

Women in BPO Sector in India: A Study of Individual Aspirations and Environmental Challenges

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Abstract

The present paper is based on the key findings of an empirical study conducted on the BPO workforce over a period of one year in Karnataka and West Bengal in India. The objective of the study was to prepare a status report on the service conditions, benefits and hazards of working women in the BPO sector. It also attempted to draw a comparative picture of the situation in the two states vis-à-vis women employees. The study assumed significance in light of the gory incidents of rape, murder, and assault of women employees in states of Karnataka, Maharashtra and others.

Women constitute a significant number of the workforce in BPO sector in the country. They are primarily in their mid-twenties and qualified with graduate or post graduate degrees. Employment opportunity and career prospects in BPOs come as an enviable choice for them. Most of the women earn a good package, especially in Bangalore where salary index is higher than Kolkata. After a brief tenure in contractual service, the employees are inducted into the permanent service of the company with diverse benefits ranging from gratuity, bonus, provident fund, allowances, insurance and others. However, it has been found that thin strains of discontentment creep in over time on issues such as inadequate salary packages, differential promotional prospects and increments, ambiguous service conditions, irregular and arduous work schedules and lack of facilities in workplace.

Keywords: BPO, women, employment, IT, service

1. Introduction

The millennium has witnessed the onset of a revolution in terms of emergence of new industries and fields of work, employment, economic well being and increased women participation in workforce. Though the change may not have permeated at all levels and penetrated all sections of society, it has definitely aided and assisted the middle class and higher middle class women to achieve economic independence, societal prominence and self esteem.

The new Information Technology companies are the prime carriers of this revolution. But the question which remains is how far the women have benefitted from this. An empirical study conducted by the author(s) in two cities of India during 2007-08 have revealed that while more and more women are being employed in the IT/ITES sector, more often than not, they are facing challenges with safety and security, both within and outside the workplace. The Visakha guidelines are still far from reality. Little efforts have been made to install grievance redressal mechanisms or sexual harassment committees to address gender issues pertaining to discrimination, harassment and victimization. "Every night when thousands of young Indian women leave home to work in the "US or UK shift" at a BPO, their family members skip a heartbeat and remain tensed till these women return safe the next morning." The challenges posed in terms of child care and family commitments are also pressing. The

present article is an evaluation of the state of affairs in the IT/ITES industry and emphasizes on the need to evolve effective strategies to improve the situation concerning BPO sector.

2. Women at IT/ITES Industry in India

The global expansion of software and IT enabled services has opened up new vistas for women. The major resource required by the software and services outsourcing in India is a steady supply of educated technical labour or 'knowledge workers'. The industry is considered to provide a good avenue for the employment of women, who have conventionally not opted for technical occupations, but have the essential knowledge base and flexibility to adjust themselves to the outsourcing industry. As UNCTAD Report (2002) demonstrated, software and IT-enabled services has broadened job prospects for women, who can now work from home (assuming adequate infrastructure and bandwidth are available) or in a data centre or tele-centre close to home

As per Nasscom estimates, women comprise 20 – 25% of total number of science and engineering graduates in the country. The number of software professionals has been rising continuously over the years. The number of software professionals increased from 6800 in 1985 to 650,000 in 2003-2004 (Nasscom, 2004). Women are joining the IT sector and their numbers are fast increasing. In 1993, only 10% of workforce was women. In 1998, 18% of IT workforce was women which were higher than the national average of 12%. In 2003, the proportion increased to 21%. The participation of women in IT is rapidly growing and is expected to go up to 35% in 2005. Hence, women are now occupying a prominent position in the labour force. According to Nasscom, the focus on women by the IT-BPO industry is in part an acknowledgment of their growing role in India's economy. The Indian IT-BPO industry, in fact, has become synonymous with some truly pioneering work related to women employees, and the sector, more than other industries in India, has been launching initiatives designed to promote the interests of women in their workplace.

In 2007-08, the IT industry had 28 per cent women in its workforce compared to 24 per cent in 2005-06. At the entry level, in 2005-06, 38 per cent were women compared to 47 per cent in 2007-08.

The 11th Five Years Plan (2007-2012) has viewed that ICT can play a meaningful role in bridging gender disparities by directly benefiting the women who use technology as well as by improving the delivery of services to women. This is also reflected in the relatively higher proportion of women employees in the Indian IT-BPO sector – as compared to other sectors of the economy. The influence on gender equality is not restricted to the urban cities alone. There are also examples where ICT is being used to strengthen earning opportunities for women and to build productive skills among disadvantaged women as well as offer knowledge-based services that help improve the productivity of women's enterprises in smaller towns and cities. Communications technology offers possibilities to women to engage in e-commerce, distance education, and e-government, thereby overcoming barriers to women's economic advancement. Especially in scenarios where face-to-face contact with other men is discouraged, women can find a route to the economy through the virtual marketplaces and workplaces that an electronics infrastructure may provide through e-commerce sites and virtual, hosted call-centres and the like.

Thus, the gender perspective in Business Process Outsourcing industry is an important point of study. Few researches have been conducted in the past on multi dimensional aspects of the industry including its women workforce which has been briefed hereunder.

3. Literature Review

Taylor, Noronho, Scholaris and D'Cruz (2008) in their study "Employees Voice and Collective Formation In Indian ITES-BPO Industry" about the working condition and employee rights highlighted the fact that "the ITES-BPO industry is portrayed as providing unparallel career opportunities and generous pay- packages for the young graduates who overwhelmingly make up its workforce. On the rare occasions that employees' dissatisfaction or grievances do arise, they can be resolved easily and timely by the management within the existing company structure". Taylor, Noronho, Scholaris and D'Cruz as such commented that Human Resource department acts as 'substitutes' for the development of the forms of collective organization and representation. However, they concluded in their study that the hosts of grievances from the seemingly trivial indignities of favouritism to the heavier handed arbitrariness of supervisory and managerial treatment or to material grievances related to pay and workload or to profound concerns over safety suggest that these are wide-spread in the Indian ITES-BPO industry. However the study has some drawbacks like- a lesser number of female respondents which reduce the variability of the responses, very few captive and third party companies were included but the job pressure in such companies is reported to be more than the Indian domestic companies and lastly although women employees in BPO sector is considered to be an integral part of the workforce, still this gender issue is not judiciously handled in this study.

In another study on “Work Organization and Employees Relation” carried out by Taylor and Bain (2006) admitted that there has been considerable diversification in the range of processes delivered from India and certainly growth in higher value and professional knowledge process outsourcing but Indian ITES-BPO industry provide largely standardized and neutralized services of low complexity. Further tight monitoring, surveillance and a plethora of quantitative and qualitative controls are implemented minimizing employees discretion. Taylor and Bain found out that within the workplace, technology is used to automate work with many of the calls being low-level transactional enquiries which are fairly repetitive, with short cycle times (between 30 and 180 seconds).

The article titled “ICT enabled services- will women benefit?” carried out by Howcroft and Richardson(2008) encompasses that the subcontractors of the call-centres provide less training and pay lower wages and employees have lower levels of job discretion, more intense monitoring and weaker collective representation. Employers prefer young, single women, with a good education and rapidly shifting technologies tend to see the remuneration of young new hires rather than experienced workers. Underlining the assembly line nature of the work, employers require flexible working, which frequently prevents women with families from jobs during off-peak hours. The authors however, concluded that although labour market issue in the global market cannot be “black boxed” with the formal being divorced from the prevalent and expanding informal economy, where many women workers are concentrated. Far from re-shaping women’s lives and creating new opportunities, ICT –enabled service work offers limited benefit to women, especially the poor.

In a study conducted by the Association Chambers of Commerce & Industry of India titled “Night Shifts for Women: Growth & Opportunities”, it has been observed that women working in night shifts experience social problems and poor child care. The study suggested that baby care centres should be opened at the workplace where she can leave her child. They are of a view that social relationship should be encouraged. The study shows that night shifts cause psychological, emotional and biological problems based on rhythmic pattern of sleeping and waking. The study also reflected the need of proper rest and alternate employment in the day time particularly three months before and two months after the child birth. Although BPO is considered to be the most promising sector for women in the night shifts in comparison to Textiles, Leather and Health service included in this study, the present scenario does not support this view as the cry for safe transportation continues to be the central concern for the BPO employees who witness frequent incidents of rash driving, over speeding and accidents involved in pick and drop BPO vehicles; cases such as rape and murder of an employee, acid attack or assault by drivers also get reported from BPO hubs across India.

Preeti Singh and Anu Pandey (2005) in their study “Women in Call Centres” reflected one of the basic facts that most of the women employed in call centres are basically in the process job. There is no discrimination against women in the entry level but a very few are in the top management level. This study also highlighted that most of women employed are unmarried who take up this jobs and drop out of their jobs to get married and bear children. Although this study is completely dedicated to the women employed in the call-centres but the limitation is that it is exploratory in nature and covers only 100 respondents at a random.

In the article titled “Women in IT”, Dataquest expressed their concern about the security in the BPO industry. While some say that corporatization of the transport sector is a must to eliminate security threats, others believe that things will improve once the domestic BPO segment kicks-off.

In a remarkable study titled “Gender Issues in the Indian Software Outsourcing Industry”, Carol Upadhyia (2006) pointed out that the reality is different from the image that has been created. Long working hours, a high pressure work atmosphere structured by unreasonable deadlines and the need to travel abroad are the factors that drove many women to drop out of the industry or to stagnate in the lower end jobs. Carol Upadhyia had not drawn a distinction between IT and ITES/BPO. Outsourcing done in BPO firms does not require the person to move abroad to do onsite projects, rather they are in their workplace to do the projects which is actually the main essence of the BPO industry. BPO firms not only recruit engineering graduates but also graduates and post graduates students who basically do not have any technical qualifications. So there is no dearth of educated labour force. So Upadhyia’s view of recruiting only engineering graduates is basically meaningless. Upadhyia rightly pointed out that HR managers and corporate leaders fail to recognize that although they might treat women employees at par with men and even provide special facilities to cater to their needs, women still live in gendered society and highly unequal domestic situations.

Vijaybhaskar (2000) and Ghosh (2003) has suggested that the sector shows clear signs of labour market segmentation by gender, where women are engaged in low-paid and less skilled occupations, thereby reinforcing or aggravating the existing gender inequities in the labour market. It has been observed that while the

proliferation of ICT based jobs will certainly draw more educated women into paid jobs and reduces the problem of educated unemployment to some extent; it would not bring about any major transformation in aggregate employment patterns in the near future.

The findings of Ramesh and Neetha (2004) in their study “Women Workers in the New Economy: Call Centre Work in Noida” view that the work condition is no way better than the traditional sweetsshops of manufacturing sector. The degree of surveillance required at work is even comparable with the situations of nineteenth century prisons or the Roman slave ships. The survey data also suggested that a considerable proportion of women agents prefer to continue at the level of agents and are not actively seeking any vertical mobility in the job ladder. This voluntary acceptance of low-end career is mainly due to the caring commitments and the household bindings where promotion is an undesirable proposition with added responsibilities and greater rigidities.

Another significant feature of women participation in the ITES workforce that is noted by both Ramesh (2004) and Singh and Pandey (2005) is that for many women workers, the job is not a economic necessity but is a supplement to the family income or is something they have taken up as a ‘pastime’. This is true especially for women from middle and upper-middle class families, and explains both the absence of a desire for upward mobility and the fact that many women continue to work only as long as the job does not interfere with their domestic responsibilities. However, for many of those from lower income groups, their earnings are the major source of family’s income.

Clark and Sekher (2007) in their study about “Gender, Technology and Development” raised a question- ‘Can career-minded young women reverse gender discrimination?’ They developed the said context in view of Bangalore’s high-tech sector. They admitted that a crucial factor responsible for accelerated demographic transition and social change is economic development. Further the concept of ‘male breadwinner’ slowly giving way to gender transformation towards an equal double-income family will almost certainly intensify with growing numbers of young women entering the new global job market, which offer seemingly glamorous occupation with handsome salaries, whatever its hazards and insecurities prove to be.

In Indian patriarchal society, the emergence of call centres is nothing less than a social reform movement as far as economic, social and cultural empowerment of women is concerned. In this backdrop Pradhan and Abraham (2005) in their study titled “Social and Cultural Impact of Outsourcing: Emerging Issues from Indian Call Centres” mentioned that employment in call centres for women is still considered to be less dignified work due to the odd working hours and is also sexually stigmatized. According to the study, perhaps the most important negative impact that call centres have generated is the wide-ranging social division within family and outside. Most of the call centre employees neither possess the necessary skills to be employed in the high-end BPO sector nor the skills to get other professional work; this has a serious social and cultural repercussion.

“Looking at Information Technology from a Gender Perspective: The Call Centres In India” Rekha Pande (2005) reported that a large number of women tend to be concentrated in the end-user, lower skilled jobs and comprise a very small number among managerial, maintenance and design personnel. The call centres are utilizing the available human resource of a large pool of English speaking youngsters. But the concluding remark of Pande emphasized that call centres are unavailable to really change gender relation but facilitating the growth of gendered division of labour.

Mattingly in her study in 2005 “Indian call centres: The outsourcing of ‘goods jobs’ for women” pointed out that the work in monotonous and grueling, night work and regular shift changes take a huge toll on health and social life, many work place have mandatory overtime, leaves can be difficult to get, the pace of the work is brutal and most workers neither advance in the industry nor learn hard skills they can use in getting another job. But at the same time, the work offers young women a mean of escaping the rigid patriarchal control exercised over middle class daughters. The social stigma associated with the job violates norms surrounding the middle class women’s employment and does not bring status to the men in their families.

