment of ICT, like call centre jobs (Gaerlan, 2004; Ramesh, 2004; Hafkin and Huyer, 2006; Nizami and Prasad, 2013). These scholars further explained that working in the ICT sector has reduced the time available to women for managing their household responsibilities; they still face the burden of traditional expectations of their roles in family and society. This creates an adverse impact on their pay and promotion as their job performance is periodically appraised.

Questions and objectives

The literature review discussed above indicates both the positive and negative aspects of women's work in the ICT sector. However, most of the studies have broader objectives and hence often neglect the issue

of women workers in this sector. The studies clearly indicated that, over the years, employment opportunities for women in the ICT sector in India have increased, mainly after globalization. But policy makers and academicians are continuously debating and raising questions about the quality of work and working conditions in the ICT sector, such as: whether women are still concentrated in low level and low skilled jobs in the ICT sector like other traditional sectors? Does the ICT sector provide regularity of work with high salary? Does the work entail normal working hours, less work pressure, social security, workers' right to participate and bargain, and voice their rights or opinions? Is the sector providing women workers with a safe and healthy environment?

The main objective of the present paper is to examine the nature of work and working conditions for women workers in the ICT sector in India. The findings will help in future policy formulation for improving the quality of women's employment in India and other countries in Asia and Africa, which are the major destinations of ICT outsourcing services.

The remainder of this paper is organized in three sections. The next section discusses the study framework and methodology, followed by the findings. The final section concludes the paper with suggestions and recommendations.

Conceptual framework and methodology

Conceptual framework

Work is an integral part of human life and central to people's wellbeing. The better work and workplace environment is referred as 'Decent Work', which is necessary to ensure productive work opportunities to both women and men, in conditions of freedom, equality, security and human dignity (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 1999). Just as 'human development' is an attempt to understand the 'quality of life' of the people in general, 'decent work' is an attempt to understand the 'quality of life' of workers in the workplace. The concept of decent work emerged with the foundation of the ILO in 1919, and has been debated extensively after globalization with an increasingly informal economy, declining social protection and the imposition of an authoritarian workplace culture in developing countries (Reddy, 2005).

Various attempts have been made in the past to conceptualize 'decent work'. Ghai (2003) presents four distinct approaches to measure decent work, namely: employment opportunity, social security, basic rights

and social dialogue. Fields (2003) and Ahmed (2003) discussed how economic growth and human development contribute to decent work. Anker et al. (2003) have provided the basis for developing a core set of decent work indicators and suggested 11 broad indicators, namely: employment opportunities, unacceptable work, adequate earnings and productive work, decent hours, security and stability of work, balancing work and family life, fair treatment in employment, safe work environment, social protection, social dialogue and workplace relations, and the economic and social context of decent work. Bescond et al. (2003) have suggested seven indicators of decent work: hourly pay, hours of work, unemployment, school enrolment, youth share of unemployment, the male-female gap in labour force participation, and old age without pension. Standing (2002) also constructed a micro-level decent work index and considered work-related security as labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security, and representation security.

Overall, the concept of decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. The different approaches discussed above provide various indicators to measure 'decent work'. These measures may vary with the actual working conditions of workers in a particular sector or industry. For this paper, the inter-related four broad dimensions of decent work, categorized as 'employment opportunity', 'social security', 'working conditions' and 'social dialogue' have been adopted from Ghai (2003) after some revision, which has gender equality as a cross-cutting objective. This framework has been used by several studies to measure decent work in the ICT sector (Ranasinghe, 2004; Sarkar and Mehta, 2010; Nizami and Prasad, 2013). The same framework, with some modifications, has been used in this study to understand the quality of employment for women employees in the Indian ICT sector. These indicators have been further elaborated in Figure 1.

Employment opportunity. The economy must generate equal opportunities for both males and females; as discussed earlier, women are almost equally represented in the Indian ICT sector. However, whether these supposedly equal opportunities for women have translated into similar nature or status of jobs with equal payment or salary needs to be examined by looking at the levels of jobs (low, middle and top), status of jobs (permanent and contractual) and earnings of women employees in the Indian ICT sector.

