

# Gender Neutral Workplaces in India for Women's Career Advancement

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*The study explores the current state of gendered nature of Indian workplaces impacting women's workplace experiences and career advancement. Three Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted with both male and female participants to understand their experiences and expectations from their employers. We found the lack of inclusive practices to make women's career advancement apparent. Even the male participants acknowledged the prevalence of gendered issues while challenging the masculine mindset in India. The findings are discussed using the framework from the Theory of Gendered Organizations along with theoretical and practical implications.*

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## Introduction

Gender diversity and inequality issues may be the oldest and most common diversity concerns (Shen, Chanda, D'netto & Monga, 2009), yet there is scope for better workplaces. For an emerging economy like India, female labor force participation has been a concern for quite some years. As per World Economic Forum, Gender Gap Report, (2021), India ranks at a low of 151 amongst 156 countries on the sub-index of economic participation and opportunity.

Previous studies related to gender have concentrated on barriers women face at the workplace and discussed issues like long working hours, work-family conflict, and workplace-to-home spillover due to gendered practices of the organizations (Boone et al., 2013; Castro, 2012; Nsair & Piszczek, 2021). Studies also discussed Joan Acker's gendered workplace definition of 'ideal worker' (Poorhosseinzadeh & Strachan, 2020; Boone et al., 2013), less powerful and ineffective professional networks (Greguletz, Diehl & Kreutzer, 2019),

oppression (Adapa & Sheridan, 2021) and getting penalized for the usage of flexibility benefits (Borgkvist, Moore, Crabb & Elliott, 2021; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020) as barriers to the career advancement of women.

In India, several principal bodies like the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) along with the government directives have taken up several initiatives to improve the female labor force participation and women empowerment. As per the Companies Act, 2013 it is mandatory to appoint at least one woman director as a board member in certain types of companies. The POSH Act came into existence in 2013 and established a mechanism for dealing with sexual harassment complaints in Indian workplaces.

Despite all the efforts, there exists the not-so-favorable advancements made in the workplaces in India toward gender-neutral and inclusive workplaces (Haq, 2012). Foley and Cooper (2021) state the need for urgent attention to address workplace gender inequality issues in the post-pandemic era, as the gap seems to have widened. Mavin and Yusupova (2020), expressed how the pandemic disrupted the progress toward gender equality. Haq (2012) found that the presence of diversity issues, equity, and equality challenges, and inclusion need for minority groups (women) calls for more awareness and research, which

will ultimately help in eradicating discrimination, harassment, and exclusion from Indian workplaces. Given the prevailing situation, the current study aims to understand employees' experiences from a gendered lens as individuals. Using Joan Acker's theory of gendered organization (1990), this study aims to explore the following:

RQ1) Though initiatives and policy advocacy are happening at the national and some times at the organization levels, how and why do workplaces seem to be still gendered?

RQ2) How is it impacting the career and gendered experiences of women in Indian workplaces?

The research aims to contribute to the Theory of Gendered Organizations by bringing forth the experiences of individuals in Indian workplaces which are yet to be gender-neutral. Therefore, in this article, we adopt an interpretivist (Crotty, 2020) perspective to understand the gendered and gender-neutral experiences of both men and women; this may help us uncover the exact interventions to pave the way for gender-neutral Indian workplaces at the practice level.

In what follows, we review the literature on gender-related studies concentrated on barriers at the workplace for women's career advancement, highlighting limitations of understanding the impediments from a gendered lens. The findings indicate current practices and possible areas of improvement, which gives hope and direction for women's career growth. We conclude by highlight-

ing the contributions made by the study to the theory of gendered organizations, by discussing the themes from the gendered lens and the gendered organization theory indicating the potential areas which when addressed, can bring positive progress in gender diversity, equity, and inclusion at workplaces.