4. Empirical Study: Methodology

The present study was conducted in 2007-08. The study has been an empirical one. The population of the study is BPOs located in Karnataka (Bangalore Region) and West Bengal (Kolkata Region). The unit of study is specific- Women employed in the BPO sector of the mentioned states.

A comprehensive database of ITES/BPO units operating in the above regions has been drawn. For the purpose, several sources like Nasscom, Prowess, Capitaline, Departments of IT, Regional IT Directories and Internet sites were referred. There are near about 1200 ITES/BPO units in Bangalore region and 400 ITES/BPO units in Kolkata region. A random selection of 10% of the ITES/BPO units was made. 10 women employees from each

of the ITES/BPO units were selected for the survey.

The sample in Kolkata comprised of 361 women as against a target of 400 and 1160 women in Bangalore as against a target of 1260. The actual number of BPO units covered is 120 in Bangalore and 40 in Kolkata (10 % of total units in the regions).

Table 1.

Items	Sampling	
	Bangalore	Kolkata
No. of ITES/BPOs	1200	400
No. of ITES/BPOs Selected@ 10%	120	40
Sample Target	1200 respondents	400 respondents
Sample Collected	1160	361
Total Sample Size	1521	

For the purpose of data collection, well structured schedules were prepared covering the different dimensions of the study. Initially, an open ended schedule was drawn in order to provide flexibility in terms of answers. However, after a pilot study being conducted in both the regions, where about 20 respondents each were administered the schedule, some modifications were done in light of the general reluctance of respondents in response to some parameters such as salary as well as time constraints. A close ended questionnaire was subsequently finalized. Before administration of the schedule, enumerators explained the aims and objects of the investigation and also removed difficulties, if any, in understanding the implications of a particular question. The proforma of questions was filled by the enumerators as per replies of the respondents.

Another schedule was drawn up for the BPO companies where the object was to know the initiatives taken by them for women employees, in addition to the already existing policies. The same was kept open ended and was filled up by the enumerators as per replies given by company officials. In most cases, they have been the Human Resource Manager of the particular BPO. The companies which participated in the course of the survey included Fortune 1000 (5), Fortune 500 (6), Forbes India (3), Other Big Companies (14) and Small and Medium units (132). See Table 2.

Table 2.

Respondents and Tools of Data Collections		
Respondent Category	Data Collection Method	Tools of Data Collection
Women BPO Employees	Schedule	Closed-ended information schedule for the employees
Company Officials	Schedule	Open-ended information schedule for the companies

Subsequent to coding, classification was done using computer devices. Analysis and report writing followed.

5. Findings: Professional Aspects

5.1 Organizational Level of Employee

The respondents were divided into four levels according to the number of years in the present organization, i.e. less than one year in the present company has been considered to be the entry level, one to three years as Junior level, three to five years as the Middle-level and more than five years as the senior level. Based on this, majority of the respondents are found to be from the junior level followed by the entry level. In terms of percentage, about 33% of the respondents in Kolkata are in their present organization for less than one year (entry level) and another 51% are working for their company for more than one year but less than three years (junior level). In Bangalore, 46% and 47% are at entry level and junior level respectively. It is to be noted that only 1% of the respondents in Bangalore are in the present organization for more than five years compared to Kolkata, where 7% are reported to be in the said category.

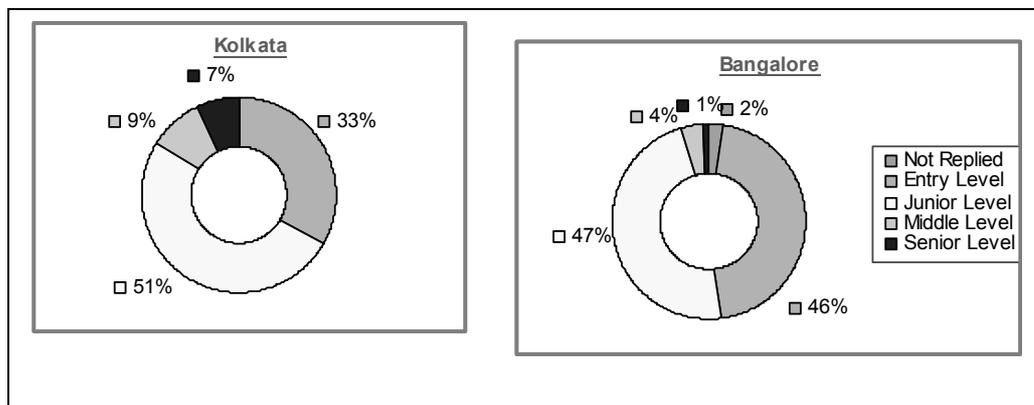


Figure 1. Organizational level of employee

5.2 Age

The findings reveal that the BPO workforce is relatively young, the majority being less than 30 years. However, in Kolkata, 21% of the surveyed women are above 30 years which is only 5% in Bangalore. The mean age of the women employees in BPOs has been found to be 25 years.

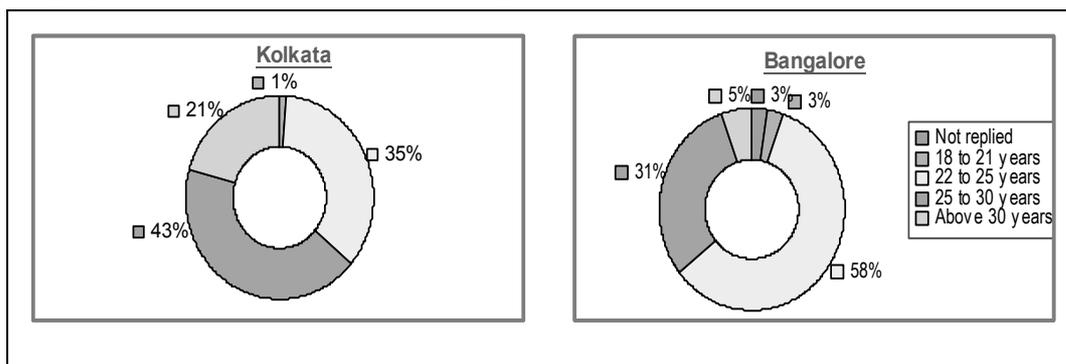


Figure 2. Age

5.3 Educational Qualification

Kolkata and Bangalore exhibit the same characteristics when it comes to the question of educational qualification. Respondents in these regions who have been surveyed were either graduates or post-graduates. 60% of the respondents in Kolkata and Bangalore are graduates while 40% of them are post graduates. A minor section of the respondents in Kolkata are undergraduates, having completed their 10 +2 (Higher Secondary) while 1 % of the respondents in Bangalore have not replied to the question.

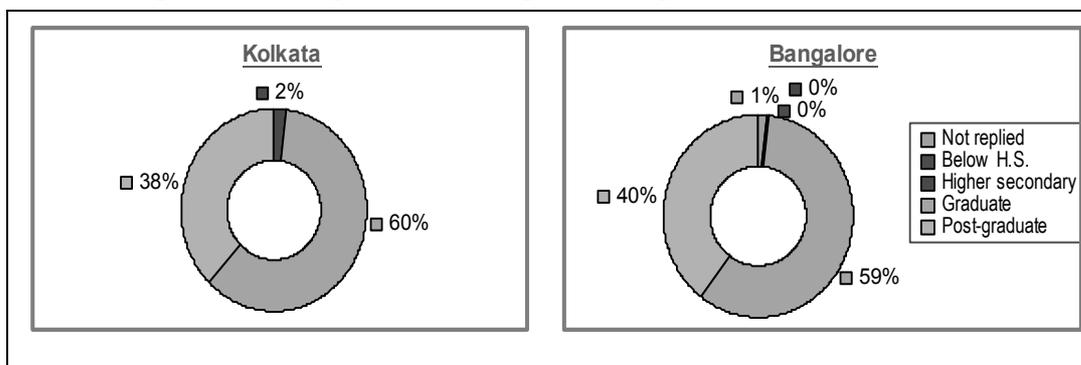


Figure 3. Educational qualification

5.4 Marital Status

Unmarried/single women constitute the maximum (approx 60%) of the BPO employees in the surveyed areas. However, 39% of the respondents in Kolkata were married which is higher to that of Bangalore accounting for merely 30%. A few were also recorded to be either widowed or divorced in both the cities.

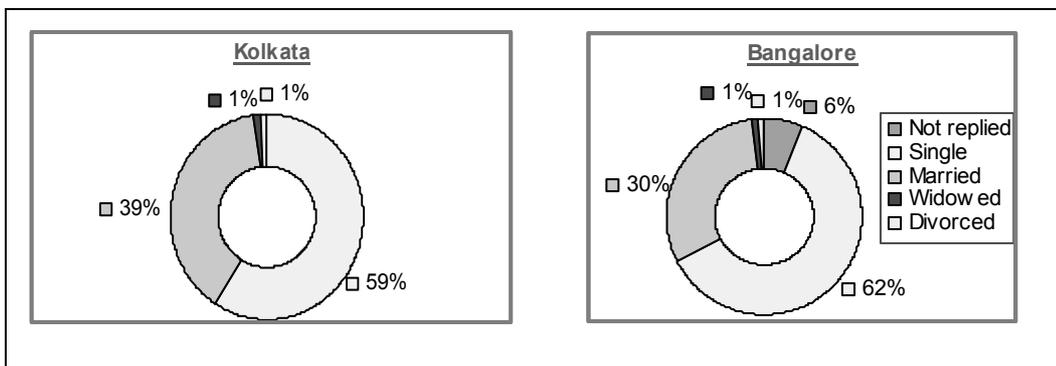


Figure 4. Marital status

5.5 Job Profile

The respondents surveyed are from three sections-technical, managerial and others. About 44 % and 56% of the respondents in Kolkata and Bangalore work in the technical section of the BPO. The management staff of the BPOs surveyed, including Finance and Human Resource, comprises 16% and 7% women respondents while about 30 % of the women respondents are in other services of the organization like system maintenance section, general and accounts section. Many respondents however did not reply to the question (14 % in Kolkata and 7 % in Bangalore).

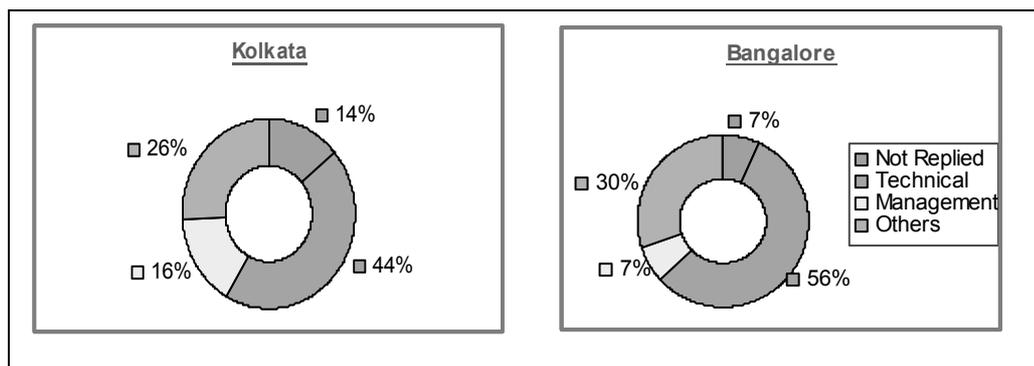


Figure 5. Job profile

5.6 Previous Work Experience

About 49% of the respondents in Bangalore have chosen not to reply to this question and the second majority (i.e., 26%) of the respondents has previous work experiences counting less than one year. Only 6 % of the women employees have work experience of more than 3 years. In Kolkata, 36% have less than one year and 33% have one to three years previous work experience. 14% of the respondents in Kolkata is found to have work experience of more than five years as compared to Bangalore having only 3%.

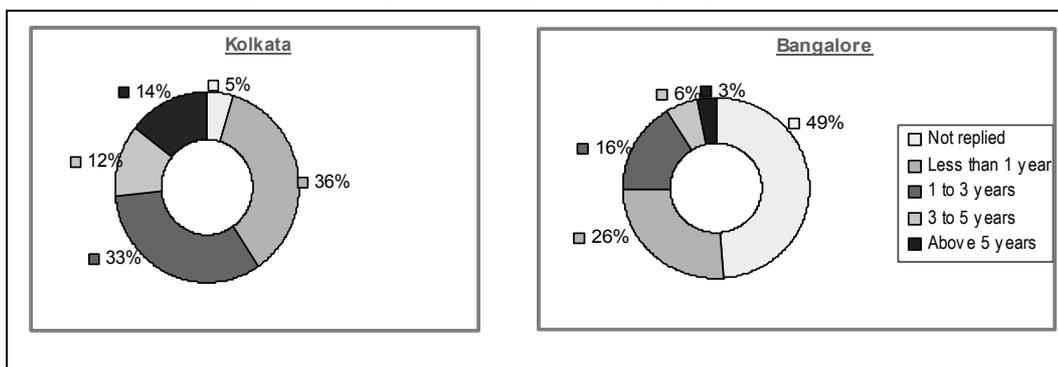


Figure 6. Previous work experience

5.7 Service Tenure

As regards tenure of service in the organization, a very high percent of the employees (67%) in Kolkata reported that they are permanent employees as against 27 % of the respondents in Bangalore. 33% and 46% percent of the respondents are in tenure jobs ranging from one to five years.