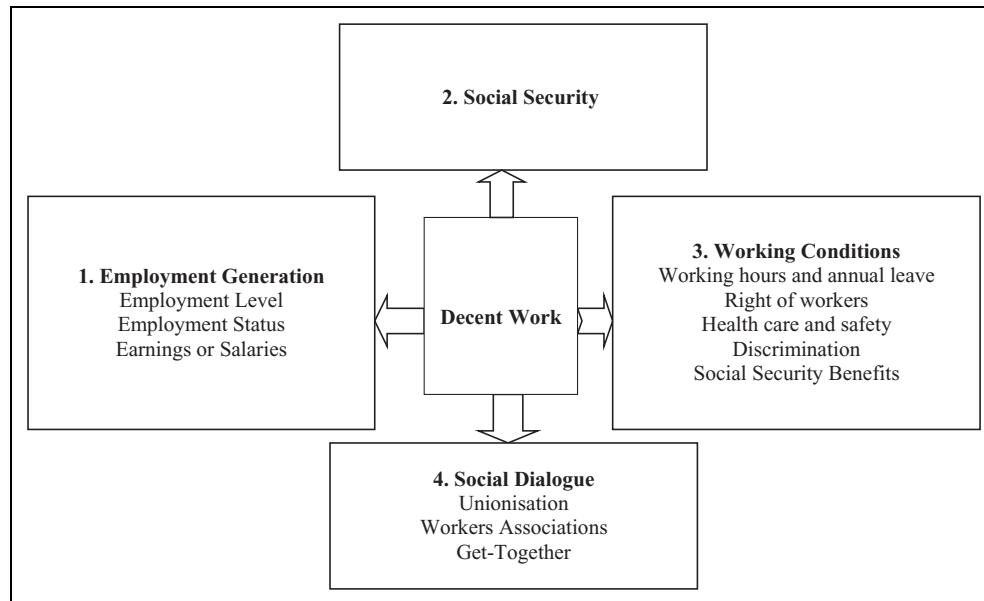


Figure 1. Decent work dimensions and indicators.

Working conditions. The promotion of a favourable working environment is a necessary condition for higher productivity. This includes proper working hours, sufficient annual leave and safe work without discriminatory practices at the workplace, for good mental or physical health conditions and work-life balance. These important aspects require further probing into the present context of women employees in the ICT sector.

Social security. Social security measures for workers provide them with adequate compensation in case of lost of job or income and permit access to adequate healthcare in case of sickness or accident. These are necessary conditions for a decent job and need to be studied for women employees in the ICT sector.

Social dialogue. Involving strong and independent workers' and employers' organizations is central for avoiding disputes at work, and enhancing the bargaining power of workers. The exercise of social dialogue relates to freedom of association of workers and protection of their rights. At the workplace it refers to any negotiations, discussions or decision-making where the employees are given a chance, not only to participate, but also to voice their opinions on various issues related to work and organization. This is an important part of workers' rights that needs to be explored for women employees in the ICT sector in India.

Methodology

In order to assess whether the Indian ICT sector provides 'decent work' or 'decent workplaces' for women employees, a survey was conducted in Delhi and National Capital Region⁴ (NCR), which covers the adjoining cities of Noida, Faridabad, Gurgaon and Ghaziabad, from December 2010 to March 2011. NCR is one of the major IT and ITeS hubs in India with more than one-fifth (22%) of the total IT-ITeS firms in the country (National Association of Software and Services Companies, 2011). The following methodology was used to collect the information.

The respondents (women ICT employees) were selected by using a multi-stage random sampling technique. First, information on the number of ICT companies or firms situated in Delhi and National Capital Region (NCR) (which refers to the surrounding area of India's capital, Delhi) was collected from a NASSCOM published directory. For the purpose of the survey, equal numbers of firms were selected from three categories: small firms with less than 50 employees; medium firms with between 51 and 500 employees; and large firms with more than 500 employees. After selecting the firms, interviews were conducted with each category of employee (executive, medium, and top category) by visiting their workplace personally, with prior appointment through emails or telephone. However, in some cases, the management of firms and employees did not respond positively. Such firms and their employees were left

and replaced by other firms belonging to the same category.

For conducting detailed interviews with the employees a semi-structured questionnaire was used. It included the profile of the employee (age, social groups, place of origin, household income, qualification) and indicators of decent work as shown in Figure 1 – employment profile (level of job, status of job and earnings), working conditions (working hours, annual leaves, rights of workers, health conditions, discrimination, social security) and social dialogue (union, association and get together). The quantitative information collected was coded, entered and analysed using SPSS. For analysis, statistical measures such as ratios, averages and percentages were used. The analysis of the two segments of the ICT sector, IT and ITeS, was also done for comparison and to understand the differences in the nature of jobs.