### **Barriers Due to Gendered Nature of Organizations**

The Theory of Gendered Organization (Acker, 1990) holds the premise that organizations are not gender-neutral and are designed in a manner that gives fuel to the existing biases and stereotypes. The Theory of Gendered Organizations suggested the need for a systematic theory of gender and organizations for several reasons, like disparity in pay, income, status inequality, the gendered organization culture, the masculine nature and design of organizations. We wish to compare our findings based on Joan Acker's framework and explore where we stand in the Indian workplaces today. Time demands affect women and perpetuate work-life conflict for everyone differently, depending on their respective life stages. Castro (2012), has studied the way time demands are (re)created by masculinities and states that paternalistic relations prevent women from complying with time demands impacting their career advancement adversely. Gentry et al., (2015) reported that when bosses rated career derailment potential as an outcome, the negative relationship between empathic concern and career derailment potential was significant only for women. Ineffective behavior displayed

by women managers faced higher adverse career consequences compared to their male counterparts (Bono et al.,2017).

Bowles et al., (2019) observed that women receive higher resistance while negotiating within organizational roles, and successful role negotiation for counter-stereotypical career paths was more significant in closing the overall gender gap than compensation negotiation. Regarding the role incongruity theory, van Osch and Schaveling (2020) argue that men's career advancement is hampered due to part-time employment compared to women, challenging the idea that part-time work affects women in particular. Women reach top positions faster than men if their organizational tenure is high compared to men, suggesting evidence of institutional pressure for advancing women (Bonet et al.,2020).

### **Methodology**

Gender researchers commonly use qualitative inquiry due to the availability of multiple qualitative approaches, which helps them deepen their understanding, improve empathy, and inspire social change (Chatfield, 2018). The researchers adopted Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to collect data, intending to bring men and women together on a common platform and exchange ideas and experiences. The goal of the FGDs was to understand and elicit the different perspectives that people hold on factors impacting the career advancement, of employees in an organization. Three group transcripts were analyzed using the the-

matic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) resulting in three levels of codes namely, 1<sup>st</sup> level coding (*Codes*), 2<sup>nd</sup> level coding (*Family*), and 3<sup>rd</sup> level coding (*Themes*). An inductive approach helps researchers with themes suggesting and pointing to the gendered practices at the workplace.

### **Sampling**

The samples comprised women and men professionals with at least ten years of work experience. The work-experience criteria ensured that participants had a gamut of workplace experiences. We also wanted the participants to have undergone at least one life stage transition providing us with more profound and richer insights for our study (Taherdoost, 2016). Therefore, purposive quota sampling technique was used (Taherdoost, 2016), that enabled the researchers to get some respondents who were in positions of influencing practices.

**The work-experience criteria ensured that participants had a gamut of workplace experiences.**

### **Data collection**

The researchers recruited the participants through their professional and personal networks spread across different Indian cities. Each FGD lasted for an average of 90 minutes. Due to the pandemic, all the FGDs were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and recorded with prior permission from participants. We transcribed the recordings

verbatim within 24 hours for thematic content analysis. There were thirteen participants, five males (38%) and eight females (62%). There was a healthy mix of sectors to which the participants belonged, 31% - Information Technology (IT), 15%-Manufacturing, 15%- Finance, 8% each in- Banking, Media, Social Sector, and Design Services, and 7%- IT-enabled services – ITeS.

The finding tables covering a sample of entire coding procedure are in the Appendix.

### **Findings**

The FGD ascertained the factors that impact the employees' career advancement from a gendered lens. It also explored the differences and similarities of experiences and perspectives across gender on the three primary themes which emerged from our data analysis. They are: 1) Human Resource (HR) Practices and Policies, 2) Employee Engagement, and 3) Role of Supervisor. The impact of the pandemic due to COVID-19 was also apparent during all the discussions.

### **HR Policies & Practices**

With focus on diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices, recruitment was the most common practice and point of initiation. While some organizations to which respondents belonged looked at the overall gender ratio balance, a few looked at the leadership positions and made all efforts to hire women for the same, without diluting the person-job fit

and merit-based hiring. Women also shared about lost opportunities due to their 'newly wed' status. Progressive initiatives are necessary to change the existing mindsets, else, the existing system stands preserved and gender inclusion will be illusive.