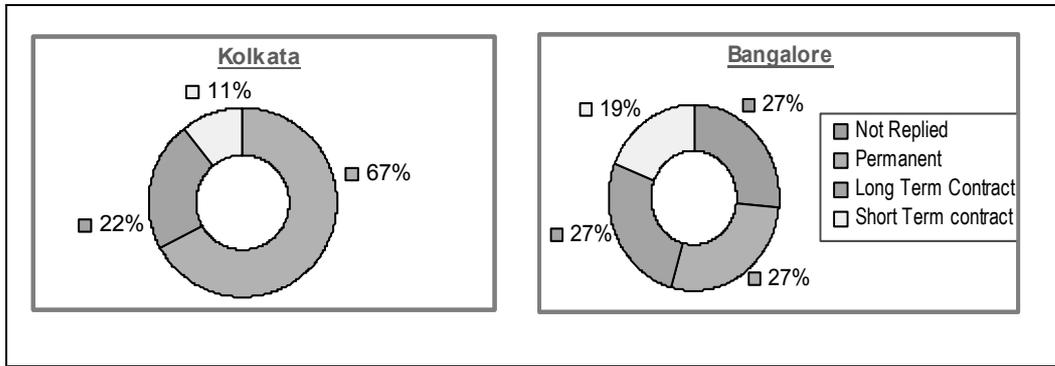


Figure 7. Service tenure

5.8 Service Bond

A majority of the surveyed women employees in Kolkata and Bangalore have replied that they don't have any service bond, near about 70 %. 17 % and 14% of the respondents have answered the question in the affirmative indicating that they are required to sign service bonds ranging from one to three years when joining the organization.

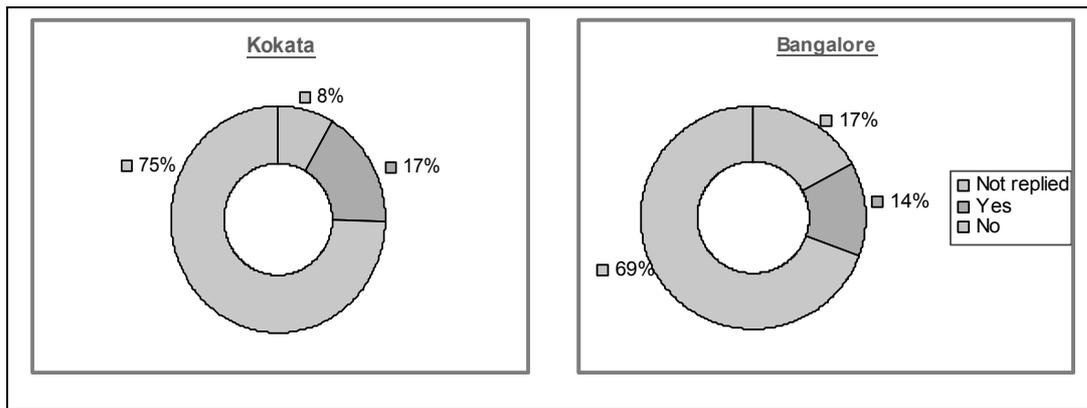


Figure 8. Service bond

Figure 8a shows the answers of respondents as to whether they are free to resign at any point. It is an extension of the above query relating to service bond. 80% in Kolkata and 68% in Bangalore have answered in affirmative, meaning they are free to resign at any time on giving notice to the company while 17% in Kolkata and 3 % in Bangalore have answered in the negative, that being the impact of service bond.

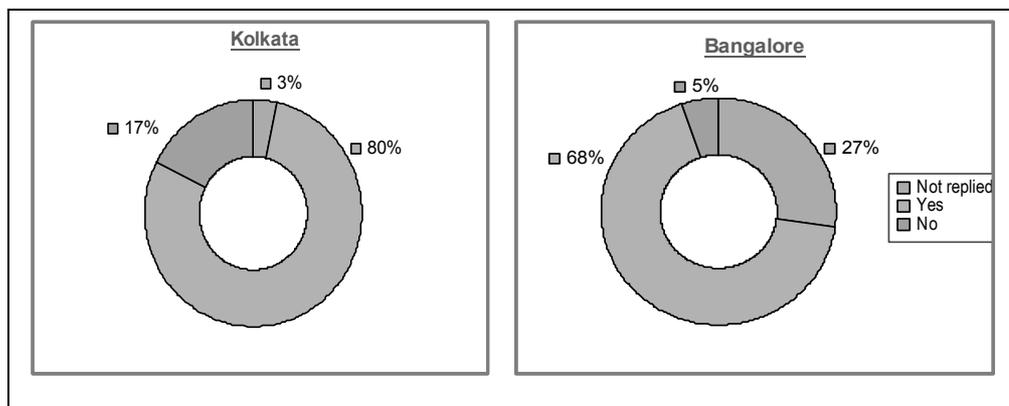


Figure 8a.

5.9 Scale of Pay

When asked about the scale of the pay, 30% of the respondents in Kolkata are found to lie in the income group of Rs 10,000 to Rs 20,000 whereas another 25% and 23% are reported to be in the income group of Rs 5000 to Rs 10,000 and Rs 20,000 to Rs 50,000 respectively. In Bangalore, 40% are in the income group of Rs 10,000 – Rs 20,000 and 34% in the income group of Rs 20,000 to Rs 50,000 while only 9% are in the income group of Rs

5000 to Rs 10,000. However, 9% are reported to have a income of Rs 5000 or less in Kolkata which is absent in Bangalore but 6% of respondents in Kolkata have claimed to be in the income scale of Rs 50,000 and above which is comparatively more than Bangalore (2%).

Generally seen, Bangalore offers a better pay package than BPOs in Kolkata. Few respondents in Kolkata have felt that the scale of pay is quite incommensurate to their work and designation and a salary hike is necessarily called for.

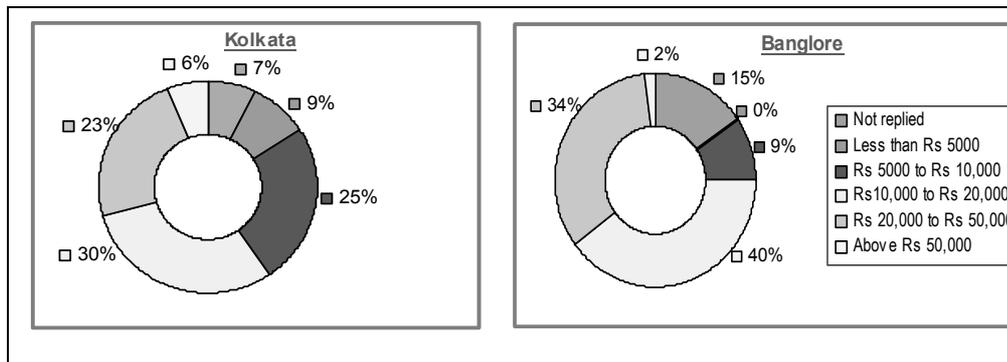


Figure 9. Scale of pay

5.10 Service Benefits

When respondents were asked about the various benefits given to respondents by their organizations, about three fourth of the women surveyed in Kolkata reported that they were given medical benefits and allowances, a half receives maternity leave, gratuity, bonus, and insurance benefits while very few gets subsidized loans. In Bangalore, however, nearly 90% gets maternity benefits, 75% gets the benefit of insurance and a little more than 50% gets medical benefits, allowances and subsidized loans while just about 25% are entitled to gratuity/bonus.

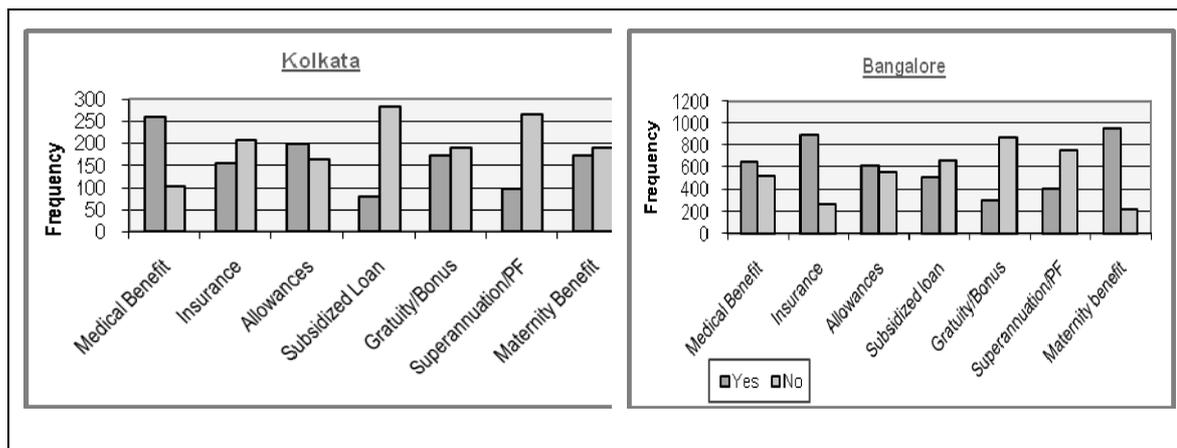


Figure 10. Service benefits

5.11 Working Hours

When the respondents were asked whether they have a fixed or flexible working hours, 74% and 48% of the respondents in Kolkata and Bangalore reported to have fixed working hours and the rest have flexible working hours (except 2% in Bangalore who haven't replied).

The hours of work per day is generally 8-10 hours (70% approximately) in Bangalore and Kolkata. For a relatively small percentage of employees, 11% in Kolkata and 2% in Bangalore, the time ranges for 10-12 hours, while another 2% of employees work beyond 12 hours a day, which is quite high. However, normally, it has been found that employees are required to remain in office for a period of 9 and half hours every day, whether they have fixed or flexible working hours.

Women respondents have largely reported in favour of flexi working hours and work from home opportunities, as is more operational in Bangalore compared to Kolkata. Nevertheless, it has been uniformly stressed by a significant number of respondents that there should be limit in terms of hours of work since women need to work both inside and outside home. Women have voiced their concerns over late working hours and have commented

that no woman should be forced to work for late hours in office nor called at odd hours during weekends for job completion.

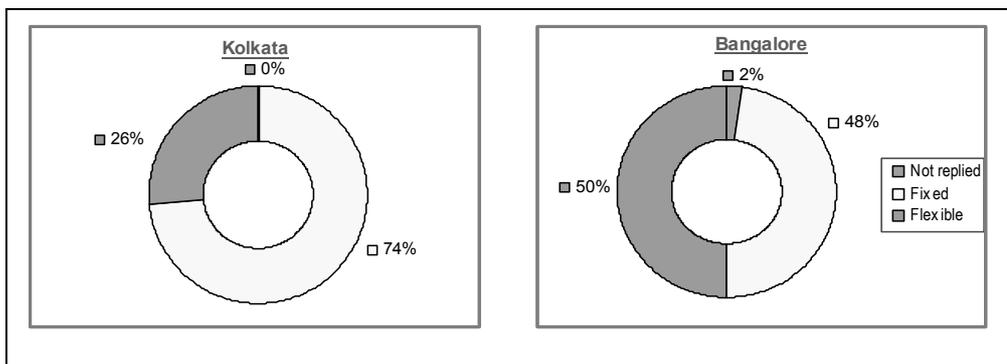


Figure 11. Working hours

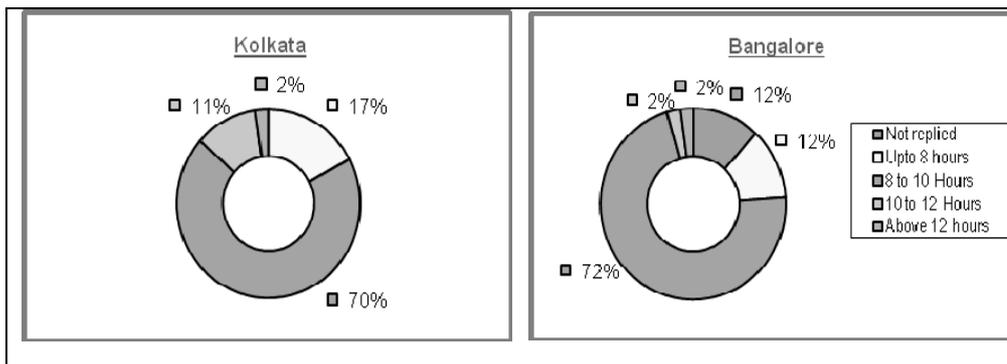


Figure 11a.

5.12 Weekly Leave

A feature which has been observed in this study is that three-fourth of the companies in Kolkata and Bangalore are giving their employees two days weekly off. However, 22% of the respondents in Kolkata get only one day as weekly off compared to 2% in Bangalore. A small percentage, 3 % and 1 % however, get no weekly leave, as has been reported. It may be noted that in many cases it has been found that though the respondents are entitled to weekly leave, they have been called to office for work and their leaves have been cancelled, though unofficially. This phenomenon is not uncommon, but in times of more projects or work coming in, the employees are required to put more hours at work.

