

The International Corner

Work and Family in India

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Bio: Tripti Pande Desai, Ph.D. attained a master's degree in industrial psychology from the University of Delhi, the premier university of India, followed by an M.Phil in the same area wherein she specialized in the area of organizational behavior. Subsequently she also earned her doctorate in psychology from the same university. Dr. Desai's additional professional qualifications include a bachelor's degree in education and a diploma in training and development. She has 18 years of work experience in teaching and research, and in the corporate sector where she worked in the managerial cadre for five years in marketing and advertising. Currently she is associate professor and head of the Organizational Behavior Area at the Institute for Integrated Learning in Management (IILM) in New Delhi, which is ranked among the top business schools in India.

India is a developing country with a population of 1.3 billion people. It is a 5,000-year-old civilization with 325 spoken languages and 1,642 dialects. It is the world's second-largest democracy and has the largest movie industry in the world. The sale of the mobile phone in India has reached more than 1.7 million handsets a month, and the telecom sector and the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector are the fastest growing sectors. According to the McKinsey report, India's revenue from the IT industry alone will reach \$87 billion in the next 5 years. India is poised to have the highest working population in the world of roughly 700 million by the year 2050.

India may be thought of as two Indias—urban and rural. The two Indias are very different, and neither knows much about the other. Women in rural India have always worked, while the urban working woman is a relatively new phenomenon.

Contemporary India is transitioning in every sphere, including the sociocultural sphere of the family, which is rapidly becoming “nuclearized.” Until India became independent from Great Britain, Indians believed in the “joint family” system, which meant that extended family lived under one roof. Over a period of time, joint families gave way to nuclear families. A major contributor to this fundamental change is the entry of working women into the urban workforce. With their rapidly increasing earning power, women wanted to break away from living with their in-laws—ironically, at a time when they needed them the most for child care and domestic support.

With this new scenario of nuclear, dual-career couples, it's important to study some of the ramifications of the policies that affect work-family. With the opening up of the economy, most employers and employees treated long working hours as an essential sacrifice for rapid development and increasing salaries. Thus, the concept of work-family balance is a relatively new one in India.

In the mid 1990s, researchers started looking at dual career couples and found that there were no significant differences in conflict and stress for working men and women; however sources of stress and conflict differed. There was, however, no public dialogue on work-family conflict until the early 2000s. At this time, a marginal focus started, and there was some concern about how the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector was affecting work-life balance for all employees. Today, in 2009, there is enough talk on work-life conflict and balance in media and organizations to warrant discussions and management development programs to address this issue.

From a policy perspective, India has always been very progressive. In 1961, the Maternity Benefits Act came into existence, with 12 weeks of paid leave for childbirth. Six weeks of paid leave is given for miscarriage associated with pregnancy. There is a move by the federal government to amend the Maternity Benefits Act to enable working women to get maternity leave for 6 months with full pay, and it is expected to pass. The Factories Act (1948) decrees that an employer must provide child care where more than 30 women workers with children below the age of 6 are employed, and the Indian Penal Code (1869), Section 509, talks about prevention of sexual harassment of women in the workplace.

There is, however, a differential practice between the public and private sector. The private sector is less generous with its policies—ironic, because this is the sector where both the men and women work 50 (or more) hours per week. The latest policy for government employees decreed by the government of India is exceptional. From now on, women employees can take paid leave up to 2 years (730 days) during their career to care for two children without affecting their seniority. A woman employee may also avail herself of child-care leave in any combination until her two children are 18 years of age. In line with the Sixth Pay Commission proposals, the new leave regime for women means that during their stint with the government, they can use as much as 3 years of paid leave, provided they do it only for two children.

The Indian government is waking up to its overworked work force and creating very progressive policies for its employees. The private sector, hitherto slow on family-friendly policies, is also attempting to match the public and government sector in reducing work-family conflict and easing the load for dual-career couples. However, the divide between policy and practice is huge, and it is this gap that the private sector of developed India needs to address.

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