Respondent: 3.13: "Actually, we operate in Baruch. And we want the port head ideally should be women employee. Probably it's very, very unique in its proposals, but actually, we want women employees handle these kind of profile[...] there are a few things which are happening from a legacy point of view[...] roles which are only men for men employees, those are the stereotypes we want to break [...]"

**Female participants were found more dissatisfied with the outcome of performance evaluations consistently.**

The Performance Management System due to its linkage to salary, promotion, and development opportunities gave an insight into the differential perspective between males and females during the FGDs. Female participants were found more dissatisfied with the outcome of performance evaluations consistently. Women who returned from maternity, lost promotion, growth, and learning opportunities and those who voiced the same received vague performance appraisal feedback.

Respondent 3.11: "They have been raising voice on why a promotion has

been stopped or why she is not getting a raise? [...] because they haven't been productive. So, they give a certain reason which sometimes is not acceptable[...]"

Participants discussed harassment at the workplace as it is a sensitive issue and impacts employees' mental health and voice behavior. One participant shared that women are reluctant to lodge formal complaints, hence it is under-reported. One participant shared that rather than relying on individual complaints, there should be alternative voice mechanisms emphasizing problem-solving and initiating early interventions.

Respondent 3.13: "But one of the barriers I see in the mind of women employees is basically the confidentiality aspect. Sometimes they don't want to open up, they don't want to raise a complaint probably, because they believe that probably things will be known to everybody that might also impact their career. [...]there is this iota of doubt in the mind of employees about the confidentiality aspect;90- 95% of the time, at least informally, things are known to either the manager or HR or the senior management."

### **Role of Supervisor**

Supervisors are responsible for their subordinates' career advancement and make the interaction productive and build a relation of camaraderie. Participants shared mixed responses and experiences with their supervisors.

Addressing employees using abusive language or speaking in a rude tone impacts their morale and reduces their productivity. Women in the group mentioned that unreasonable workload, undue pressure, and abusive behavior all resulted in stress and emotional exhaustion. The gendered organization structure and practices do not allow a healthy relationship between supervisors and female employees.

Respondent 2.8: “So it’s very easy to pick that call and say that, you know, why don’t you do this and send it when the person knows that you are already loaded with 10 of other things which you have. But it’s because everything is remote, you know, the entire other people don’t get to know what all you are handling. [...]”

Respondent 2.7: “[...]nothing more than money and financial needs are motivating you to work towards your role right now because we are so exhausted. [...] there are people who will send the email at 9:30 pm[...].”

Another essential element discussed was that a subordinate’s alignment with the supervisor’s goals builds a good rapport and, in turn, increases productivity. Good communication between the boss and the subordinates improves mental health, enhances productivity, however, lousy communication increases the probability of quitting, and often the compatibility depends on their combined personality traits; and organizational contexts also influence women’s relationship at the workplace.

Respondent 3.12: “[...]organization, which is following a very standard and transparent way of giving equal opportunities to everyone, then we are almost 90% there[...]. [...] it is a communication, which is happening regularly, frequently and repetitively, then I don’t think communication would be a challenge in terms of whether it is promotion or anything else, or any opportunities, which is coming in [...]. [...]If you are not part of that communication and you are being sidelined, then probably that’s a place where you will not feel comfortable [...].”

### **Employee Engagement**

A strong relationship with employee engagement is work-life balance. It was found that domestic responsibilities and work pose more significant work pressure resulting in decreased feelings of engagement, while the availability of home and work resources increases the sense of engagement and also reduces burnout.

Respondent 3.11: “[...]best part was like working together sitting beside and, you know, go for a chat[...]. [...]right now, what is happening is we are working from home, we are isolated. So we have to work for continuously for hours and then again, family comes and it’s something like you have to switch between both the things. You have no break. At least for me it is that extra work.”

Based on the above analysis, the summary of findings in Table 1 highlights how workplaces are still gendered which may be attributed to employee awareness and

attitude (due to innate biases) and decision-makers at large, and a few gender-neutral practices that need further accomplishment.