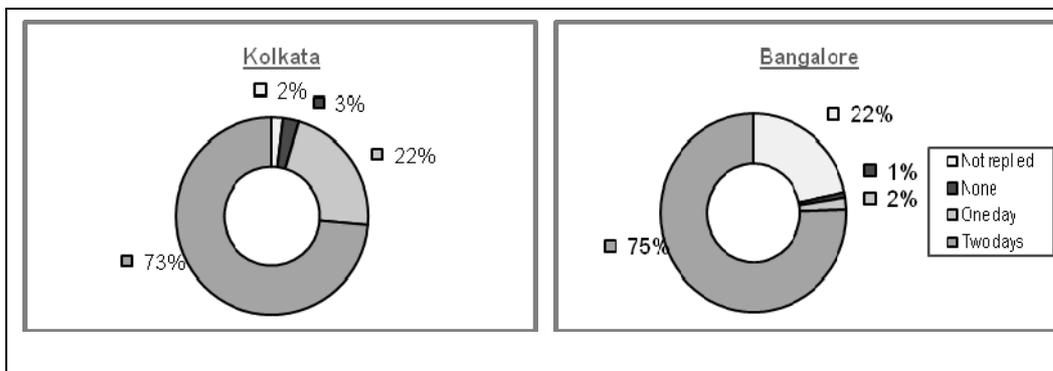


Figure 12. Weekly leave

5.13 Annual Leave

When the respondents were asked about their annual leaves, about 46% of the surveyed women of both the regions (Kolkata and Bangalore) claimed to have more than 20 days as annual leave. But an equal number of respondents in Kolkata have annual leaves between 12 to 20 days which is only 29% in Bangalore. 10% and 6% of the respondents in Kolkata and Bangalore however have leaves less than 20 days in a year.

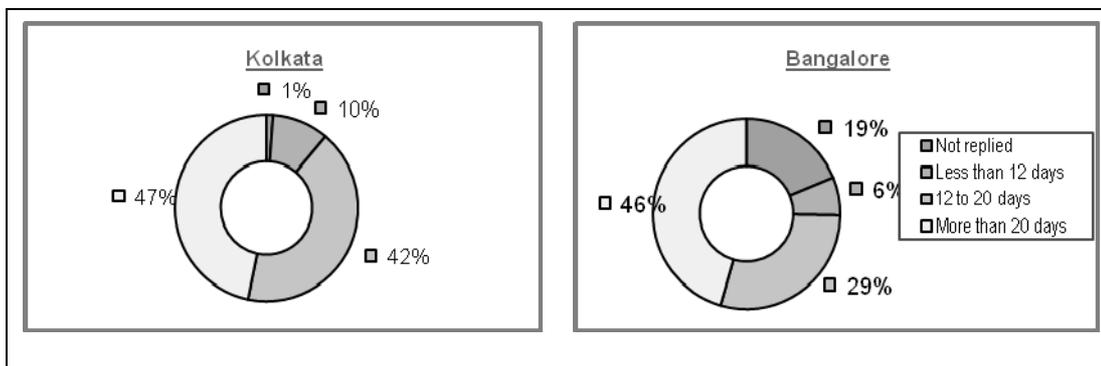


Figure 13. Annual leave

5.14 Maternity Leave

Enumerators have reported that a quarter of the respondents both in Kolkata and Bangalore found the question of maternity leave a sensitive one and opted not to reply it. Almost three-fourth of the respondents in both the regions have however, positively replied to the same while a few reported not to get maternity leaves at all (3 % in Kolkata and 6 % in Bangalore).

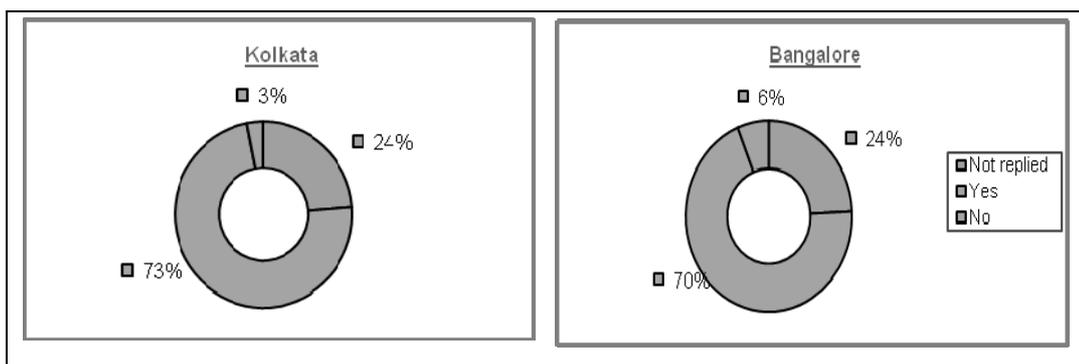


Figure 14. Maternity leave

Queries were put with regard to the number of days available for maternity and the replies reflected a general trend of avoidance. Nearly 70 % of the respondents in Kolkata and 38% of them in Bangalore preferred not to answer due to lack of knowledge as well as the question being a sensitive one. Amongst those who replied, it is evident that usually the leave is for 90 days, i.e., three months as per statute while a few reported it being 84 days, 7% in Kolkata and 2% in Bangalore.

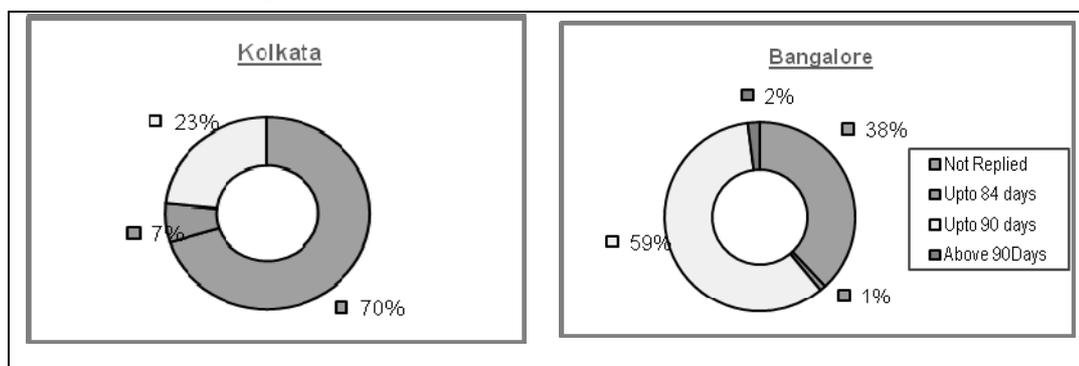


Figure 14a.

5.15 Nature of Work

On asking the respondents about the nature of work and its basic characteristic, 46% in Kolkata reported the work being enjoyable whereas the same percentage in Bangalore reported the work to be routine one as against 34% in Kolkata. Again, 16% and 7 % in Bangalore and Kolkata reported the job to be stressful. In both the regions, very few respondents actually find their work to be exciting.

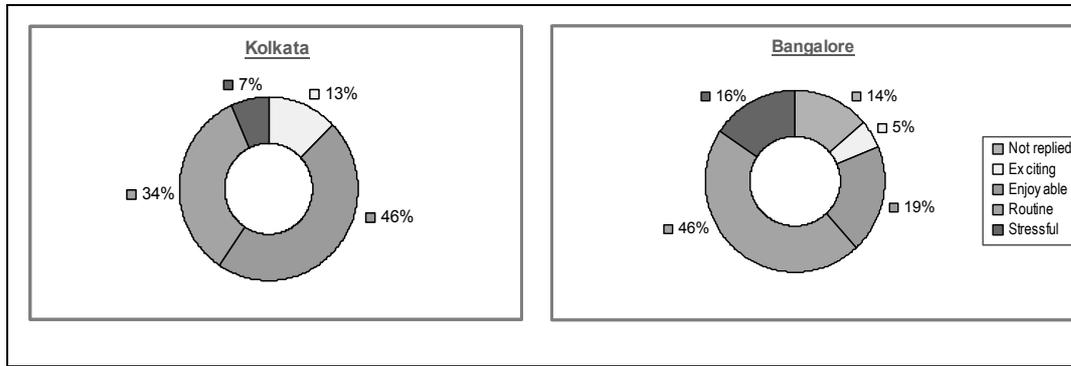


Figure 15. Nature of work

5.16 Promotion Prospects

A little more than 40% of the respondents in Kolkata and 46% of their counterpart in Bangalore have been promoted. 58% in Kolkata reported that they have not been promoted, as against 40% in Bangalore.

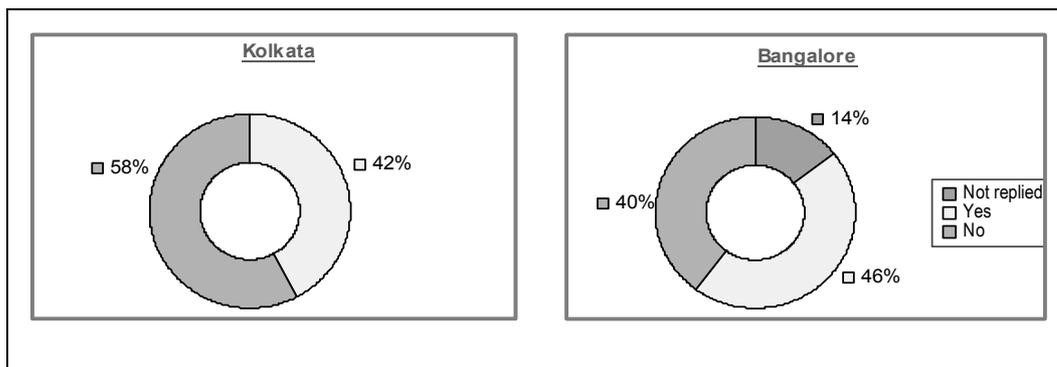


Figure 16. Promotion prospects

5.16.1 Factors for Promotion

When the respondents were asked how long do they take to move to the next level, three factors came out to play dominant role which were (1) performance, (2) fixed number of years and (3) management outlook. In Kolkata, the performance of the employee is not the only criteria for promotion but the employee should also be in the good book of the management. Most of the respondents in Bangalore opined that their performance can be/is the sole reason for their career prospects and promotion, the other two factors, somehow, considered as not having any strong hold on their promotion.

Individual respondents have opined that promotion is often biased in favor of male employees. While no specific fact has surfaced in this regard, it has been perceived in course of comments made by respondents that discrimination in promotion is existent in a subtle manner with the management generally favoring men over women.

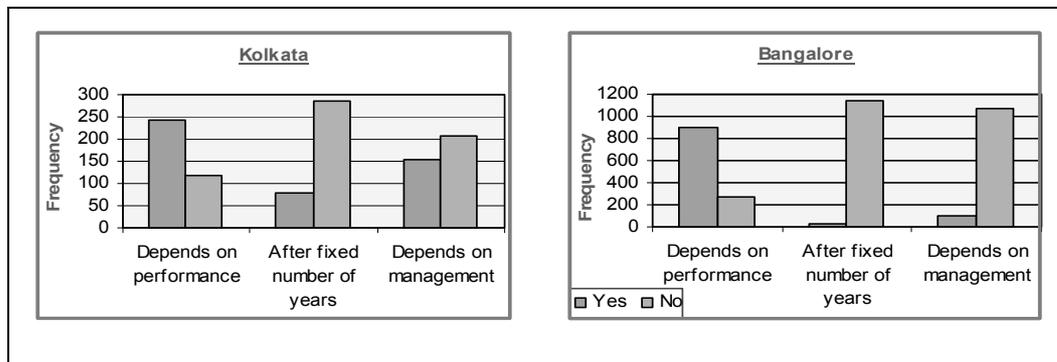


Figure 17. Factors for promotion

5.17 Leisure and Breaks

It is a cause of concern when almost 20% of the women employees in this study have replied that they don't have sufficient breaks during work. However, a majority are satisfied with the leisure breaks offered at work

including two tea-breaks and a lunch/dinner break. This has been regarded as quite sufficient for a shift which generally lasts for nine and a half hours on an average. A significant percentage, i.e., 25%, has expressed reservations in answering this question.

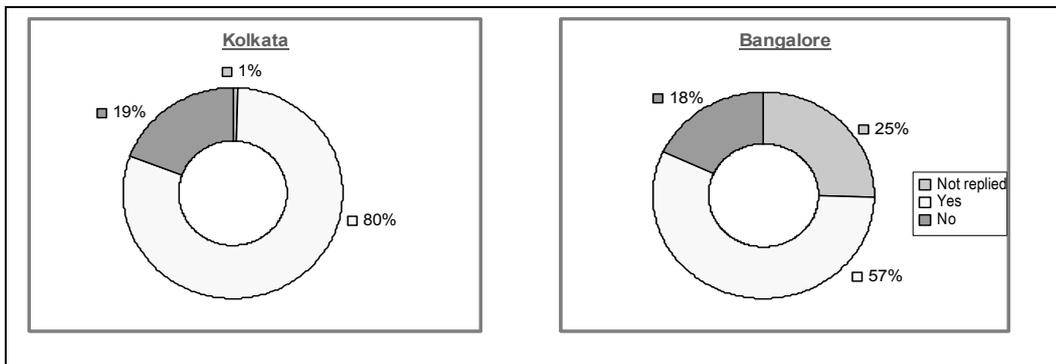


Figure 18. Leisure and breaks

About the work leisure, mixed response has been received. About 49% in Bangalore answered that their company provides them with proper work-leisure facilities, like gym, music, video games, etc. (though music remains the main mode of relaxation available during work). In Kolkata, about 56% reported not to have any type of work-leisure facility while the rest, 43%, enjoys mostly music or indoor games.

