



**THE GLASS WALL: UNSEEN
STRUGGLE OF WORKING
WOMEN IN URBAN INDIA'S
CORPORATE SECTOR**

RAPID URBANIZATION, INCREASING EDUCATION AND AWARENESS AMONG WOMEN, YET FALLING CORPORATE PARTICIPATION.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the visible rise in literacy and professional qualifications among Indian women, their participation in urban corporate sectors remains alarmingly low. India's urban centers boast some of the largest multinational corporations, modern infrastructures, and supposedly progressive workplaces. Yet, beneath this glossy surface, a significant gender disparity festers. According to the World Bank, female labor force participation in India stood at merely 24% in 2022, with urban formal sector participation declining even further. In many corporate settings, women face deeply ingrained structural and cultural barriers that hinder their growth. The reasons for this phenomenon are layered: historical socialization, patriarchal mindsets, hiring biases, the penalty of motherhood, safety concerns, and unequal expectations. This article seeks to unpack each of these factors in detail, backed by data, personal experience, and a critical lens toward institutional failures.

GENDERED SOCIAL CONDITIONING FROM CHILDHOOD & HIRING BIASES IN THE CORPORATE WORLD

In India, girls are often raised with deeply ingrained social expectations that prioritise obedience, silence, and sacrifice over self-expression or independence. From a young age, they are subtly conditioned through language and behaviour norms—told to sit modestly, avoid physical activities like climbing trees, and refrain from raising their voices. These messages are not isolated but reinforced daily by family, school, and society. While boys are encouraged to take risks, lead, and challenge rules, girls are trained to be compliant, supportive, and accommodating.

This early socialisation has long-term consequences. As they grow, many girls hesitate to assert themselves, fearing being labeled as arrogant or rebellious. Emotional restraint and modesty are seen as virtues, but they suppress leadership potential. By the time women enter the workforce, years of such conditioning contribute to low self-confidence,

difficulty in negotiating salaries, and reluctance to claim leadership or recognition.

In corporate India, gender biases further compound these issues. During interviews, women are frequently asked intrusive and discriminatory questions about their marital status, family plans, or permission from in-laws—questions almost never posed to men. These reflect outdated assumptions that women are less committed or available for work, particularly during their late 20s and 30s.

Hiring managers often assume that men are better suited for roles requiring travel, late shifts, or client interfacing. As a result, women are either overlooked for such positions or discouraged from applying altogether. According to the LinkedIn Opportunity Index 2021, 85% of working women in India felt they were denied promotions because of gender, and 66% believed family responsibilities hindered their career growth.

Together, these cultural and corporate dynamics limit women's career opportunities and reinforce systemic gender inequality in professional settings.

CAREER BREAK PENALTY

Career breaks, especially among women in India, are often not a matter of choice but of necessity. Whether it is maternity leave, childcare, or attending to elderly family members, these interruptions come with a heavy price in the professional world.

Take the case of a woman marketing manager in a multinational firm in Chennai. After taking a two-year break for maternity and early childcare, she returned to the job market only to find that roles she was once fully qualified for were now out of reach. Despite having 8 years of experience and a strong leadership track record, she was only offered positions two levels below her previous role—with a 40% salary cut.

According to a Monster India survey, only 27% of Indian women manage to return to work after a break. Of these, 65% are offered lower salaries or downgraded positions. Recruiters often assume a lack of commitment, seeing gaps on the résumé as red flags instead of understanding the societal obligations behind them.

This bias is rooted in a systemic problem—there is little institutional support or structured re-entry programs for returning women. Unlike in some global firms like Accenture or IBM, which run “returnship” programs to reintegrate

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women post-break, most Indian companies have no formal channels for career restarts.

Another example is that of a woman HR professional who took a career break to care for a sick family member. When she reapplied after a year, recruiters questioned her professional relevance, despite her updated certifications. One interviewer even asked, “Are you sure you’ll stay long term this time?”—a question seldom directed at male candidates.

This perception—that a woman post-break lacks updated skills or may leave again—overrides her past contributions. Skill gaps are exaggerated, and upskilling during the break is often overlooked. Even if women take certification courses or freelance to stay active, their profiles are not evaluated on merit.

As a result, many capable women end up in freelance or self-employment, not by choice but because the mainstream workforce doesn’t welcome them back. This contributes to the leaky pipeline, where 73% of women leave for caregiving reasons but few return, reducing overall female labor force participation in India.

To change this, companies need to institutionalise return-to-work programs, offer reskilling platforms, and create mentorship support. Government policies and corporate incentives must align to reward companies that promote

workforce reintegration. Until then, the career break penalty will continue to rob the economy of skilled, experienced women—and deny countless individuals the fulfilling careers they deserve.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND UNSAFE WORKPLACES IN URBAN INDIA: A DEEP DIVE

Despite the enactment of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act (POSH), 2013, the ground reality in urban India remains far from ideal. The Act mandates the formation of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in organizations with more than ten employees, aiming to protect women and create a safe working environment. However, the actual implementation is severely lacking.

