

## Women in Profession: Expectations and Challenges



*We must accept and even celebrate our successful women. They take our homes ahead and our country forward. We may have less hot phulkas, but we will have a better nation—these words are quite grave and important for our times and we will have to appreciate the concerns. Popular fiction writer Chetan Bhagat makes an appeal to the people of India. It is indeed time to understand that women now have to be given space so that they have some more space at workplace and they could release some at home. It is not in vain that someone had advised the world to educate women if we want a real change in a generation. The author, being a woman herself, lets out her understanding by presenting facts, arguing against the existing workplace and societal realities and dares to ask questions. She lets us understand that women need an understanding today from men of their society. Read on to know about some crucial aspects of women-at-work...*

They say, *educate a man and you educate a person... educate a woman and you educate a generation.* According to a survey by an international executive research firm, EMA Partners International, around 11 % of Indian companies have women CEOs, while in the case of Fortune 500 list from the US,

the women CEOs just account for 3 % of the total consideration set.

But are these just statistics? Though the number in India is almost 4 times of that in the US, are the women in India still considered incapable of handling their roles of a bread-earner as well as that of a homemaker satisfactorily? Do Indian families still find it difficult to send their daughters and daughters-in-law to work despite their high potential at the workplace and immensely great management skills to handle both work and home? Do co-workers at the workplace find it difficult to accept female workforce? Do women find it difficult to match up with their male counterparts or manage work and family? The list of questions is almost endless...



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A study has found that working women in India are the most ambitious. Their ambition is twice of that of the US women, for that matter. They fare remarkably well in the difficult act of balancing their household and walking up the career ladder. But what good can such ambition do if one cannot convert that to reality.

Working women in India face lot more challenges than their counterparts in other parts of the world. In India, men do not contribute to most of the household chores; it is women who have to cook, clean the house, do the dishes, wash the clothes, get the children ready for school, *etc.* Men take care of some chores that have to do with outside-the-home affairs. So, a major burden of running a family is on the shoulders of women. It was alright for women to handle all the chores as long as they were just homemakers. Now, with the increasing need to get some income for their family, women work all the more harder. They take up a job and handle their household chores as before, *i.e.* as they handled as a homemaker, while men's role has not changed much.

Therefore, the following statement of Forbes magazine founder B. C. Forbes, applies to women who wish to achieve something in life: *Think not of yourself as the architect of your career but as the sculptor. Expect to have to do a lot of hard hammering and chiselling and scraping and polishing.*

### **NEED FOR CAREER: A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE**

Women in today's world are eloquent, ambitious and forceful, and they are exhilarated about being part of the transfusion of the country. They understand the opportunities and they are quite keen to exploit them. Women nowadays make good use of all the opportunities of getting educated. Families too appreciate this situation and take pride in the fact that women are excelling in education. But the problem arises when women decide to work. Even in many developed and educated families, women are not encouraged to work. But such families that do not appreciate women who work, must try to understand the women's perspective and their degree of frustration, when they are not able to work despite having the potential to do that. Ultimately this adds to their stress, which affects both their mental and physical conditions.

Working women scramble to run two lives—one at home and another at work. They want to be good wives and mothers, but they also want to

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be intellectually stimulated by a challenging career or at least bring in a second income to help their households get by. Things are tough for women in India, but, as Sylvia Ann Hewlett, the founding president of the Center for Talent Innovation, says: *they certainly aspire.* If proofs are required, consider, for example, three major banks in India— Axis, ICICI and HSBC India—are headed by women; no one could imagine women here once upon a time.

The status of Indian women has undergone a considerable change. Indian women are far more independent and a majority of them are unaware of their legal rights, such as right to work, equal treatment, property and maintenance. There are other factors that affect their quality of life such as age of marriage, extent of literacy, role in the family and so on. In many families, women do not have a voice in anything, while some may have a dominating role. The result is: *empowerment of women in India is highly unbalanced and with huge gaps.* Economically, the independent and literate live a kind of life that other women tend to envy about. This disparity is a cause for worry because there is no balanced development.