**Table 1 Comparative Table for Gendered vs Ungendered Practices in Workplaces (Reported from Focus Group Discussions Analysis)**

Theme	Gendered Traits and Practices (undesirable)	Ungendered Traits and Practices (desirable)
<b>HR Policies and Practices</b>	<p>Stopping promotion and increment for females when they are newly married, get pregnant, go for maternity leave, return from maternity leave; For same role male get more increment than female</p> <p>Lack of voice mechanism and communication channel for grievance handling</p> <p>Long working hours; lack of consideration for work life balance</p> <p>Women preferred for support and backend functions and men for front ending roles</p>	<p>Having a compliance &amp; POSH committee for grievance handling and the grievances are handled well</p> <p>Safety and travel policies for women</p> <p>Merit based targeted hiring for women in leadership position</p> <p>Offering similar opportunities to both male and female</p> <p>Awareness training around D&amp;I initiatives</p>
<b>Role of Supervisor</b>	<p>Favoritism towards people who say “yes boss”; Adverse impact on women’s career who raise voice or come forward and complain</p> <p>Non-transparency around promotion and salary increments decisions</p> <p>Judgmental and unreasonable workload while WFH during pandemic.</p> <p>Discrimination in assigning roles and opportunities by favoring men.</p> <p>Using abusive language while interacting with individuals and teams.</p> <p>Male subordinates not ready to take directives from female boss.</p>	<p>Equal opportunities for training and development, sharing ideas.</p> <p>Functioning with empathy and trust especially during pandemic.</p> <p>Transparency and consistency with both men and women; similar expectations around job alignment and outcomes; competency-based work assignments.</p> <p>Approachable without being judgmental; especially important for women who perceive adverse impact on career if they are transparent with their supervisor.</p> <p>Provide psychologically safe environments for all even while working remotely</p> <p>People with “good” supervisors have not dipped in their productivity.</p>
<b>Employee Engagement</b>	<p>People working in different time zones expected to be available round the clock, while catering to domestic and care giving responsibilities.</p> <p>Work life balance issues adversely impacting mental wellbeing.</p> <p>Being available round the clock is a mark of good performance and productivity.</p>	<p>Structured way of working; continuous feedback and communication so that employees can plan the day in hybrid working.</p>

Table 1 highlights the findings as Gendered (undesirable) vs Un-Gendered (desirable) attitudes and practices as understood from the participants.

Most of the female participants discussed the biases and discrimination they faced during appraisals, promotions, and salary increases. The ones who did not express much displeasure shared that they either had to be extremely vocal about their expectations or were extremely good at their jobs; they knew that the current organization valued them. None of the male participants shared similar facing biases.

**A female participant shared that in Northern India, known to be male-dominated, the role of subordinates also plays a crucial role in her success.**

India is culturally diverse region-wise (Haq, 2012); a female participant shared that in Northern India, known to be male-dominated, the role of subordinates also plays a crucial role in her success. Male subordinates are not ready to take directions from female supervisors; unfortunately, she often has to seek help from her male counterparts to get things done.

Furthermore, there was also a general pattern where both male and female participants agreed to the critical role of their supervisor's attitude in their career advancement.

## **Discussion**

Acker (1990) suggested the need for "A systematic theory of gender and organizations for several reasons". We discuss our findings based on the theoretical framework and explore possible strategies to overcome gender barriers.

First, the gender segregation of work, including divisions between paid and unpaid work, is partly created through organizational practices. It was understood from the FGDs, that though in almost all organizations, there was discussion around diversity and inclusion, the procedures for implementation were nascent in most cases (Mor Barak, Luria & Brimhall, 2021). Gendered work practices were apparent from the inputs of respondents belonging to financial, banking, and social sectors; the prevalence of travel to a remote location without making appropriate arrangements for females discouraged women from taking up similar roles but also left women without solutions to the problem. One male respondent from the construction industry acknowledged that due to vendors' behavior at the worksite, women are unlikely to choose those profiles as careers (Infante-Perea, Navarro-Astor & Román-Onsalo, 2021). As reported mainly during the pandemic, women are either dropping out or having burnout due to additional childcare and domestic responsibilities during the lockdown (Whiley, Sayer & Juanchich, 2021).