Apart from the quantitative information, detailed discussions were also conducted with workers during interviews, and with the head of the company or the human resources department by prior appointment. Issues of recruitment, training, promotion, discrimination, social security benefits and presence of union/association were discussed. The qualitative interviews were recorded and transcribed later and used in the text to strengthen and supplement the quantitative analysis.

In total, 220 employees – 100 from IT and 120 from ITeS – were interviewed. The sample size largely represents the distribution of ICT firms situated in Delhi and NCR region. Around half of the sample ICT women employees were from medium firms (51%), one-quarter from small firms (28%) and 16% from large firms.

Discussion

Profile of the respondents

Women employees in the ICT sector were dominated by youths of between 20-30 years of age (93%) from urban areas (83%). They were mostly unmarried (69%) and belonged to upper socio-economic strata, viz. 70% from upper castes and 91% from upper middle income groups. Almost 94% of the women employees in the ICT sector had at least graduate level education, with more technically educated in the IT segment (70%) than the ITeS (37%) segment (Table 1). The higher share of technically qualified women employees in the IT segment implies strong entry-level barriers for non-technical graduates in IT firms (Abraham and Sharma, 2005) There appears to be an

Table 1. Profile of sample women employees in ICT sector by broad age-group, marital status, income category, social group, place of origin and education/skill level.

		IT	ITeS	Total
Age Group	20-25	66.7	41.3	49.1
	26-30	21.2	53.3	43.5
	30-38	12.1	5.3	7.4
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Marital Status	Single	72.7	68.0	69.4
	Married	27.3	32.0	30.6
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Income Category	Up to 150	12.1	6.7	8.3
	150-300	45.5	40.0	41.7
	300-500	33.3	40.0	38.0
	500+	9.1	13.3	12.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Social Group	Forward	78.8	66.7	70.4
	Backward Caste	21.2	26.7	25.0
	Schedule Caste/Tribe	0.0	6.7	4.6
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Place of origin	Rural	9.1	0.0	2.8
	Semi-Urban	15.2	13.3	13.9
	Urban	33.3	29.3	30.6
	Metro	42.4	57.3	52.8
Education	Higher Secondary	3.0	1.3	1.9
	Diploma	6.1	4.0	4.6
	Graduate	78.8	82.7	81.5
	Post Graduate	12.1	12.0	12.0
Technical Skill	Technical	69.7	37.3	47.2
	Non-Tech	30.3	62.7	52.8
	Total (N)	100	120	220

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

urban and class bias with skill-polarization between the IT and ITeS segments, with those with higher level of technical skills working in IT and others with non-technical skills working at the lower level (Vijayabaskar et al., 2001; Sarkar and Mehta, 2010).

The entry of English-speaking women in ITeS jobs is comparatively easy, as one of the respondents expressed: “In ITeS entry is easy and environment is also women friendly. It has given me financial security with only simple graduate level qualification and knowledge of English language”. Another said:

“Where else will I get such a job and a salary? I am just a graduate in English literature. Picking up a job with just a degree is impossible. Possibly I can get a job of receptionist with low salary but my parents would never allow me to work as a receptionist. I stay in a women’s

hostel close to the office with my other colleague. We have also pick-drop facility provided by the office. I am really enjoying the job and do not want to stay with my parents by doing nothing.”

They are able to provide financial support to the family in need and also gain financial autonomy, as revealed by a respondent:

“I have never been a good student. I always wanted to be a good housewife and mother. But circumstances forced me to take up this job. My husband lost his job in US and though my in-laws are looking after my needs, I thought this will be a good diversion and will also provide me with some financial autonomy”.

Employment opportunity

Employment opportunity covers three aspects of women’s work in the ICT sector. One is level of employment, which has three major categories- entry or executive level, middle level and top level. Another aspect is employment status: contractual or temporary jobs and permanent or regular jobs; and the third aspect is level of income or salary. It is argued that women in the ICT sector are largely concentrated in entry or low-skilled jobs, predominantly contractual with a one or two year contract period (Sarkar and Mehta, 2010).