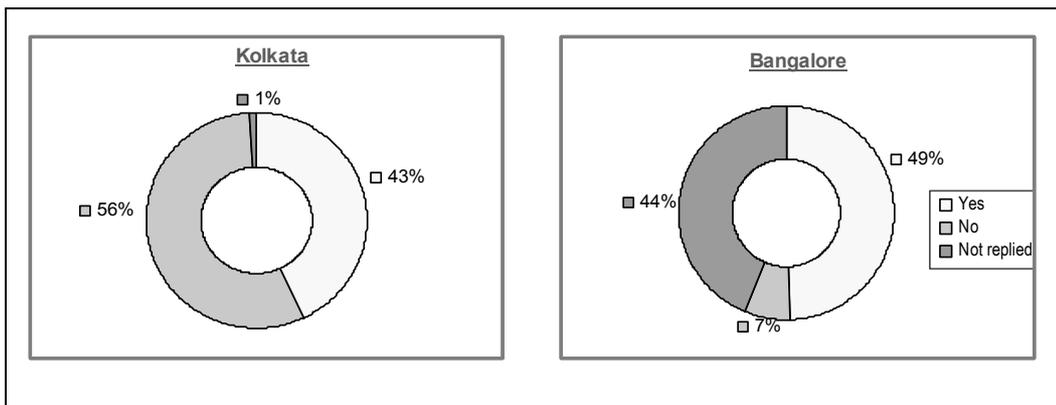


Figure 18a.

5.18 Facilities Available at Workplace

Three types of facilities, i.e., separate washroom, separate relaxation zone and medico/psycho counseling, were listed as these are recognized to be vital facilities which should be provided by the organizations having female employees and the responses to this question varied widely in the two regions. The largest proportion of women in Kolkata are having separate washroom, yet there were some very small companies which, actually did not have any separate washroom for men and women. Few companies in Kolkata have separate relaxation zone. Bangalore experiences a quite different situation- majority of the respondents have separate relaxation zone and considerable number of them have separate washroom facility also. It is to be noted herein that the facilities are not similar in all branch offices of the organization. Thus, while the Corporate Head office is well equipped with the facilities, the other offices over the state have few or no facility at all.

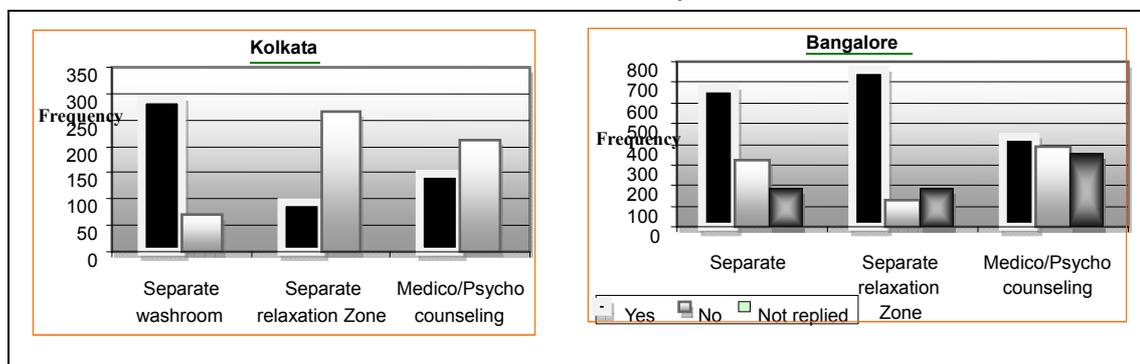


Figure 19. Facilities available at workplace

As regards the medico/psychological counseling, 58% in Kolkata and near about 35% in Bangalore have reported access to these facilities in the organization. A significant number however are deprived of the same in both the regions, even though some respondents have opined that they must have medical and psychological counseling centers at intervals within the organization for those who want to avail them.

An option was given to respondents as regards other facilities they want in the organization which are presently unavailable. The answers are mixed with a significant number of women opting for crèche facilities for infants and children, regular transport facilities to and from home, rest room for the sick, an all time in house woman doctor and better canteen facilities. The respondents strongly feel that since the large portion of the day and night is spent within the office, the organization should take care to afford a more comfortable workplace for women, especially married women with small children. Though none reported any specific sickness or health problems related to work, many have found the work culture strenuous and having an impact on their overall well being, calling for the need of doctors and psychologists to analyze and improve the situation.

5.19 Distance Travelled

Since the study was conducted in the two metropolises of Bangalore and Kolkata, where the BPOs are generally situated in specific locations of the city, it was important to know the distance travelled by the respondents in reaching their place of work. In the absence of proper transport facilities by the organization, commutation becomes a difficult task involving long hours in local buses, trains or cars in polluted environments.

83% respondents in Kolkata travel more than 5 kms of which 36% travel more than 15 kms every day. Since only 35% get cab facility (see, chart below) there is an urgency to develop this system in Kolkata to help the employees not only to reduce the time required to travel but also for their safe and secure journey. On the other hand, only 40% travel more than 5 kms of which 11% have to travel more than 15 kms in Bangalore.

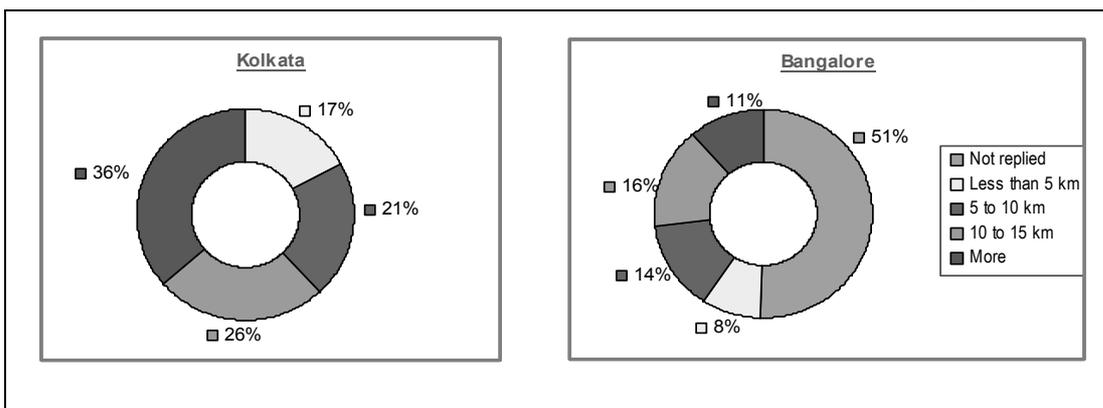


Figure 20. Distance travelled

5.20 Pick-up and Drop-down Facility

A dismal picture is depicted as regards Kolkata when the respondents were asked whether the company provides them with pick-up and drop-in facility. 68% of the respondents in Bangalore have said yes, whereas 65% in Kolkata does not get any type of such facility. The same is true even in case of late night shifts in the regions, especially in Kolkata except for few big companies, and respondents have strongly vent their feelings against night shifts as well as the callous attitude of the BPOs in not providing adequate pick up and drop-home arrangements. Some respondents have observed that either evening or night shifts should be banned for women or else suitable arrangements must be made immediately.

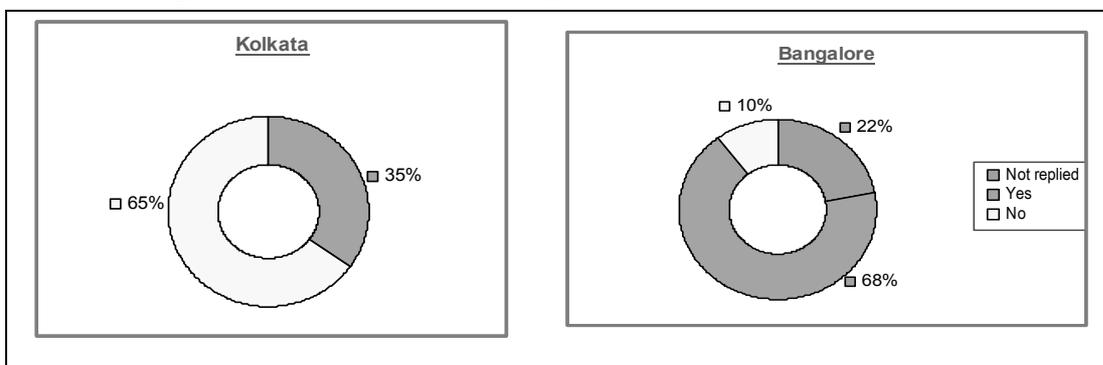


Figure 21. Pick-up and drop-down facility

5.21 Security Arrangements

Security is one of the major concerns for the women who are working in the BPO sector. The odd hours of work and the long distances of travel make women quite prone to difficult and often dangerous situations, as has been reported in the past over incidences of molestation, rape and murders of young women in BPOs. A large proportion of the respondents in both the regions (82% in Kolkata and 84% in Bangalore) are satisfied with the security arrangements made within and outside workplace though approximately 10% of the respondents answered in the negative. A significant number of women in Kolkata are perturbed over the night arrangements, since no drop down facilities are generally provided making them vulnerable to attacks from outsiders. Few respondents reported as being subject to eve-teasing from roadside rogues while some others have fallen victim to vulgar and abusive remarks and gestures from outsiders. Those in Bangalore have opined for even better arrangements in light of the criminal incidents in recent past, especially the security within the cabs made available to them. Respondents in Bangalore have stressed on the need to tighten the security within the organization and out-house arrangements with responsible drivers and more security staff being deployed.

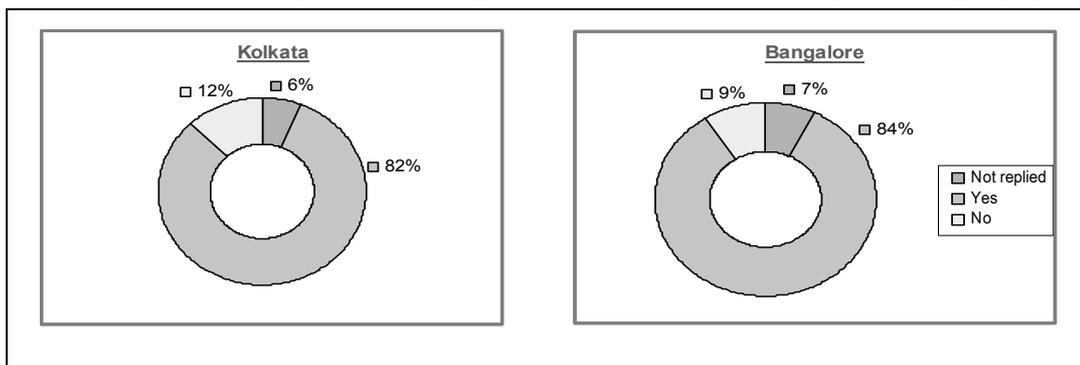


Figure 22. Security arrangements

5.22 Discrimination at Workplace

Most of the respondents have not experienced any type of discrimination at their work place, 90% in Kolkata and 82% in Bangalore. But there are few who have faced discrimination, 9% in Bangalore as against 5% in Kolkata. The discrimination is in terms of salary, annual increments, promotion, service benefits etc. While the percentage is significantly low, it may be observed that in general comments the women, both in Bangalore and Kolkata, have emphasized on the need of performance based approach to salary, incentives and other benefits instead of gender oriented approach from employers.

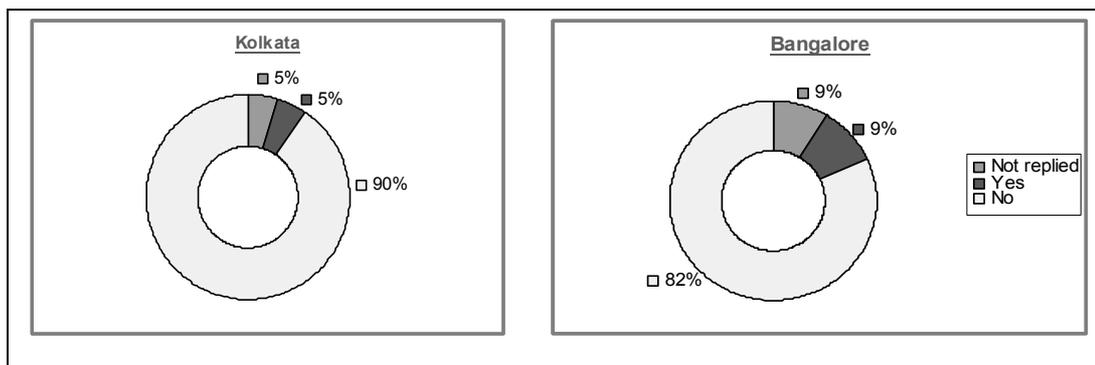


Figure 23. Discrimination at workplace

5.23 Grievance Redressal Mechanism

The existence of grievance redressal mechanism including sexual harassment complaints committee is a very important aspect in every organization. It is reflective of the organization’s concern over employees and their welfare. As regards the sexual harassment cell, under Supreme Court guidelines in Vishaka, employers have to mandatorily prevent sexual harassment at workplace by adopting preventive measures and establishing a sexual harassment complaints committee.