In 2023, the National Commission for Women (NCW) recorded over 5000 formal complaints of workplace harassment—a figure that likely underrepresents the true scale of the problem. According to multiple surveys, only 35% of Indian organizations have properly functioning ICCs, and even fewer conduct regular awareness training sessions for employees.

Take the case of a young woman software engineer in a top

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Bengaluru IT firm. After facing repeated unwanted advances from a colleague, she reported the issue. However, her complaint was subtly dismissed by an Internal Committee that lacked external representation and was dominated by senior male managers. She was later sidelined from key projects, and eventually, fearing harm to her career prospects, she chose to resign.

This is not an isolated case. Victim blaming and retaliation—including poor performance reviews, transfers, and even termination are common responses faced by women who speak out. In some Mumbai-based media houses, informal reports have shown that women journalists often keep silent about verbal and physical harassment for fear of losing their beats or facing character assassination.

The problem is compounded by low awareness levels among female employees, especially freshers or contractual workers, who are unaware of their rights under POSH. Many startups and mid-sized firms, especially in tier-2 cities, treat compliance as a checkbox exercise, merely appointing a committee on paper.

This leads to a vicious cycle: women fear reporting, perpetrators go unpunished, and workplaces remain unsafe. As a result, many talented women leave the workforce or shift careers, not due to lack of skill, but due to toxic environments.

Others stay but suffer silently, dealing with mental health issues, anxiety, and stunted professional growth. In Delhi's corporate sector, several women-led initiatives have emerged, trying to reverse this trend. One such example is HerWorkSafe, an NGO that collaborates with companies to audit workplace safety, conduct anonymous surveys, and train leadership teams to recognise and prevent harassment.

But systemic change requires more than external intervention. Urban corporate India must go beyond compliance to actively build inclusive and safe cultures—ones where women not only feel protected but are empowered to lead without fear. Until then, the promise of urban corporate equality for Indian women will remain largely unfulfilled.

WORKPLACE FAVOURITISM AND GENDER POLITICS

Even in modern corporate India, women often face unspoken biases and gender-based favouritism. Promotions and key opportunities are sometimes less about merit and more about proximity to male leadership. Women who don't engage in office politics or refuse to "play along" with these informal male-dominated networks often find themselves sidelined.

In many cases, despite consistent performance, women are passed over for promotion in favour of male colleagues who share a closer rapport with senior leadership. When women display assertiveness in meetings, they are often unfairly labeled as “aggressive,” while the same behaviour in men is perceived as confident and leadership-oriented.

According to KPMG, only 3% of India’s top 500 companies have female CEOs, and many women in leadership feel excluded from informal discussions where critical decisions happen. A senior woman leader who refused to engage in sexist conversations was gradually isolated from key decisions, reflecting how women who don’t conform to informal, male-dominated norms often face career stagnation. To change this, organisations must actively dismantle these invisible networks and double standards, so that all employees, regardless of gender, have a fair shot at success.

MENTAL LOAD AND ROLE CONFLICT: THE HIDDEN STAIN.

In urban India, working women often shoulder a dual burden managing professional responsibilities alongside constant domestic and caregiving duties. This is unlike

many men, who frequently have spousal or family support for household work.

As per NSSO data, women spend about 352 minutes per day on unpaid care work, while men spend only 52 minutes. Beyond physical chores, women carry the mental load constantly planning meals, tracking school schedules, managing family health, and coordinating household logistics.

This invisible workload continues even after office hours, leaving little time for rest, up skilling, networking, or staying late for projects. It directly impacts their career progression, limiting opportunities for visibility, leadership roles, and promotions.

Role conflict also creates emotional and cognitive fatigue, affecting performance and overall well-being. Many women are forced to scale back careers, decline growth opportunities, or opt for flexible but lower-paying roles just to balance both worlds.

Despite growing awareness, few workplaces provide structural support like flexible hours or caregiving leave. For real progress, both home dynamics and workplace policies must evolve to share responsibilities and recognise the full spectrum of labor women perform.

FEAR OF JUDGMENT AND SOCIAL POLICING IN WOMEN'S CAREERS

In many parts of India, women's professional choices are not merely evaluated for competence but are constantly judged through a moral and cultural lens. Success, ambition, and independence in women are often viewed with suspicion, especially in urban work environments. A woman working late or traveling alone for work is frequently subjected to character-based assumptions, regardless of her performance or professionalism. The idea that ambition makes a woman less suitable for marriage or family life still prevails in many households and workplaces.

As a result, many women feel compelled to self-censor. They avoid night shifts, high-travel jobs, or leadership positions—not due to lack of skill but to escape social scrutiny. Even within offices, they might hesitate to assert opinions or accept promotions, fearing backlash or being labeled as “too aggressive.” This policing isn't just external—from colleagues or families—it's internalized, leading women to downplay their achievements just to fit in or seem humble and likable.

