An Analysis of Cultural Factors Influencing Career Persistence for Indian Women’s ICT Career

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the influence of cultural factors on women’s career persistence during junior to middle management transition in Indian ICT sector. Research notes that social and structural factors continue to influence women’s career persistence in ICT in Western societies (Ahuja, 2002) and in Indian context (Valk and Srinivasan, 2011). However, this study argues that ‘cultural factors’ also play an important role in influencing the career persistence of Indian women’s ICT careers. Moreover, this study further argues that the intersections of gender with age, class and caste in the Indian context may also influence cultural factors, thereby impacting the career persistence of Indian women in ICT careers.

Keywords

Cultural factors, women and ICT careers, intersectionality.

Introduction

Research shows that globally women are less represented compared with men in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) workforce (Trauth, 2006) and particularly they account only for 2.3% of senior technical positions such as Chief Information Officer (CIO) on the global Fortune 500 companies list (Catalyst, 2014). While literature has documented varied patterns of individual, social, and structural barriers for women’s underrepresentation in top management in ICT’s around the world (Ahuja, 2002; Trauth, 2006; Upadhyya and Vasavi, 2006); recent research notes that women’s decision to opt-out of the ICT workforce is just as problematic as attracting them in the first place (Adam et al., 2006). For instance, studies in the USA point women’s decision in voluntarily ‘opting out’ of careers in mid to late stages to be one of the important reasons for their under-representation in top management positions (Belkin, 2003). Similarly, studies involving a majority of countries within Asia show women’s decision in opting out during the later stages of their ICT careers for instance during their senior management level to be one of the main reasons for their under-representation in senior technical roles (Gender diversity benchmark for Asia, 2011). However, research on India suggests that Indian women may decide to exit very early, i.e. during their junior to mid-career transition in the ICT sector (Gender diversity benchmark for Asia, 2011) and that this may be one of the main reasons for their under-representation in senior technical roles. Despite the fact that most of the countries in the Asian region are seen to lose on their technical women potential only during later stages of their careers, we find significant differences within this region, yielding the need for further investigation on India to understand its unique pattern of women careers in the ICT sector. While Ahuja (2002) has noted that social and structural factors influence women’s decision to remain or opt-out of ICT careers during the career choice (early), career persistence (mid-stage) and career advancement (late stage) stages of a woman’s career in ICT workforce; I argue that the applicability of such a model in non-western societies is in question considering the fact that women’s lives are differently shaped by the intersections of gender and culture across geographical contexts (Kabeer, 2008). Therefore,
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this paper aims to address this gap in literature by addressing the influence of cultural factors with gender in shaping women’s career decisions in Indian ICT workforce.

Literature review

Barriers for women’s career development in ICT workforce

A review of the literature indicates that the career progress of women is affected by an array of factors at the individual, organizational and societal levels. In particular, scholars (Trauth, 2006; Ahuja, 2002; Arun and Arun, 2002) have documented varied patterns of individual, social and structural barriers for women’s career advancement in ICT in Western societies.

Individual factors

Trauth (2002) notes that individual factors play a vital role in explaining the under-representation of women in senior positions in workforce. Scholars believe that individual factors such as self-efficacy (Lent et al., 1994) and coping mechanism are important in understanding the position and persistence of women in ICT careers. Trauth (2006) claims that perspective of individual differences characterized by the way individual women respond in a range of specific ways to the interplay between individual characteristics and environmental influences, contributes to a better understanding of women’s involvement in the ICT industry. In line with that, Clerc and Kels (2013) found that career coping strategies of female professionals in Switzerland ICT sector had played a major role in their persistence in ICT careers. Give the long-hours work culture in ICT’s, Adya (2008) also argues that coping mechanism of women is detrimental in influencing their career persistence in ICT careers. From her study on American women in ICT professions, Adya (2008) noted that women in these professions demonstrated two extreme coping mechanisms; they either rebelled against the system that perpetuated these stereotypes or decided to conform to it. Thus, Ahuja (2002) argues that women in the western countries more often feel discouraged with the ICT industry’s macho culture and it’s long-hours work demands, that more often sets women with struggling to cope up with their ICT careers.

Social factors

Work-family conflict can be a source of occupational stress in the ICT sector (Ahuja et al., 2007). The interplay between home and work becomes significant to understanding women’s careers given that women bear children, and take on the major brunt of domestic labour and childcare within their households (Crompton, 2006). Given their dual role, that requires handling both professional and domestic chores, scholars term this as ‘double-bind’ or double-burden’ issue and therefore argues that this could be one of the important implications for women’s career advancement (Crompton and Lyonette, 2011). Thus, Quesenberry et al (2006) argues that women working in the ICT sector face higher work-family conflict, which in turn influences their persistence in ICT careers. Moreover, the association of male traits with competence in computing is central to male-biased assumptions of who does and does not fit in the more technical IT occupational fields (Michie and Nelson, 2006). Therefore, Ahuja (2002) claims that this may further reduce women’s probability of choosing and persisting in ICT careers.