With regard to grievance redressal mechanism within the organization, most of the respondents have answered in the negative, about 55% in Kolkata and 42% in Bangalore. Somewhat similar is the situation in respect of sexual harassment complaints committee. Even after the Supreme Court guidelines, few companies actually have such

type of committees, 37% in Kolkata and 20% in Bangalore. It may be mentioned that those who have not answered the question are not aware of the existence of any such mechanism or committee within the organization. Of those who have replied in the affirmative, none are aware of any issues pending before the body nor have personally ever approached them for any cause whatsoever. Most of the respondents in the junior and entry level have spoken of the need to address any discriminatory practices in the organization as well as objectionable behavior towards them by senior employees. Some have categorically mentioned that their senior bosses use foul and abusive language in case deadlines are not met, which should be discouraged at organizational level. The base line voiced by almost all respondents in Kolkata and Bangalore is that women should be respected; they should be taken seriously for their capabilities and judged by their performances. Strangely however, it has been found that women in the higher echelons have answered in affirmative both questions relating to existence of grievance mechanism and sexual harassment cell or complaints committee. They have also reiterated that the bodies are very effective and have satisfactorily resolved all matters that have been referred to it.

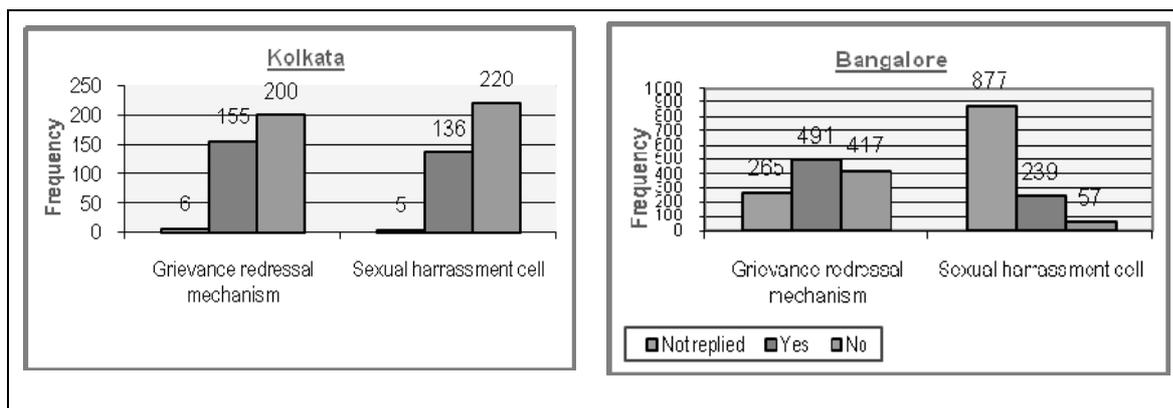


Figure 24. Grievance redressal mechanism

5.24 Environment Adaptability

Adaptability to work environs is an important factor in work performance and ability. It is also essential for a healthy state of mind and body. The respondents were questioned how they rate the work environs of the BPO. Almost three quarters of the respondents in Kolkata and a quarter in Bangalore opted not to reply to this question. Of those who opted to answer, 57% of respondents in Bangalore reported as having a “good” work environment as against merely 19% in Kolkata. 13% and 6% in Bangalore and Kolkata are somewhat satisfied with the work culture and environment at workplace. It is interesting to note that the significant number who have opted to remain silent have remarked that the environment should be more respectful and comfortable towards women employees. Management policies should be strengthened to encourage women employees and their overall performance at work.

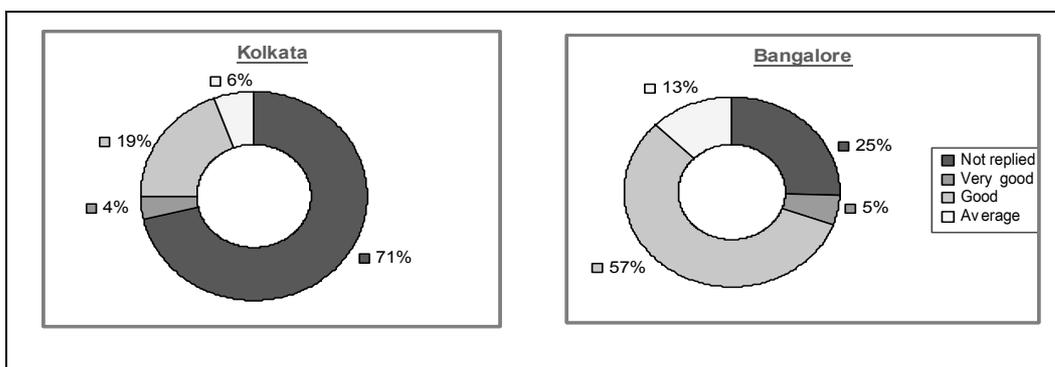


Figure 25. Environment adaptability

5.25 Attitudes of Organization/Employer

About 56% in Kolkata and 83% in Bangalore have replied that the organizational attitude is supportive towards women employees while 2% respondents in Bangalore and Kolkata have relied that the attitude is hostile. The survey reflects a healthy trend in employer-employee relations, though few comments of abusive behavior,

disrespectful attitude towards women and non supportive as well as biased approaches have been reported by women employees.

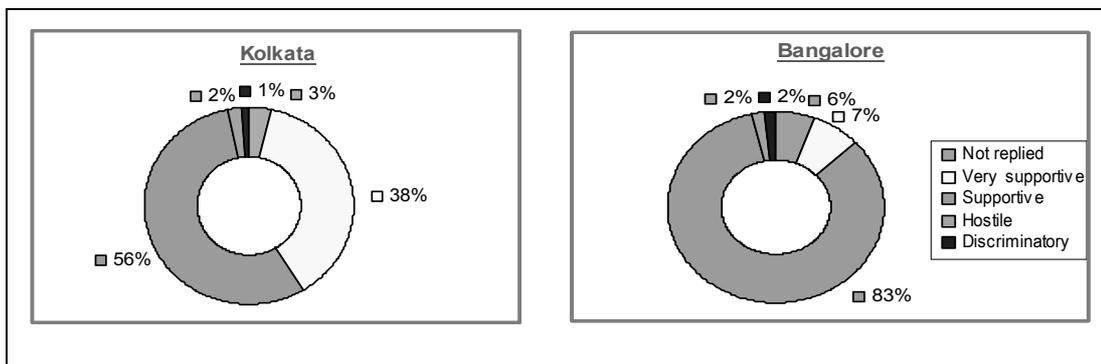


Figure 26. Attitudes of organization/employer

5.26 Perception Level of Comfort, Safety and Security at Workplace

When asked about the perception level of comfort, safety and security at the work place, a mixed reaction prevails. Majority of the respondents of Kolkata marked the same as ‘good’ (41%), whereas 2% of the surveyed women did not feel the atmosphere comfortable enough for them to work there. Almost the same picture is reflected in the Bangalore region. While majority of them are satisfied (45%), few respondents, just 1 % stated that it is ‘bad’ and not suitable for women. Few respondents reported the fact that they often receive indecent calls, especially during the night shifts, which they should be allowed to disconnect.

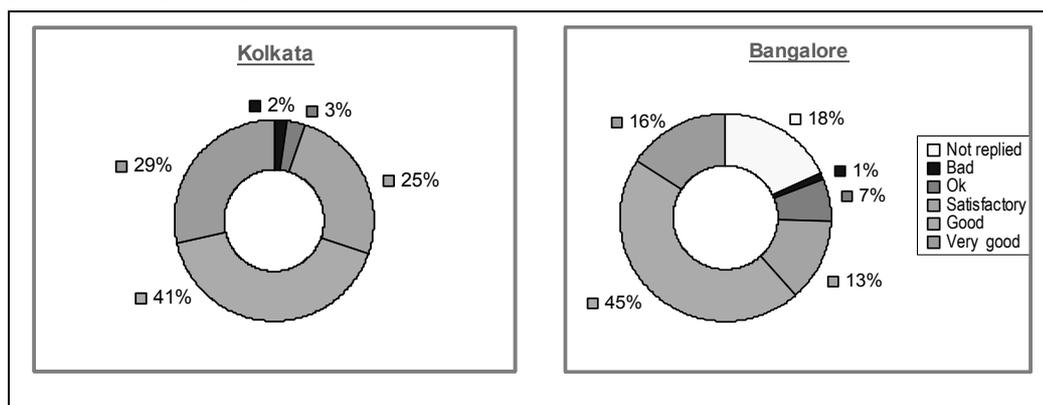


Figure 27. Perception level of comfort, safety and security at workplace

5.27 Suitability of Women in BPO

A general question as regards suitability of women in BPO sector was posed to the respondents. A different picture emerged from the replies obtained. More than 90% of the respondents in Kolkata feel that they are either ‘satisfied’ (46%), or this sector is ‘good’ (33%) or ‘very good’(14%) for women to work in. In Bangalore, near about 38% characterized the sector as being good or satisfactory for women while 7 % felt it to be not suitable or ‘bad’ as against 2% in Kolkata.

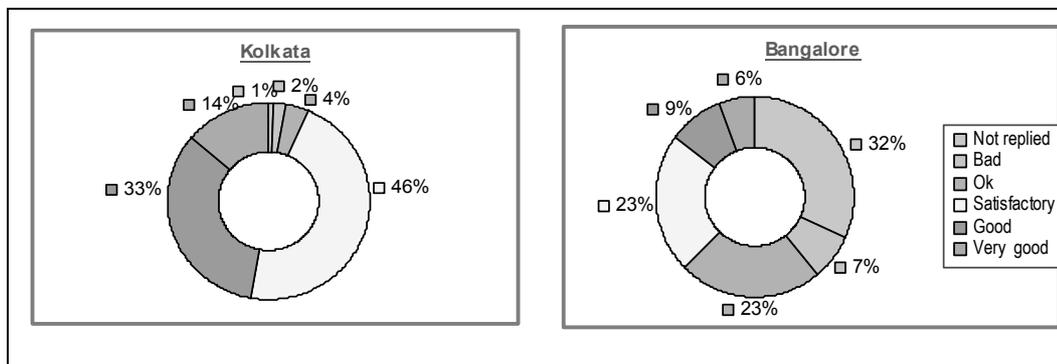


Figure 28. Suitability of women in BPO

5.28 Personal Aspects

Few questions were devised and administered in order to understand the personal front of the respondents and the compulsions and conflicts arising within public-private lives.

5.28.1 Family Composition

Most of the women surveyed are single and live with their parents, i.e. 52% in Kolkata and 16% in Bangalore. In the latter, however, joint families with parents and others are existent which constitute for 12% of the respondents. About 8% and 11% of the respondents live alone in the two cities for reasons such as (1) workplace far from home or (2) personal preference. Of the women who are married, 19% live with spouse in both the regions, while others live with children and in-laws.

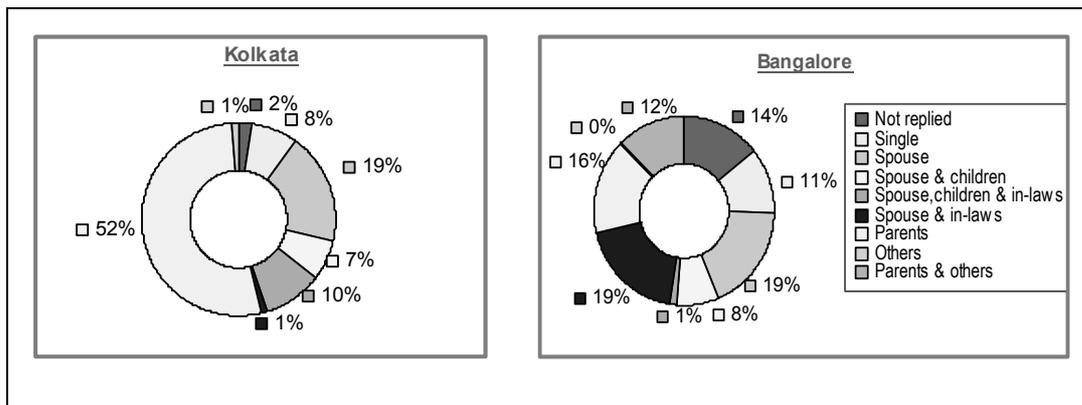


Figure 29. Family composition

5.28.2 Annual Income

Social status of a person can be adjudged from the annual income of his/her family. 23% of the respondents in Kolkata have replied that their family income is less than 2 lacs which is only 3% in Bangalore. Again 2% in Bangalore have said that the annual income of their family is more than 20 lacs which is absent in case of Kolkata. About 14% respondents in Kolkata have claimed that their family income is more than 10 lacs but less than 20 lacs which is a bit less in Bangalore (9%). A significant percentage of the respondents have family income ranging from 2 to 10 lacs annually (57% in Kolkata and 67% in Bangalore).