These invisible pressures stifle risk-taking, innovation, and leadership. Women who might otherwise lead large teams

or take bold initiatives end up staying in safer, less visible roles. Such cultures restrict not just individual growth but also the organization's potential to benefit from diverse perspectives.

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS RISING, BUT STILL MARGINALISED

The rise in women-led businesses across India is often celebrated as a sign of empowerment, but the full picture is more complex. According to the Ministry of MSME, India has about 15.7 million women-owned enterprises, but 90% are informal, home-based, or extremely small in scale. Only 1 in 5 businesses is officially woman-led, and very few scale up to medium or large enterprises.

This surge in entrepreneurship is often not the result of opportunity, but a reaction to systemic exclusion in traditional employment sectors. Many women start businesses after facing discrimination, limited mobility, or outright rejection in corporate jobs. But even in entrepreneurship, they face barriers—limited access to credit, lack of networks, and almost no mentorship or institutional support.

Thus, while women entrepreneurs are indeed rising in number, it's often a survival strategy, not a sign of a truly

inclusive economy. Unless structural issues in employment and support systems are addressed, entrepreneurship will remain a reflection of exclusion, not empowerment.

POLICY GAPS AND INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES:

Despite the existence of progressive workplace policies meant to support women's inclusion, their implementation often remains superficial. Many organizations showcase diversity on paper but fail to follow through with actions that bring real impact. Gender audits—meant to track pay equity, representation, and bias—are rarely conducted, which means gaps go unaddressed. Promotion processes lack transparency, with advancement often based on informal networks that women are excluded from.

Returnship and re-skilling programs, critical for women coming back from career breaks, are limited to a few elite firms and are virtually absent in mid-sized or traditional companies. Moreover, many workplaces still neglect the full enforcement of the POSH Act. Internal Committees are either inactive or poorly trained, leaving harassment issues unresolved.

Structural barriers further compound the problem. The absence of on-site childcare and inflexible work timings

force many women to choose between career and caregiving. Rigid 9-to-6 schedules leave little room for balance, especially for working mothers. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles and corporate boards, which perpetuates a cycle where decisions are made without gendered perspectives.

When systems fail, the burden unfairly shifts to women to adapt, compromise, and prove themselves in environments that are not designed for them. This institutional neglect discourages talent, deepens attrition, and stalls the broader goal of workplace equality.

To bridge these gaps, workplaces need structural reforms, not symbolic gestures. Only when organizations commit to action across hiring, promotions, compliance, and culture can genuine inclusion take root.

CALL FOR ACTION: WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

To fix the deep-rooted gender imbalance in workplaces, it's not enough to have policies; what's needed is actionable, structural change at every level. This starts with recruitment reform. Biases—both conscious and unconscious—often begin at the hiring stage. Practices like blind resume screening (removing names, gender, and marital status

from CVs) and eliminating inappropriate interview questions about marriage or maternity plans can ensure a more level playing field.

Next, returnship programs are crucial. Many skilled women take career breaks for caregiving and struggle to return due to outdated skills or biased assumptions. Companies must offer sponsored training, mentorship, and dedicated placements to bring these professionals back into the workforce.

POSH Act compliance needs serious attention. Instead of internal committees that may lack neutrality, companies should conduct quarterly audits by independent third parties and introduce anonymous reporting mechanisms to protect victims from retaliation.

Building leadership pipelines for women is another essential step. Fast-track programs, sponsorship by senior executives, and regular development feedback can help high-potential women advance. This requires intentional efforts—not just inviting women to the table, but letting them lead the conversation.

Flexible policies also make a big difference. Hybrid work, part-time roles, job sharing, and equal caregiving leave (not just for mothers) support both work and family life. Such policies don't just benefit women—they build a healthier workplace for everyone.

Lastly, a cultural reorientation is needed. Organizations must go beyond policies and focus on changing workplace attitudes. Gender sensitivity training, inclusive communication practices, and male allyship programs can reshape the environment to be more empathetic, respectful, and balanced.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

These systemic issues are not just statistics—they reflect lived realities. Many women face rejection not because of incompetence, but simply because they are women. During interviews, it's common to be asked, "*Will you continue working after marriage?*", a question rarely posed to male candidates. Even when women perform well and lead effectively, leadership roles are often denied due to hidden biases or outdated mindsets.

There are countless stories of women who've had to step back—not for lack of talent, but because they were denied dignity, equal opportunity, or simply a safe space. The emotional toll—being undervalued, overlooked, or harassed—leads many to walk away from careers they once loved.

What women need is not sympathy, but structural support. Not tokenism, but trust and transparency. The goal is not to prove that women *can* lead—we already do. The real need is a system that removes the hurdles, so leadership,

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respect, and growth come from merit, not gender. In short, empowerment must be institutional, not individual. Only then can workplaces truly reflect the equality they claim to support.

Let this be a manifesto—for companies, governments, and society—to break the glass wall before it becomes a permanent ceiling. Equality is not a women’s issue. It’s an economic and ethical necessity.