Employment level. It is argued that women in the ICT sector tend to work in areas of low technological content, low value work, simple and repetitive work and are seen less in managerial and senior jobs. There appears to be a ‘glass ceiling’ restricting women to certain fields and position or separating them from management and professional positions (Nizami and Prasad, 2013). The survey results also confirm that women employees were involved more in entry and middle level jobs (48.1% each), in both the IT segment (51.5%) and ITeS (46.7%). However, only 3.7% of women employees were at the top level, with just 2.7% in IT compared to 6.1% in ITeS (Table 2).

Women respondents expressed that, apart from lack of high skills, personal reasons and longer working hours also influence their employment level. An employee said: “My husband is in an equally demanding job and we have a nuclear family, how can I opt for promotion?” Others commented: “My husband was very upset when I got promotion. He was annoyed and thought that now I am not able to give him proper attention” and “I do not have any personal

Table 2. Distribution of women employees in ICT sector.

	IT	ITeS	ICT
Executive Level	51.5	46.7	48.1
Middle Level	42.4	50.7	48.1
Top Level	6.1	2.7	3.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2011

experience but my colleagues often discussed cases, where they declined a promotion that involves longer working hours and extensive travelling”. These factors are partly responsible for the predominance of women in low level jobs in both the IT and ITeS segments. This confirms the argument that there is persistence of gender-based stereotypical practices adopted by management, by considering women’s skills as ‘soft skills’ – being good at routine, standard and repetitive work (Kelkar et al., 2002; Nizami and Prasad, 2013). As one of the respondents revealed, “major responsibilities are not given to women employees”. In some cases single women were preferred for promotion or higher level jobs, as expressed by one respondent: “It is strange that all the female team leaders that I know in our firm are either single or separated or have a strong family support”.

Employment status. The survey results revealed that around 95% of the women employees in the ICT sector were permanent and only 5% were on contract. However, the perception about permanent status was not very clear among the employees as most of them (78%) were recruited for a period of 1-3 years on an assignment or project basis. Similarly, in the ITeS segment, most of the assignments were based on outsourcing and annual renewal on the basis of performance. In most cases, tenures of engagement were normally on a project or assignments basis to allow the management to get rid of employees who fall short in terms of performance (Figure 2.1). This is explained by Upadhyaya (2010); due to the high dependence of Indian ICT firms on foreign clients and consequent volatility of demand, most jobs in the sector are insecure.

This practice was very common in small firms, which largely depend upon one or two projects from foreign clients. Further, the tenure of engagement of the employees in the present job also supports the argument against the fallacy of ‘regular’ jobs, because more than three-quarters of employees (78%) had

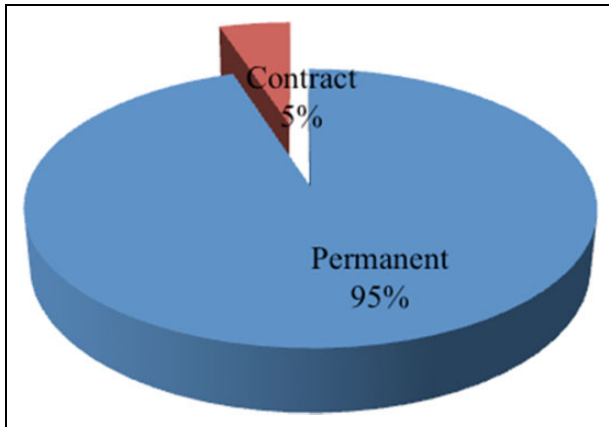


Figure 2.1. Type of employment of women employees in ICT sector.

Source: Field Survey, 2011

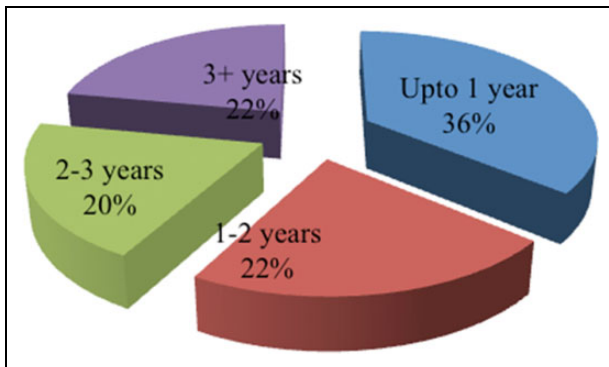


Figure 2.2. Contract period of women employees in ICT sector.

