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Title: Women Choosing to Opt-out of ICT Careers: New Perspectives on the Kaleidoscopic Careers.

Track: Gender in Management

Abstract:

Research has widely documented that women are increasingly choosing to opt-out of careers during mid-stages (Belkin, 2003; Stone, 2007; Zimmerman and Clark, 2016). Although organisational factors are equally argued to push women away from the workforce (Hewlett and Luce, 2005), academic literature has heavily documented on women's reason to exit careers mainly for family reasons (Stone et al., 2004; Zimmerman and Clark, 2016). While women choosing to opt-out during mid-careers for family reasons is found across all occupations (Stone, 2007); studies increasingly point to the high exodus of women particularly high for the ICT industry during mid-careers (Armstrong et al., 2015). This study builds on Kaleidoscopic career model (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) to understand why women leave mid-careers from technology careers in the context of India. The study uses hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the reasons behind women's decision to opt-out mid-careers from Indian ICT sector. The study interviews twenty women who have chosen to opt-out of Indian ICT sector during mid-stages. The study extends our knowledge and understanding of Kaleidoscopic careers in the Indian context especially in the ICT sector.

Keywords: Kaleidoscopic careers, women opt-out, ICT careers, India.

Word count:

Literature review:

“Opt-out”, a term referring to the exodus of professional women from the workplace (Zimmerman and Clark, 2016) has become increasingly popular since Lisa Belkin (2003) coined the term in an article published in New York Times Magazine. Belkin (2003) argued that highly qualified women are increasingly opting-out of careers during mid-stages to be stay at home mothers. Similarly, a plethora of academic studies (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Stone, 2007) have also increasingly documented on women choosing to opt-out of careers. However, research notes that women choosing to opt-out of STEM careers is particularly high compared to other sectors (Ahuja, 2005; Ahuja et al., 2007). For example, studies in the USA (Armstrong et al., 2007 and Armstrong et al., 2015) and UK (Moore, 2000 and Moore et al., 2008) have noted that women are increasingly opting-out of ICT careers during mid-stages for both family and structural reasons (Hewlett, 2012; Simard et al., 2008). Similarly, studies conducted in Asian region also show similar results, pointing to increasing percentage of opt-out decisions of women from ICT sector (Gender diversity benchmark for Asia, 2011). In particular, studies on India note that almost 48% of women choose to leave technology careers during mid-stages (Gender diversity benchmark for Asia, 2011; NASCOM, 2017). This study sets out to understand the factors that lead women to opt-out during mid-stages from the Indian ICT sector with a Kaleidoscopic career lens.

This study finds India as a unique case to study the career experiences of women in the ICT sector. Gender is a salient issue in the Indian contexts compared to women in the Western literature as research notes that patriarchal issues and gender relations continue to dominate the

Indian society and ICT sector (Bhattacharya and Ghosh, 2012). Further to that, intense work-family roles of Indian women in comparison to the Western women (Bagati and Carter, 2010; Dutt and Sil, 2014); the issues pertaining to “respectable femininity” (Radhakrishnan, 2009) and expectations of culturally appropriate behavior (Patel, 2006; Phadke, 2007; Patel and Parmentier, 2005) places Indian women with a lot more constraints in sustaining and developing careers in the ICT in comparison to women from Western literature. Moreover, as Indian women from collectivistic society are conceptualized as constrained and less agentic in comparison to women in the West (Uppalury and Racherla, 2014), this study finds the need to understand that women are not a homogeneous group and it is essential to understand the different experiences of women in careers from third-world countries (Mohanty, 2003). Therefore, this study sets out its context of women’s career trajectories in the Indian ICT sector.

The ICT industry in India has emerged as one of the fastest growing formal sector (Bhatnagar, 2006) that has an increasing percentage of women participation in ICT careers (NASCOM, 2017). While women in the Western literature showed gender concerns for ICT education (OECD, 2014; Pau et al., 2013; Trauth, 2006; Wadhwa, 2014; Woodfield, 2000) and careers (Adya and Kaiser, 2005; Kelan, 2007a; Moore, 2008; Trauth, 2006, Wajcman, 2004), a plethora of studies on Indian women (Adya and Kaiser, 2005; Clark and Sekher, 2007; Gupta, 2015; Shanker, 2008; Trauth, 2006; Unni, 2008) notes positive attitude towards ICT education and careers. In fact, the share of Indian women enrolments in computing education is observed to be the highest among OECD countries (Gupta, 2015). Studies also documented that parental support to female children studying computing education and entering the ICT sector has favoured Indian women’s increasing participation in ICT employment (Gupta, 2015; Raghuram, 2004; Valk et al., 2014). Though, masculine “cultures of engineering” towards ICT education and careers often noted in the Western societies are weaker in the Indian context (Poster, 2013); studies note that Indian women are still under-represented in mid and senior technical positions in the ICT workforce (Bhattacharya and Ghosh, 2012; Upadhyaya and Vasavi, 2006) and are increasingly opting-out during junior to mid-career transitions due to social and structural constraints (Ravindran and Baral, 2013). This is particularly intriguing considering the fact that Indian women are finding computing as women friendly (Gupta, 2015) and seeking parental encouragement in pursuing ICT careers (Kelkar et al., 2012). Therefore, India is still far from achieving gender equality in the ICT workforce (Bhattacharya and Ghosh, 2012; Gupta, 2015).

Literature on women opting-out of careers has extensively recorded domestic responsibilities, structural constraints and personal choices to be the driving factors (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Kuperberg and Stone, 2008; Stone and Lovejoy, 2004) for women leaving the workforce. In order to understand the reasons for women opting-out, Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) proposed the Kaleidoscopic career model (KCM) to explain that women prefer to seek ‘challenge’ during the beginning of their careers, then prefers to ‘balance’ during mid-career stages and finally seeks ‘authenticity’ during late stages of their career. The authors argue that women experience a shift during mid-stages of their careers, as this is the phase where they are keen on seeking a balance in managing both domestic and professional responsibilities. So, when women finds it difficult to balance work and family roles during the mid-stages, they are either pulled out of the workforce due to domestic responsibilities or pushed out of the workforce being discouraged with unavailability of organisational support systems (Hewlett and Luce, 2005). More recently, Zimmerman and Clark (2016) proposed an integrative framework of women’s opt-out and opt-in experiences that was built upon the KCM model. The authors have acknowledged that ‘balance’ play a key role in women’s opt-out decisions during mid-stages of their career. Similarly studies on ICT sector (Ahuja, 2002; Allen et al.,

2006; Armstrong et al., 2007) have also noted that social and structural constraints are the driving factors for women choosing to opt-out during various stages of their career. However, this paper argues that career experiences of women's lives are differently shaped across geographical contexts (Kabeer, 2008) and therefore, understanding why women choose to leave especially from the Indian context, in comparison to Western context is essential.

This paper aims to fill the gaps in literature by building upon Kaleidoscopic Career Model (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) for understanding the reasons behind women's career exit during mid-careers in ICT sector (Ahuja, 2002), in the case of underexamined context, India (Ravindran and Baral, 2013). The study uses qualitative semi-structured interviews with twenty women who have opted-out of ICT sector during mid-career stages. Interviews are recorded and transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVIVO. The study is expected to contribute to the career literature on women's reasons to opt-out with a Kaleidoscopic Career lens in ICT and also aims to contribute empirical knowledge to the dearth of literature on Indian women's career experiences in the ICT sector.

Research stage: The research has completed data collection stage and is currently on data analysis stage. By the mid of May, the research is expected to be completed with analysis and findings.

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