Second, and related to gender segregation, income and status inequality between women and men is also partly

created in organizational processes; understanding these processes is necessary for understanding gender inequality. It was understood from the FGD that there is a lack of focused change initiatives. Few female respondents shared that despite the prevalence of grievance processes, they have not seen actions taken even after raising grievances. There were harassment and a lack of transparency in salary increments and promotion decisions. Additionally, discrimination between males and females, while a female wanted to make her point during meetings.

**There were harassment and a lack of transparency in salary increments and promotion decisions.**

On the contrary, one male respondent shared that despite having a formal grievance-handling process, women choose the informal way. They either fear an adverse impact on their career or their character assassination. The same male respondent, however, also shared that they are aware of the cultural barriers in India and hence resolve the grievances even if they learn about it through an informal channel. Due to the pandemic, the gendered segregation of work is further widening, and practitioners and policymakers must make additional efforts to include women (Foley & Cooper, 2021).

Third, organizations are one arena in which widely disseminated cultural images of gender are invented and reproduced. Knowledge of cultural production

is important for understanding gender construction (Hear Parkin 1987). Acker (1990) mentions the early image of the manager as the “capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interest of task accomplishment,” which was evident from the FGDs and reiterated by females with male bosses. Huang, Diehl and Paterlini (2020) found that boards with men with multiple appointments did not want to break their gender monopoly resulting in low gender-diverse boards. In the same light, two female participants shared their experience of favoritism extended by male bosses towards male subordinates, promoting a “yes boss” culture. Powell and Butterfield (2015) established that male subordinates either prefer male bosses or have no preferences. In the given context, in addition to the masculine nature of Indian society (Naghavi & Mubarak, 2019), the Northern part of India is known to be very male-dominated. This masculine culture is a barrier in the workplace where male subordinates working in the field are not ready to take directives from female bosses, as disclosed by a female respondent.

Fourth, some aspects of individual gender identity, perhaps particularly masculinity, are also products of organizational processes pressures. The use of abusive language at the workplace was reported by female respondents in bad taste, impacting their morale, giving unnecessary stress, and viewing it as an unwarranted means to get work done (Matos, O’Neill & Lei, 2018). The culture of long working hours was already detrimental to women’s career advance-

ment (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). The current pandemic has further blurred the line between work hours and family/household time, impacting women more than men, thus negatively aggravating the work-life balance issues. Gebbels, Gao and Cai (2020) emphasized the need for open employee dialogue based on an inclusive listening environment, thus challenging traditional masculinity in workplaces. The current pandemic has aggravated this need for open and regular communication with employees, especially women, as understood by the FGD participants.

Fifth, an important feminist project is to make large-scale organizations more democratic and more supportive of humane goals. One male respondent shared the current practice of making special efforts to fill up leadership positions like head of the port, head of purchase, and a few more as a focused attempt to bring in the mindset change in the organization. He shared that the motive is to challenge the status quo and make the organization inclusive in a true sense. Considering the situation for both genders, especially females who have been adversely impacted due to household and professional workloads while working from home during the pandemic (Raile, 2021), can reduce burnout and emotional exhaustion (Ren, Song, Li & Xiao, 2020).

Additionally, it is noteworthy that both male and female respondents belong to Information Technology (IT) and Information Technology enabled Services (ITeS) with parent companies

headquartered in the US and Europe. They had more matured processes and were relatively more transparent. The respondent from the Indian IT company had several episodes of discrimination and unfairness impacting her career advancement. Respondents from the banking and finance sector had similar experiences of biases and discrimination. Despite structural barriers in engineering (Yates & Skinner, 2021), it was evident from the discussion that acknowledgment of the presence of obstacles to women's career advancement, deliberate and focused initiatives were necessary. Else even if awareness is there, with every new challenge or crisis (like the current pandemic), the issue will remain open, and efforts will go in vain. The media sector, which has more females as an industry, seemed to be more comfortable voicing themselves and getting opportunities to grow. The attitude of employees at large seems to be the barrier to making organizations gender-neutral. Gathering male and female perspectives on a common forum made it easier to validate the assumptions while trying to explore the obstacles from the gendered perspective. It was encouraging to witness those men participants discuss the opportunities and success stories of interventions that have worked in their organizations, that were supportive of women and invested in their career advancement.