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

worked for less than three years in their present job (Figure 2.2).

Earnings or salary. The ICT sector provides substantially higher average salaries compared to non-ICT sectors (Sarkar and Mehta, 2010). It is argued that high disposable earnings and a sophisticated work environment are factors attracting skilled graduates to the sector (Verma and Sashikumar, 2004, Nizami and Prasad, 2013). The survey results also show that there was a huge inequality in the salaries of employees within and between the two segments of the ICT sector. The annual average salary of women employees in the ICT sector at middle and top level was around two and half times higher than entry-level jobs. There was a large salary gap between the IT and ITeS segments with considerably higher salaries in the IT segment than in the ITeS (Table 3).

Table 3. Average annual salary of women employees in ICT sector in INR 000s. (US\$ '000s given in parentheses).

	IT	ITeS	ICT
Executive Level	171 (4)	167 (4)	168 (4)
Middle Level	443 (10)	365 (8)	386 (9)
Top Level	1000 (22)	650 (14)	825 (18)
Total	336 (7)	280 (6)	298 (7)

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

Working conditions

It is widely recognized that apart from high payment, a good working environment is a crucial factor for the development of any industry (Mazumdar, 2007). In the ICT sector, firms are not only investing in employees' skill development but also make continuous efforts to improve their satisfaction level at the job to get higher productivity.

Working hours and annual leave. The Indian ICT sector is mainly based on outsourcing from the USA with both countries in different time zones. This has often been cited as a reason for the flexitime culture; the duration of 8-hour work periods remains, but the time-slot is changed according to the needs of the project or client. It is argued that working on weekends is also quite normal in the ICT sector, as employees have to meet the deadlines set with project or client requirements (Mazumdar, 2007, Upadhy, 2010). Fewer days of annual leave are allowed in the sector due to high work load and demand for high productivity. The target and deadline based assignments always put employees under pressure to complete the assignment or target in time (Upadhy, 2006). Those in charge of human resources in the firms stated that when deadlines come nearer, there were instances of working 16-18 hours a day and staying back in the office over the weekend. The survey results also show that women employees took an average of only 25 days' annual leave last year and worked about 9 hours per day in both day and night shifts (Table 4). Around 30% of them could not use their quota of leave due to deadlines and work targets (Upadhy, 2010). This phenomenon was more pronounced in the IT segment than the ITeS segment.

Rights of workers. Women employees have expressed concern about the prevalence of high stress due to high targets and project deadlines in the sector

Table 4. Working conditions for sample women employees in ICT sector.

		IT	ITeS	Total
Leave availed last year	Annual Leave	23	26	25
	Casual Leave	11	12	11
Average Working hours	Night Shift Per day	9	9	9
	Day Shift Per day	10	9	9
Availed entitled leave last year (%)		62.7	79.3	71.0

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

(Upadhyaya, 2010). There is regular monitoring (93%) of work in the sector by log-in and log-out time checks and daily and weekly progress reports. This has resulted in employees being promoted or fired from the job. The shifting pattern of work or job-hopping is also high, since most work in the ITeS segment and on overseas projects in the IT segment goes on round the clock, especially when the USA sleeps. These factors are not only an intrusion into their privacy, but also compel women employees to work in night shifts. In one way this is helping them financially, but on the other hand, it is violating their basic rights (Sarkar and Mehta, 2010).

Health conditions. Since an ICT job requires minimal physical activity, it may lead to a variety of health problems (Nizami and Prasad, 2013). The long working hours and deadline pressures lead to stress and variety of health problems. Eight out of every 10 employees in the ICT sector reported some job-related health problems. The results are divided into three categories, i.e. top (75% and above), medium (50% to 75%) and low (below 50%). Backache, eye-sight problems, pain in neck and hard hearing were top problems; sleeping disorder, high tobacco/alcohol consumption and loss of identity stands at medium level, while digestive disorder, voice loss, obesity and isolation prevalence was lower. Backache, hard hearing, sleeping disorder, loss of identity, digestive disorders, voice loss and isolation problem were comparatively higher in the ITeS segment due to the nature of jobs like night shifts and endless listening and talking (Upadhyaya, 2010-Table 5).

The main reasons for the above mentioned health problems explained by women employees were high work targets (90.8%), continuous sitting (89.2%), performance monitoring (63.5%) and particularly endless listening, watching and talking (63.3%), lack of

Table 5. Health problems of women employees in ICT sector*.