Structural factors

Scholars (Trauth, 2006; Ahuja, 2002) point that structural factors from organisations may also explain women’s alienation from the ICT field, that are constructed as masculine. IT workplaces are reported as “chilly and hostile” for women (Raghuram, 2004). As the occupational culture in this industry incorporates exceptionally long working hours, late nights, after-hour meetings, on-call duty, and a continual state of ‘rush’ or crisis (Kelan, 2008), for many women, this work ethic may conflict with their safety concerns and family responsibilities (Kelan, 2008). Further to that, Kelan (2008) also points that this industry tends to measure projects by ‘man-hours’ which are renowned for being under-estimated, resulting in the actual extra work needed to meet a deadline being taken up by the workers themselves, and therefore these long hours often being unsociable work hours; hinders women from giving in their extra time due to domestic commitments. Despite the ‘promise’ of flexible working conditions going hand-in-hand with this work
culture, the reality is different and a presenteeism culture predominates (Huyer et al., 2005). As these work practices are a part of the ICT occupational culture that may be particularly demanding, this can adversely impact a woman’s promotional opportunities and lead to voluntary turnover (Ahuja, 2002). Further to that, established ‘old boys’ network and the lack of female role models and mentors have also further caused women’s alienation from ICT field. Empirical evidence conducted on women careers in the ICT in the USA (Adya, 2008; Ahuja et al, 2007); in the UK (Grey and Healy, 2004), in Ireland (Cross and Linehan, 2006), have collectively pointed that lack of mentorship opportunities and existence of ‘old-boys’ network in the ICT has affected women’s career advancement.

**The Indian context**

The ICT industry in India has emerged as one of the fastest growing formal sector (Bhatnagar, 2006) and employs about 3.1 millions of employees of which nearly a million are women (Raghuram et al, 2018). The Indian ICT sector is comprised of young men and women, with a majority who are below 30 years of age (Upadhya and Vasavi, 2006), who most often come from upper-social class and middle class backgrounds (Belliappa, 2012). Further to that, the Indian ICT sector is also dominated by employees belonging to higher castes (Upadhya and Vasavi, 2006), such as the ‘brahmins’ (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2007). Thus, it is argued that age, social class and caste plays a prominent role in the employment of men and women in Indian ICT workforce (Upadhya and Vasavi, 2006; Belliappa, 2012). Though the ICT sector is promising for Indian women’s careers, it is noted that 48% of Indian women decide to opt-out of this sector during junior to middle-career transition (Ravindran and Baral, 2013). While past research has noted social and structural barriers to influence women’s career experiences in Indian context (Valk and Srinivasan, 2011), research also finds that ‘cultural restrictions’ such as concerns for Indian women working late hours (Patel, 2006), traveling late in the night after work (Tara and Ilavarasan, 2012) and restrictions for socialising with men in and outside workplaces (Phadke, 2007b) continue to affect women’s persistence in ICT careers (Radhakrishnan, 2009). Though Radhakrishnan (2009) points that Indian women negotiate through such cultural restrictions by performing ‘respectable feminity’, that is, by identifying themselves as ‘culturally appropriate yet modern’; Fernando and Cohen (2014) argues that the implications of performing such respectable feminity behaviour on women’s career progressions is still unclear in the Indian context. This paper aims to fill this gap by addressing the influence of ‘cultural factors’ in women’s career decisions to remain or opt-out of ICT workforce during junior to middle level career transitions. Moreover, this paper argues that career experiences are also shaped by intersectional factors (Kvasny et al., 2009; Trauth, 2013) such as age, class and caste identified for Indian context (Upadhya and Vasavi, 2006) and therefore, this paper aims to understand how gender intersects with age, class and caste in influencing the career decisions of Indian women due to cultural factors during junior to mid-career transition.

**Methodology**

This study will employ semi-structured interviews with 20 women and 20 men who are in junior to mid-career stages, working in core technical roles in Indian ICT sector. Semi-structured interviews will help to derive the meaning, perspectives and experiences of the individual’s (Boeije, 2010) career experiences in the Indian ICT sector. Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed and coded. Participants will be recruited by contacting the respective HR professionals of their companies. This study aims to question men and women on their perceptions of cultural restrictions imposed on Indian women working in ICT, and what are its implications for women’s career progression during junior to middle level transition.

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