### **STAGES IN A WOMAN'S CAREER LIFE CYCLE:**

**Stage 1: Preparing for a career:** This is a phase where girls as students, are very enthusiastic about their studies and career prospects that await them consequent to the successful completion of studies and professional education they strive for. Generally, parents and the families, barring some, are more than supportive towards the girls in the completion of their studies and excelling in their examinations.

**Stage 2: Work and family life:** As soon as the girls qualify with their degrees so that they earn after a lot of hard work, patience and determination, they are in their mid or late 20s and about to enter the job market and, at this stage, they at times face resistance from their families, parents and in-laws, and sometimes even by their society. They at times face a discriminatory behaviour at workplace too.

**Stage 3: Decision- the bolder step:** At this stage, they enter a phase when they have to decide if they should pursue what they wish to pursue and to what extent they should pursue, while they juggle between various factors including dreams, career, family, health, society, *etc.* At times, they fall prey to the unjustified demands and expectations of their society and family. However, a few, keeping in mind their potential and skill, decide to take up the task of handling the two with utmost sincerity and hard work.

## **WORKPLACE CHALLENGES:**

**1. Mental Pressure:** At the workplace, women often find people with a preconceived notion that women can never be at par with their male counterparts and that they will not be able to undertake some of the work which men can accomplish easily. Such ready perception at a workplace creates a negative mental attitude in the minds of women employees and, as a result, they find it difficult to continue their work in this environment, where already there is a question mark on their potential. This decreases their professional drive to some extent.

**2. Sexual Harassment:** Mostly, women employees tend to be concentrated in middle and lower level services where generally men are their immediate superiors, and such a situation gives men an opportunity to exploit their female subordinates. It is a very difficult situation for women when they get a hint of getting sexually harassed and exploited. Once they refuse such advancements, their professional life may suffer. There have been several cases of sexual harassment at a workplace recently, even involving women from senior management. If women are praised for their work or promoted on merit, their colleagues do not hesitate to attribute such success to their gender and, in some cases, sexual advantages too. Women at the workplace have to undergo similar and many more psychological pressures and, at times, these lead to difficult professional situations.

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**3. Discrimination:** Women are often deprived of promotions and growth opportunities at workplace in India. A majority of them continue to be denied their right to equal compensations, under the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 and are often underpaid in comparison to their male counterparts even when they are equally competent. Such situations often occur in the labour-oriented industry.

## **CHALLENGES IN FAMILY:**

**1. Conservative attitude of society:** Very often, society tries to impose its outdated and self-proclaimed diktats on ambitious women who strive to achieve great heights.

**2. Age-old assigned rules:** The typical age-old myth that men are the bread-earners and women are the home-makers, is still being observed in many families and this lowers the morale of their women members and brings down their ambitions, especially in cases where women are mentally not strong and not aware of their fundamental rights.

**3. Unsupportive attitude of family members:** Often families do not support their women in moving out and achieving what they deserve and this puts a major hindrance in the way of their growth and professional development.

**4. Status symbol:** Allowing women to work outside a family is often associated by traditional families with the fact that male members are not able to earn enough or the desired amount. This attitude stops families to allow women to work, where male members earn a lot.

**5. Self-induced guilt:** Indian women face another issue of self-induced guilt as they are not able to give enough time to their families due to their professional commitments. This again has to do with the traditional myth about gender and its associated roles, *i.e.* that women are homemakers. Such situations demand some understanding and cooperation from their relevant families and society.

## **ORGANISATIONAL CONSEQUENCES DUE TO PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN:**

Due to various problems faced by women at workplace, organisations also face bad consequences:

- Increased absenteeism and dropout rate
- Reduced efficiency

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- Additional recruitment and training cost due to employee attrition
- Loss of professional image in the market
- Lawsuits and high legal costs involving court fees, settlements, etc.