	IT	ITeS	Total
Backache	81.5	91.3	87.7
Eye problems	85.2	82.2	83.3
Pain in neck	80.8	80.0	80.3
Hard hearing	75.0	81.1	78.5
Sleeping disorder	58.6	82.2	73.0
High tobacco/alcohol consumption	24.0	78.1	54.4
Loss of identity	24.0	69.7	50.0
Digestive disorders	34.8	56.5	45.7
Voice loss	27.3	47.4	36.6
Obesity	17.4	47.4	31.0
Isolation	0.0	33.3	13.5

*Multiple answers

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

Table 6. Reasons for health hazards and safety problems of women employees in ICT sector*.

		IT	ITeS	Total
Health Hazards	High work targets	86.7	93.5	90.8
	Continuously sitting	86.2	90.7	89.2
	The performance monitoring	41.7	82.1	63.5
	Endlessly listening, watching and talking	33.9	76.7	63.2
	Lack of career prospects	46.4	75.8	62.3
	Odd timing and night shifts	41.7	75.0	60.7
Continuously on VDU		27.3	57.9	41.5

*Multiple answers

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

career prospects (62.3%) and odd timing (60.7%) in the ITeS sub-sector. Overall, these health problems were comparatively higher in the ITeS segment due to the nature of the jobs (Ramesh, 2004).

Discrimination and safety. Gender discrimination or unfair treatment in salary, promotion and safety are the other major concern in the ICT sector (Upadhyaya, 2010). The discrimination related questions were also asked to women employees and most of them revealed that they were drawing similar salary (82%) as men but did not get the same job opportunities (96%). Around 10% of women revealed that their career development was affected due to being a woman. A few women employees (8%) in the ITeS segment complained about sexual advances by their

Table 7. Gender discrimination in ICT sector*.

	IT	ITeS	ICT
Career development affected due to being a women	9.1	10.7	10.2
Experience any discrimination	6.1	1.3	2.8
Sexual advances	0.0	8.0	5.6
Same Wage	72.7	85.3	81.5
Same Opportunities	3.0	4.0	3.7
Have Children	55.6	54.2	54.5
Facility for children	22.2	8.3	12.1
Pick/Drop facility	57.6	88.0	84.8
Total (N)	100	120	220
Safety Safety for women workers	20.0	53.8	33.3

*Multiple answers

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

employer or colleagues (Table 7). One third of the women employees also worried about their safety, particularly in night shifts. The employees particularly of the ITeS segment were more concerned about their safety during night shifts, as mentioned by other studies (Upadhy, 2010, Ramesh, 2004).

A few ICT women employees stated that their family members were concerned about their safety as “My parents are always worried about me because of my night shift work”; another woman said “There is free pick and drop facilities provided to women. Due to some recent incidents of attacks on women, especially for those working in ITeS the employees’ safety is a major concern for in the ICT sector.”

Social security

The job security is an important aspect as if a company or firm faces loss, or does not get the new project, the workers lose their jobs. In such cases ICT companies reported to fire workers without any prior notice, which has a grave impact on their future security. Evidently, it is an example of decent work deficit or lack of social security provision. A decent employer needs to give at least public provident fund or help financially for a considerable time span until he/she is able to find a stable job. These social security provisions are thus treated only as a formality and not an obligation by the employers. Similarly, sickness or contingency leaves are also important rights of the workers in case of any unforeseen incidents/mishaps in their lives. Indian ICT workers do feel

Table 8. Social security and other allowances among women in ICT sector*.

		IT	ITeS	ICT
Social Security	Provident Fund	100.0	100.0	100.0
	Health Insurance	100.0	45.0	59.3
	Maternity/paternity	85.7	55.0	63.0
	All Social Security benefit	85.7	15.0	33.3
	Any One of the above	100.0	100.0	100.0
Other Allowances	Leave Travel Allowances	28.6	60.0	51.9
	Provision of Training	57.1	60.0	59.3
	Car Allowances	57.1	35.0	40.7
	Dearness Allowances	57.1	70.0	66.7
	Education Allowances	85.7	30.0	44.4
	Housing	71.4	20.0	33.3
	Telephone	85.7	20.0	37.0
	Total	100	100	100

*Multiple answer

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

insecure knowing that they could lose their jobs any time, but ICT jobs are still desirable because of high salary compared to other jobs (Upadhy, 2010).