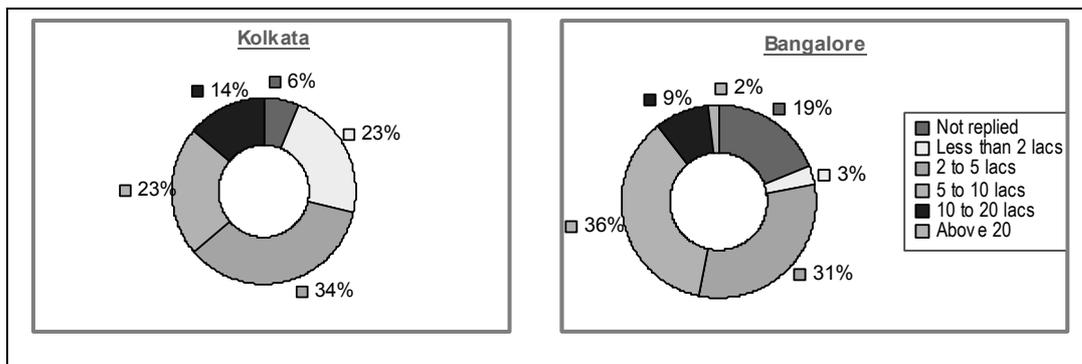


Figure 30. Annual income

5.28.3 Family Support/ Co-operation towards Work

Women in Kolkata are found to be luckier than their counterparts in Bangalore with respect to family support or co-operation. Only 3% in Kolkata compared to 23% in Bangalore have expressed that their family members are either indifferent or hostile towards them due to their working status. About 27% and 16% have responded to their family being enthusiastic towards their work and 67% and 51% reported their families being cooperative.

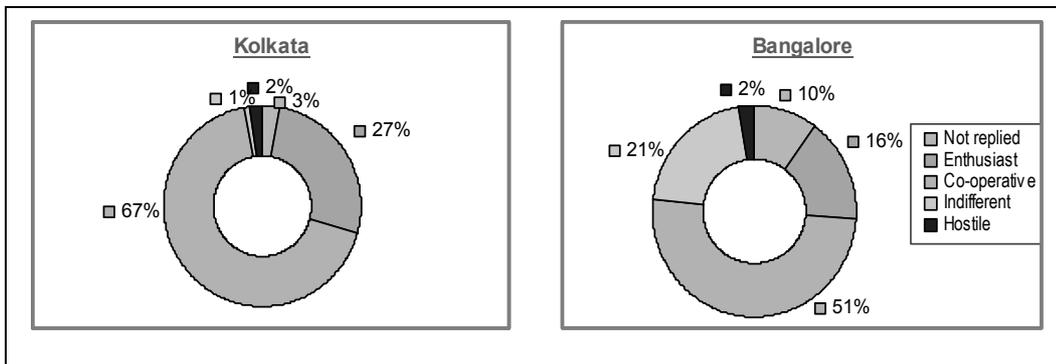


Figure 31. Family support/ co-operation towards work

5.28.4 Family Discord

Most of the respondents in Kolkata (92%) as well as in Bangalore (80%) did not face any marital or family discord due to their work and the oddities attached with it. However, a small percentage has answered the same in the affirmative while some have preferred to leave the question unanswered.

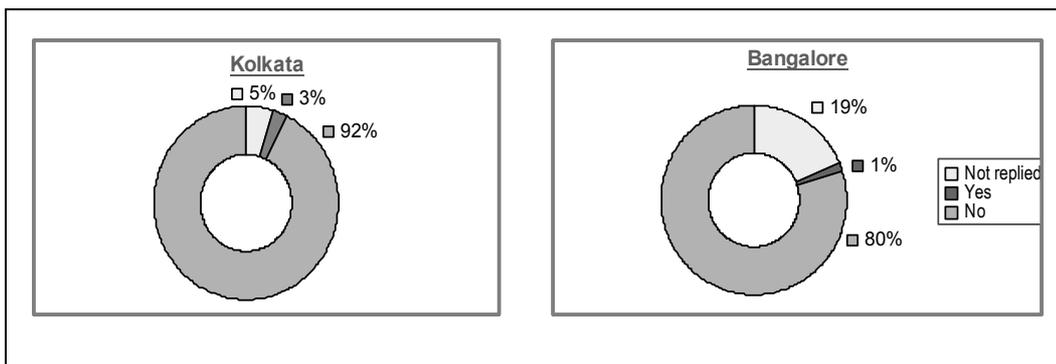


Figure 32. Family discord

5.28.5 Personal Adjustments for Professional Reasons

A significant section of the respondents both in Kolkata and Bangalore (44% in Kolkata and 43% in Bangalore) have replied that they have had to make personal and family adjustments due to professional requirements. Infact, family commitments have suffered in order to cope up with work pressures and deadlines. Most respondents have indicated that they have been unable to spend quality time with family or join in social gatherings or functions. Responsibilities towards children as mothers have also reported a setback when it comes to personal-professional conflicts.

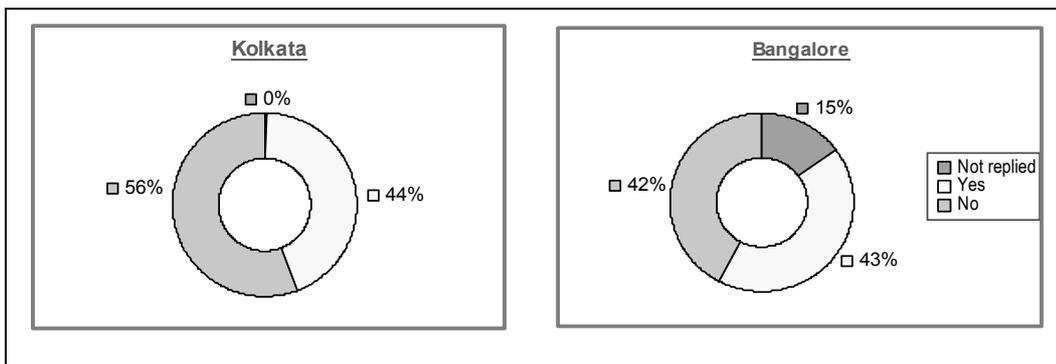


Figure 33. Personal adjustments for professional reasons

5.28.6 Life-style Patterns

Respondents of Bangalore (42%) are found to be prone to adoption of new life-style patterns as compared to that of Kolkata (21%). 'New Life Style Patterns' include late night partying, smoking, boozing, drug-addiction, staying away from family or live-in relationships. Although a significant number of respondents have adopted new life style patterns, most of them preferred to remain silent about the exact form of transformation they have undergone. While Kolkata has 80% respondents answering in the negative, it may be noted that the conservative

attitude of the state as well as non-acceptability of urban lifestyles in social circles may be a reason for negative replies.

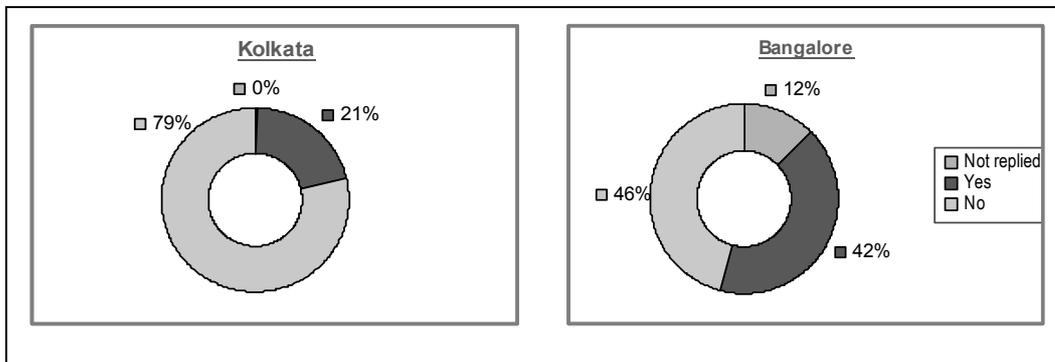


Figure 34. Life-style patterns

A question was posed to respondents about their colleagues’ lifestyle changes which they might be aware of, since as is evident from the previous question, very few are actually welcoming of such intrusive questions regarding themselves.

5.28.7 Life-style Change in Colleagues

Majority of the respondents of Kolkata are actually not aware of their co-workers or colleagues making significant life-style change though, respondents in Bangalore reported an overwhelming 56% as against 34% in Kolkata of being aware of such behavior or lifestyle patterns in colleagues. In fact the answers elicited, have reflected a trend towards boozing and late night partying. Smoking amongst women has also been reported in few cases as is live in relationships mostly amongst colleagues.

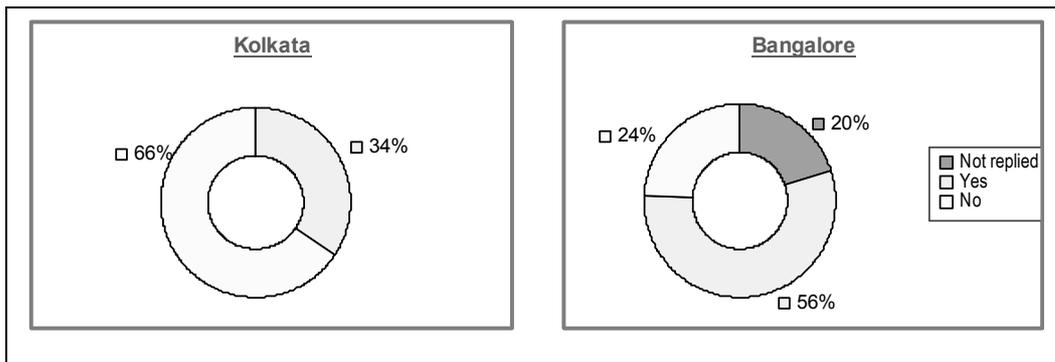


Figure 35. Life-style change in colleagues

6. BPO Policies and Initiatives

The present study has included 160 BPO units in Karnataka and West Bengal. The companies which have participated in the course of the survey are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3.

Participating ITES/BPO	No. of Companies
Fortune 1000	5
Fortune 500	6
Forbes India	3
Big Companies	14
Medium & Small Companies	132

Schedules have been administered to BPO officials, especially Human Resource Managers, to understand the organization’s stand regarding women employees. Most of the organizations have reflected a ‘women-friendly’ approach and expressed support and concern over the welfare of women employees of the organization. They

have pointed at a five-fold policy initiative as is shown below for the female employees. It is to be mentioned herein that in both the regions the answers have been quite similar with majority of BPOs agreeing to have facilities separate for women like relaxation zones, washroom, routine check up or doctor on call, psychological counselling and security arrangements especially for women in night shifts. They have also highlighted the provision of cab facilities for women with pick up from home and drop down provisions. Very few companies in Kolkata have noted that they preferably do not place women in night shifts to avoid any untoward incidents. As regards redressal mechanisms, most of the companies expressed zero tolerance attitudes towards any incident of discrimination and harassment and pointed out at the existence of effective bodies where grievances or disputes can be resolved. BPOs also stressed on the existence of effective dialogue processes and communication system with women employees in order to comprehend and resolve internal problems. In line with the Supreme Court directive, a separate Sexual Harassment Complaints Committee manned mostly by women of higher management strata is also in place but none revealed the number of complaints actually disposed of by them.



Figure 36. Facilities provided by BPOs

6.1 Important Steps Taken by Different BPOs

To underline the important steps taken by different BPOs in Kolkata and Bangalore:

- ✓ Flexi-Time Schedule
- ✓ Work from Home Opportunity
- ✓ Avoidance of Women in Night Shifts
- ✓ Separate Relaxation Zone/Rest Room
- ✓ Separate Washroom
- ✓ Health Care Centres for Regular Health Checkup Facilities
- ✓ Doctor on Call in Emergency Situations
- ✓ Psychological Counseling to deal with stress or other related problems
- ✓ 24*7 Security at Office Premises
- ✓ Cab Facilities(limited) during Night Shifts
- ✓ Security in Cab(Limited)
- ✓ Pick up and Drop Down from and at Door Step
- ✓ 24 Hours Help line for Women in distress
- ✓ Open Discussion Forum for dispute resolution
- ✓ All Women Councils to deal with harassment/discrimination issues

It may be mentioned that all these initiatives have been entirely at the organizational levels, with no comprehensive step taken on the part of the entire sector to formalize and implement the policies uniformly. The

range of answers make it evident that efforts are fragmented and except few big BPOs employing near about 1000 or more women, all others are merely employing women without even the least facility such as a separate toilet for them.

7. Conclusion

The present study is a significant step in the direction of addressing gender related issues in Indian ITES/BPO industry. While the sector has demonstrated an add value and created an impact in economic growth and employability, it has remained somewhat unregulated and uncontrolled. A certain level of ambivalence and ambiguity has remained in the mode of its overall functioning and employment strategy. The study has been able to bring into light the significant issues involved in the sector as of today. Being based on the two states of Karnataka and West Bengal, the study has been able to highlight the differences in the organisations of the two cities vis a vis the women working therein.