### CONSEQUENCES OF PROBLEMS FACED, TO WOMEN THEMSELVES:

**1. Mental stress:** Ambitious women with enormous potential and skills are often seen to suffer from mental stress when their spouse, family or workplace colleagues are not supportive professionally. The unsafe work environment adds to their plight even more.

**2. Loss of health:** Working women face health issues to a much greater extent than others because of the hectic schedule accompanied by unsupportive attitude of people in their circle. Due to the pressure of handling a lot of duties together, women often tend to lose the most important asset, *i.e.* their health.

**3. Frustration:** Women in profession ultimately face a lot of frustration due to denial, especially when they know that what they desire is something which belongs to them by right. There is nothing wrong in demanding or wanting to achieve these.

### RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES:

**1. Let it be:** Do not think too much about what others would say. Be yourself and do your best in both the sectors. It is better to be an average in both than zero in one and best in others. So plan things that way. To pick and savour the happy moments from your life or give in to the stress—choice is entirely yours.

**2. Ask for help:** Do not try to be a superwoman...you are not one. Don't try and do all things by yourself. Ask for help from your spouse and family in daily work. It is not necessary to score an A+ in everything. Just an A or a B+ is not bad either, when you have so many things to manage.

**3. Respect yourself:** For others to respect us, we have to first respect ourselves and also the other women folk around us. No matter what others have to say, we need to believe in ourselves and strive for our betterment.

**4. Don't lose yourself:** Relationships are a very important part of our lives. But relationships do not end with our family members. Yes, we need to be a good daughter, sister, wife and a mother, but at the same time we need to fulfil our duty towards our own self. Yes, we have to love our self.

**5. Learn to say 'NO':** Whether it's a co-worker asking you to spearhead an extra project or your child's teacher asking you to organise a class party, remember that it's OK to respectfully say a no. When you quit accepting tasks out of guilt or some false sense of obligation, you'll have more time for the activities that are meaningful to you.

**6. Nurture yourself:** Eat a healthy diet, include physical activity in your daily routine and get enough sleep. Set aside time each day for an activity that you enjoy, such as practicing yoga or reading. Better yet, discover activities you can do with your partner, family or friends— such as hiking, dancing or taking up some extracurricular activities.

**7. A word for the family:** In families, people living together understand each other and be each other's strength. So, next time when you sit with your eight-year old daughter, do give her examples of great women like Chanda Kochar and Indra Nooyi, besides talking about very social grannies and aunts being such good cooks. You never know, she may be one of them tomorrow.

Let's have a reading of what Chetan Bhagat has to say about Indian working women:

*"My mother worked for 40 years. My wife is the COO at an international bank. It makes me proud. She doesn't make phulkas for me. We outsource that work to our help, and it doesn't really bother me. If my wife had spent her life in the kitchen, it would have bothered me more.*

*One, a man who marries a career woman gets a partner to discuss his own career with. A working woman may be able to relate better to organisational issues than a housewife. A*

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spouse who understands office politics and can give you good advice can be an asset. **Two**, a working woman diversifies the family income streams. In the era of expensive apartments and frequent lay-offs, a working spouse can help you afford a decent house and feel more secure about finances. **Three**, a working woman is better exposed to the world. She brings back knowledge and information that can be useful to the family. Whether it's the latest deals or the best mutual fund to invest in, or even new holiday destinations, a working woman can add to the quality of life. **Four**, the children of a working woman learn to be more independent

and will do better than mollycoddled children. **Five**, working women often find some fulfilment in their jobs, apart from homes. Hence, they may have better life satisfaction, and feel less dependent on the man. This in turn can lead to more harmony.

We must accept and even celebrate our successful women. They take our homes ahead and our country forward. We may have less hot phulkas, but we will have a better nation."

To conclude, I would say a few words depicting the insight of women today: Trust me...we can... we can manage a sick child, our lined-up meetings and our sleepless nights at the same time...but of course, we need people at the workplace who should believe that we can, and need people at home who could share the daily chores and understand that there has to be some sharing and some fair equality when it comes to work and responsibility...we do not want anybody to judge us by the fact that we are women...like others, we are proud of who we are... ■



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