Social security schemes in India include provident fund, pension, health care service, maternity benefits, and gratuity (Sarkar and Mehta, 2010). Around one-third of the women workers in ICT sector reported getting all types of social security benefits. The social security benefits were significantly higher in the IT segment compared to the ITeS segment. However, they were getting these benefits only after the probation **period**, which varies from six months to one year. . The other benefits like inflation adjustments, car, education, housing and telephone allowances were also provided to women employees, which was far better compared to other sectors in India (Table 8).

Social dialogue

In the ICT sector, lack of unionization cannot be attributed to lack of goodwill or interest on the part of employees, but is linked to stability and security of their employment. Employees’ participation in the decision making process is desirable because it inculcates the sense of belonging among them, which in turn contributes to the highest productivity to the ICT sector. The presence of a union or any association in the ICT sector is always questionable (Sarkar and Mehta, 2010). The presence of a union and any

Table 9. Social networking/union/associations among women employees in ICT Sector.

		IT	ITeS	ICT
Union/Association Presence		6.1	2.7	3.7
Meet other employees	Three times in a week	48.5	53.3	51.9
	Once in a week	30.3	42.7	38.9
	Twice a month	12.1	4.0	6.5
	Once a month	3.0	0.0	0.9
	Hardly	6.1	0.0	1.9
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Get together important for career	Essential	72.4	77.8	76.2
	Important	27.6	18.1	20.8
	Not important	0.0	4.2	3.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2011.

worker association/forum represents rights of workers and enhances their bargaining power. In the ICT sector, even though the unions have not talked much, some presence of associations of workers in the activity was observed (Sandhu, 2006, Sarkar, 2009). The union or association presence was reported only by 4% women ICT workers. In the IT segment, due to high skills and salary, women workers believe that there is no need of unions and some of them also reported fear of job loss as the reason that they did not want to participate or have membership with some employee organizations. However, in recent years the Union for Information Technology Enabled Services Professional (UNITES, which is an association formed by ITeS workers) and some other member associations have come up and have started taking up the concerns of the employees to the employers (Sarkar and Mehta, 2013).

About half of the workers stated that they meet three times a week, and one third of them at least once a week, to discuss their concerns and other problems. Most of them thought that meeting is essential (76%) and important (21%) for career development and sharing their job related problems (Table 9).

Summary and conclusions

Overall working conditions in the Indian ICT sector are women-friendly, with high participation of women in employment. However, this sector is providing employment mainly to young women from high socio-economic backgrounds, highly educated and from urban centres. There is high job insecurity in the ICT sector with prevalence of contractual jobs of 1 to 3 years and workers could be fired any time in

the circumstance of no projects, under-performance, economic or global slowdown, etc. The salary or income in this sector was high in comparison to other traditional services and the manufacturing sector. But there was high level of inequality in salaries within and between the IT and ITeS segments of the sector.

As far as working conditions were concerned both favourable and unfavourable conditions coexist. Favourable conditions included high performance incentives, pick and drop facility, higher education, training facilities, etc. Unfavourable conditions include fewer annual leave days, more working hours, shift based work and safety issues in night shifts for women in ITeS, high work pressure, target oriented jobs leading to high mental pressure and other health problems. Further, the ICT industry offered a low level of social security and high level of contractual appointment, which made working situations most vulnerable. The sector also virtually lacked any kind of workers' association or union; only very few were reported to be members of any association or union. Employers discouraged formation of any union or association. There was also very little organized dialogue between employers and employees. It can be concluded that working conditions for women in ICT sector are still poor.

Finally, the survey pinpointed the exclusion of large numbers of educated young women from rural areas, low level of social security measures and adverse working conditions as some of the challenges the sector faced. There is a dire need for creating more favourable working conditions for women, like safety measures at night shifts, family breaks (so that women can come back to work after starting a family), more flexible hours for work and life balance, creating opportunities for rural and disadvantaged classes by providing skills, training and retraining them. Extending social security benefits and favourable working conditions for women and mobilization of workers for better job conditions are considered essential for the overall development of the Indian ICT sector.

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About the author

Balwant Singh Mehta is a Fellow at the Institute For Human Development, 3rd Floor NIDM Building, IIPA Campus New Delhi-110002; T: 23358166 F: 23765410. Email: balmehalko@gmail.com