The results of the study may be briefly outlined under the following:

a. Professional:

Women constitute a significant portion of the workforce in the BPO sector especially at the entry and junior levels. They are primarily graduates or post graduates in their mid twenties. The salary ranges between Rs 5000 to Rs 20000, with Kolkata being on a lower salary scale than Bangalore. These women are primarily employed in technical or managerial sections, though quite a few women are also employed in the general and accounts section of the companies. The time frame of work is usually nine and a half hours per day, extending to 12 hours maximum, with tea breaks and meal break. The women are entitled to one or two weekly off days, though that depends on the work pressure of the organization, since many employees are required to work even on weekends. They are generally entitled to 20 days of annual leave. The benefits of the employees include medical entitlement, allowances, subsidized loans, gratuity, bonus and insurance benefits. However, a lot of disparity is noticed in course of the survey with regard to the disbursement of service benefits and several respondents have answered the same in the negative. Maternity leave is another aspect posing confusion since many women are not aware of their statutory entitlements. Findings point to a figure of 84 days given as maternity leave. Promotion is a matter of performance and management recommendation, though Bangalore has indicated a favourable trend towards performance based approach, contrary to Kolkata. Subtle discrimination in matters of promotion, increments and service benefits have been noted in the course of the study with respondents venting their displeasure at management preferences. Several women have opined that they should be taken more seriously for their capabilities and adequately rewarded for their performance. In matters of leisure, facilities at workplace and security, Bangalore scores a point higher than Kolkata. While Bangalore generally makes provision for a more comfortable workplace for women with separate washrooms, relaxation zones, health checkup facilities, psychological counseling, gym and music to help relieve stress, Kolkata provides for the bare minimum. Except for the few big BPOs in the city, most BPOs are not adequately equipped. In respect of security, all BPOs have security guards at the offices, throughout the day and night. But while Bangalore has provisions of transportation for women especially during night shifts, BPOs in Kolkata do not portray the same picture. While some companies do provide for cab facilities, others do not have it at all. As a precautionary measure, some BPOs also avoid employing women during night shifts. The respondents surveyed in course of the study have strongly reasoned in favour of improvised security systems at office and in transition both in Kolkata and Bangalore, in order to protect themselves from untoward incidences. In matters of grievance redressal mechanisms and sexual harassment cells, both Bangalore and Kolkata seem to have failed to make a breakthrough. Few BPOs have an informal body set up under the HR to deal with issues arising out of discrimination and harassment, but the majority while vouching in favor of 'women- friendly' policies have omitted to set up any formal mechanism in place. Nevertheless, grievances are not rare with numerous instances of annoyance voiced by women respondents before the enumerators that they are not respected, they are not adequately rewarded, etc. So far as the work culture and job is concerned, while majority has found it to be good, few have highlighted that the same is routine and stressful. The environment, on the whole, is satisfactory with supportive attitudes of employers and colleagues. The women also recommend BPO as a satisfactory workplace generally for women, though some point otherwise.

b. Personal:

At the personal level, women employees working in BPOs generally reside with their families, parents or spouse, excepting few who live separately. Families are generally supportive of women except that in Bangalore, a significant number pointed towards a hostile or indifferent attitude. Marital discord is almost unknown. Nevertheless, the women feel that they are unable to contribute towards family or fulfil social commitments due

to work pressure. Several women, in Kolkata and Bangalore, point towards a difficult situation in handling children since they are unable to give time and new mothers are placed at a even worse situation with no crèches or child care facilities in office and long distances between home and workplace. Life style changes have also been noticed in course of the study with women resorting to late night partying, smoking and boozing. Live in relationships are also not uncommon amongst the women.

7.1 Areas of Concern

In view of the above findings, several policy related issues come to the fore especially with regard to women:

- Working Hours & Leave
- Service Benefits & Maternity
- Availability of Suitable Work Facilities
- Security Arrangements
- Redressal Mechanisms- Grievances and Sexual Harassment Cell
- Applicability of Labour Legislations

7.1.1 Working Hours and Leave

Women employees should, in no case, be employed for more than nine hours in a day and forty eight hours in a week. The duration should be inclusive of sufficient breaks between work including tea/coffee breaks and lunch/dinner breaks, not exceeding three hours at a stretch. All women employees should be entitled to at least one day weekly off. Except in specific situations, no woman should be called for work on weekly holiday. In case, an employee has to work for the day, the leave must be compensated on another working day. In no case, can the leave be compensated by way of payment of additional amount. Women employees must be entitled to an annual leave of 12 to 20 days in addition to the regular casual and medical entitlements of the company.

The above will help women employees to improve performance, work efficiency as well as release stress in course of the daily work. Participation of women in domestic and social life, essential for a happy and peaceful coexistence and child rearing will also be facilitated in this process.

7.1.2 Service Benefits and Maternity

Employees must be ensured the proper service benefits of an organization. They must be entitled to benefits such as gratuity, provident fund, bonus, insurance including medical insurance for self and family, superannuation, leave travel allowance, city travel allowance, subsidized canteen and loan facilities. All the terms and conditions of employment including benefits must be clearly mentioned in their offer letters, in order to remove any ambiguity.

So far as women employees specifically are concerned, in addition to the above, The Maternity Benefit Act 1961 itself determines the duration and minimum benefits to be given by organisations to would-be mothers. But even then, it has been seen that regular flouting of statutory provisions is common in BPOs. Therefore, it is reiterated that the minimum statutory leave with pay must be ensured to all women availing of maternity benefit. In no case, can the period be reduced nor duress created in minds of employees of losing jobs in case they do not join. In case of violation of this provision, strict action may be taken in accordance with the provisions of the Act. Apart from leave and wages, the other provisions of the Act concerning lighter work and rest periods should be properly implemented.

No expecting mother or woman after delivery till a period of 12 months thereafter may be required to work in night shifts in order to avoid personal health complications and aid child nursing.

7.1.3 Availability of Work Facilities

All organizations employing one or more women must make provisions for such facilities as may be necessary for the purpose. Separate toilets and rest rooms must be available for women employees. Provisions must be made for regular health check-up or doctor on call in case of emergencies by BPOs. For the purpose, tie ups may be made with the nearest health clinic or hospital available in the locality.

All BPOs must make adequate provision for child care facilities for infants and children in order to facilitate nursing and other care opportunities for working mothers. Small and medium sector BPOs may form a conglomerate for the purpose and set up such crèches for children.

7.1.4 Security Arrangements

All BPOs must make adequate security arrangements for women working therein. As suggested by the National Women Commission, they may be listed as under:

- All BPOs must have provision of transport facilities for women engaged in evening and night shifts. Where a BPO is unable to arrange for the same for cost reasons, it must avoid the employment of women during odd hours or else, form a conglomerate with other small BPOs in near vicinity for pick up and drop down.
- A security guard must escort women in office transport.
- Women employees must be in groups during night shifts; they should not be the first to be picked up from their homes and the last to be dropped home by the drivers.
- The Local police station must be furnished a complete record of the transport operators for day to day transport arrangements. The credentials of the drivers must be duly verified by the organization as well as submitted to the local police station for necessary verification and record.
- The Business Process Outsourcing sector ought to install a GLOBAL POSITIONING SYSTEM (GPS) for tracking the position of women employee transport vehicles.
- A 24 hours helpline must be initiated at the crucial step for women security. Through the helpline, an employee may send a SMS at a particular number which will be automatically forwarded to the company as well as the police headquarters of the State. This may be started as a nationwide service facility for all women employees.
- Wherever possible, BPOs must be set up in near locales with adequate police patrolling in order to prevent outside incidences of eve teasing or assault. However, they should not entirely depend on police for safety issues. As a business organization, appropriate measures to guarantee the safety of women in and outside office must be made.

7.1.5 Discriminatory Practices

All employees are to be treated equally within the organization. They are also entitled to equality of opportunity and benefits in relation to their work. Nevertheless, inspite of the Constitutional guarantee of equality, it has been perceived in course of the study that women are often not considered for promotion or given increments at par with their male counterparts. Grudges have also poured in with regard to preference of male employees for specific jobs which are highly target specific. Women employees have expressed distress over the rude and impolite behaviour of seniors in case of minor omissions or failures on their part. It is important that a gender friendly environment is maintained and promoted within the organization with equal opportunity given to one and all. Promotion, salary and other benefits must be decided on transparent policies in order to reaffirm and establish the gender neutral approach of the organization.

7.1.6 Grievance Redressal Mechanism and Sexual Harassment Cell

In order to avoid situations of discrimination and harassment within the organisation, every organization must lay down a clear set of policies for grievance redressal and harassment. Every employer must create and notify a committee to address employee issues. The committee should comprise of not less than three members, including representatives from employees themselves. An appellate structure must be created within the organization in case any party is dissatisfied with the findings of the committee. No complainant should be victimised in terms of salary, promotion and other benefits for the complaint made by him/her.

A sexual harassment complaints committee must be separately set to deal with cases of sexual harassment. As per the Supreme Court ruling, it is necessary and expedient for employers as well as other responsible persons and institutions to observe certain guidelines to ensure prevention of sexual harassment of women. The guidelines suggest creation of a complaint mechanism for redressing complaints. The complaints committee should be headed by a woman and half of its members should be women. To prevent the possibility of any undue pressure or influence from senior levels, such a Committee should involve a third party, either an NGO or anybody who is familiar with the issues of sexual harassment.

7.1.7 Applicability of Labour Legislations

Since inception, a general opposition has been shown by BPOs to the enforcement of labour laws and regulations by the Government. The Industry has consistently contended that rigid laws are antithesis to productivity and efficiency and, so far as possible, they may be kept away from their application. A policy of least interference

and maximum flexibility has also been displayed by the Government in relaxation of rules and policies in its application to BPO sector. However, it is of importance, that the sector should comply with the minimum labour standards and laws just like any other industry. The basic rules regarding hours of work, leave, equality in remuneration and promotion, non discriminatory and dignified work environment must be met in order to ensure employee welfare and organizational growth.

7.1.8 Initiatives at Organizational and Governmental Level

While the above have been identified as the key issues arising out of the present study, the initiatives which are required on the part of the Organization and Government is as under:

7.1.8.1 Initiatives at Organizational Level

- Developing and Notifying a Code of Best Practices for effective and uniform regularization of rules and policies pertaining to employees especially women employed therein. In this endeavor, organizations such as NASSCOM or BPIAI can play a meaningful role.
- Holding a thorough induction process for employees that spell out the work hours, leave facilities, work benefits, transport arrangements and other organizational rules.
- Conducting regular workshops for employees especially women employees to communicate and understand the prevalent situation, problems arising thereto and measures taken to improve thereupon.

7.1.8.2 Initiatives at Governmental Level

- The Central Government, Department of Labour and Employment, should issue a directive to develop and implement the Code of Best Practices within a period of six months.
- BPOs should be directed to submit quarterly reports of Human Resource Development to the State Government, Department of Labour. Such quarterly reports should include records of the steps taken by the organization for employees welfare, proper implementation of legal provisions as well as Code of Best Practices, set up of committees including cases disposed and penalties imposed, if any, . Such reports should be duly notified and available to public generally. The State Government, may on its own or on information, be permitted to direct any organization to furnish details pertaining to any matter within the organisation.
- Constant monitoring of the operation of organization as well as employee situation shall be an effective step for improvement as well as development. The Inspectorate created under the Shops and Establishments Act of respective States must conduct periodic and surprise checks for compliance and submit reports to the appropriate authority. Stern actions may be taken in case of non compliance, not in order to deter investors, but to intimate that violators are not taken kindly.
- A Web based Voluntary Feedback Mechanism Service must be generated by the State Government, Department of Labour. The link will provide a feedback form for any employee or organization to air their opinion, views, and complaints on labour related issues of any organization. The name and particulars of the complainant or body shall be mandatory in such case. The State Government, on scrutiny, may forward the same to the organization concerned or else direct the furnishing of necessary information by the organization, on suppression of personal details of the complainant. In particular cases, where necessary, it may call upon the Inspector to hold immediate enquiry and submit a report thereupon.
- A National Accreditation Agency may be created by the Central Government. Such Accreditation Agency shall be responsible for rating of the BPOs on certain parameters, one being Human Resource Development. An organisation which performs well will be given a five or six star rating compared to one which flouts legal provisions, violates the Code of Best Practices etc. In this process, organizations with substantial number of women employees, at all levels, and having proper facilities for them may be given an additional rating as a mode of encouragement. The report of the Agency should be published and available for public generally. This may act as a sanction for violators.
- The Central Government, Departments of Labour and Information Technology, on a public-private partnership mode, must jointly initiate the creation and establishment of a nationwide toll free helpline service for women employees. Such step shall enable women to make SMSes or calls in emergency situations which may be tracked down by the State police and organization concerned to offer immediate help in distress.

- The Central and State Government, Department of Labour and Department of Information Technology, in association with any organization or institution, should organize regular national and regional level Seminars/Workshops/Conferences on such issues as corporate social responsibility, social security and labour welfare, women empowerment etc. Participation of the BPOs should be mandatory at least once in every two years.
- It may also be emphasized herein that development of a course curriculum and its nationwide introduction in graduate level programs of all public and private colleges, universities and technical institutes is of paramount importance. Awareness and information is the key to development and welfare. Therefore, all students at the college or university level must compulsorily be required to take one course on Labour Law and Social Welfare, whereby they are informed of their basic rights, duties and means of enforcement under the law, so that violations and exploitations are reduced to the minimum.

The study has been able to highlight the status of women employees in the BPO sector in the country, in general. On a comparative note, it has revealed that Kolkata, West Bengal, lags far behind Bangalore, Karnataka with regard to employee salaries, benefits and facilities available at workplace. Transportation is a major problem for Kolkata employees, even for those who are employed during night shifts. Security arrangements, generally, needs to be strengthened both in Kolkata and Bangalore. The two cities have similarly highlighted the absence of grievance redressal mechanisms within the organization for addressing issues of discrimination and harassment. While it may definitely be outlined that some BPOs have taken remarkable strides for a gender-friendly work environment, much remains to be done for the numerous other BPOs which are mushrooming all over the states. A more vigilant approach on the part of the Government and a cooperative and concerned attitude of the organizations may definitely help in obliterating the problems.

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