**The attitude of employees at large seems to be the barrier to making organizations gender-neutral.**

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## Implication, Limitations & Conclusion

The study has practical implications and identifies a few actions that can facilitate women's advancement in Indian workplaces. Organizations in the following areas must make a focused intervention:

Hiring – Targeted D&I hiring practices for stereotypical male dominated roles will help make the hiring practices successful. This is in addition to the popular practice of improving gender ratios across levels.

Appraisal, Promotion, and Salary Increase – Transparency in decision-making with robust communication mechanisms can change the perception of unfairness at all levels (executive and non-executive) when it comes to such key processes, where most of the women display maximum dissatisfaction

Role of Supervisor – Supervisor's support, as understood from the discussion, has a considerable impact on the employees' engagement levels, thus affecting their productivity. The onus of fulfillment of a subordinate's career expectation is with the supervisors as they decide on roles, opportunities, rewards, and well-being of their subordinates; this becomes critical for women as the biases and stereotypes often come in the way of their potential assessment.

Future studies can focus on mindset and implicit bias issues which come in the way of an inclusive culture, thus impeding women's career advancement.

The sample size may be a limitation to generalizing the findings across all sectors and organizations. In addition, the study looks at male and female as a binary, whereas it could be ranging in a continuum, thus not considering the different identities which may differ due to the same.

This study, builds on Acker's theory of gendered organization and bring to light the gendered structures, policies and practices and how women embodiment in many circumstances go unnoticed, acting as barriers for successful implementation of a gender-neutral organization. The design of workplaces and mindset issues reinforce the gendered way of working in Indian organizations. The study highlights that even in a male dominated industry, with the conscious intervention of leadership and human resource personnel, not only gender diversity and inclusion but productivity also gets a boost.

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Appendix 1

Sample Focus Group Discussion Analysis: Development of 1st Level Code (Codes), 2<sup>nd</sup> Level Code (Family) and 3<sup>rd</sup> Level Code (Theme).

**TABLE 1-A**

FGD No.	Respondent	Comments/Statements	Context	Important Words	Strength of the statements
3		<p>certain managers who are probably not fashioned they their own way of looking at team members. Those who are probably in terms of thinking in terms of culture in there, they look like they would like to like these team members, which is not the right thing in an organization context.</p>	<p>Since manufacturing has a culture legacy which is tough to change, he mentions how people with primitive mindsets still exist which doesn't appear professional in today's organization context.</p>	<p>old fashioned way of looking at team members, mindsets, platform to team member,</p>	<p>high</p>
3		<p>it's all about what platform you are giving to a team member.</p>	<p>for successfully handling the team, you need to give that platform to them create it for them</p>	<p>platform to team member,</p>	<p>low</p>
3		<p>I found probably they are not speaking up, because that culture was like that, but the moment I tried to tell them that the culture we are responsible for this, I mean, nobody else will come on our way to probably change the culture, then things change actively.</p>	<p>His perspective on culture, how culture impacts practice of openness and transparency and how he himself is an agent of change, he is the one who can bring in the change as necessary.</p>	<p>culture was like that,</p>	<p>moderate</p>
3		<p>actually we support over is as a manager I need to support a lot. Sometimes as a lot of problems, which are available in organizations in context, we need to detect them and provide those support</p>	<p>how to make practices feasible: dual role of a manager as well as giving platform at an organizational level</p>	<p>Support as manager, give platform</p>	<p>moderate</p>

Sample Table 1B

Code	Frequency	Family	Theme
Male Female Ratio	4	Recruitment	
Same kind of opportunities	5		
Specific roles identified for women	2		
Evaluation practices	5	Performance Management	
Delayed Promotions	4		
Transparent practices	2		HR Policies and Practices
D&I related trainings	4	Learning and Development	
Training for career development	3		
Mindset	2	Inclusion Practices	
Gender Diversity	2		
Practices for Inclusion	6		