ABSTRACT
Career trajectories of Indians have undergone significant transformations over the last two decades. Of these, the career paths that modern Indian women have chosen are both diverse and challenging. In this paper, an empirical study of the career paths of the modern Indian Women Professional with emphasis to the women workforce in the Information &Technology (IT) industry is presented. The objective of the study was to understand the circumstances under which an Indian woman professional decides to take a career break. The study was done on a cross domain sample of IT professionals from across India. It resulted in interesting insights into the myriad reasons for career breaks of women which could be broadly classified as cultural, social, structural, personal and job-role specific. Based on popular opinion the study recommends policies which when exercised by IT employers and a woman professional’s ecosystem will help her stay on the career track even after a break in her career.

KEYWORDS: Career break, Flexi time work, Glass Ceiling, Indian Woman Professional (IWP), Information and Technology (IT), Second Career Women

INTRODUCTION:
The technological revolution aided by liberalization, privatization and globalization has redefined the way people in India work. In the last two decades, career trajectories of the Indian workforce have undergone interesting transformations as a consequence of better and greater job opportunities that the technology boom created. The IT industry opened doors to unparalleled career opportunities to aspiring young Indians as a result of some inherent advantages of the Indian work environment like the availability of a large talent pool of educated English-speaking but inexpensive labor force, the Indian Government’s policy incentives for profit making IT firms and the natural comparative advantage of the 12 hour time-gap with the American continent (where the activities of a vast majority of multinational IT companies is centered) etc. In addition to contributing significantly to the export earnings for the country and creating a handful of new age entrepreneurs, the IT sector also offered a multitude of employment opportunities to the educated unemployed youth in India, including many attractive options for
women. Women welcomed the opportunities offered to them which is validated by the fact that 37% of India’s IT-BPO workforce is comprised of women, as of 2011 (as reported in National Association of Software Services Company (NASSCOM) HR survey 2011).

However research shows that a significant percentage of women employees in the IT sector attrite every year. This attrition results in a whopping 48% women dropping off from the workplace before the age of 30. Consequently, a huge talent pool of women with about 3 to 10 years of work experience who have taken such career breaks is created. Hence, though the proportion of women workforce at entry level as well as middle level management has increased considerably over the years, there is inadequate representation of women at the senior level in the IT sector.

In this paper, an empirical study on the career trajectories of Indian Women Professionals (IWPs) in the IT industry is presented. The study traces the career journey of an IWP in the IT industry, against the backdrop of Indian culture. The study attempts to analyze the career trajectories of these women in order to bring into perspective the various reasons for breaks in their career paths. The findings of this study will help one identify the measures needed to enable and empower the GenNext Indian woman that and provide her access to a sustainable career. The study recommends practices which when incorporated in an IWP’s personal and professional ecosystem will ensure that her potential is put to maximum use while granting her the space to shoulder the responsibilities that various social roles she plays, demand of her.

LITERATURE REVIEW:
In this section, a brief review of work undertaken by gender inclusivity researchers from India and different parts of the world is presented. It is well known that the last decade was witness to the war for talent wherein IT companies competed with each other to employ more people, a good percentage of which was women. The many lucrative job offers had resulted in a considerable increase in the number of women at the entry level and the middle management level in the IT sector. The higher participation rates of women in the IT workforce can be attributed to comparatively high salaries, easy international mobility, gender neutral policy based on knowledge-centric skills possession, and physically less demanding work processes in comfortable indoor work environment (Kumar 2001; Upadhya 2006; Shanker 2008). Another interesting revelation is that though there are socially sanctioned gender inequalities in the Indian market, women prefer to work outside the home in an attempt to improve their social position in turn breaking free from family-based dependence (Kelkar, Sreshta & Veena, 2002). The job opportunities in the IT sector have improved the IWP’s financial autonomy, mobility and social acceptance in a male dominated society, opine Clark and Sekher, 2007. A detailed sociological analysis of Indian women in the IT industry has been carried out by Bhattacharya & Ghosh, 2012.

Though a typical Indian woman’s rationale for career planning is different from the career management styles of her Western or South Asian counterparts, drawing from the research on women careers from across the world can prove to be insightful. The proverbial glass ceiling that prevents women in IT from advancing beyond a certain point in rank and wages has been extensively researched (Baroudi & Igbaria, 1995; Harris & Wilkinson, 2004; Igbaria & Baroudi, 1995; Kaminski & Reilly, 2004; Perrons, 2002; Ranson & Reeves, 1996; Smits, McLean, &
Tanner, 1993; Sumner & Niederman, 2003; Upadhya 200). A model of barriers, both social and structural, faced by women in the field of information technology is presented in a detailed study (Ahuja, 2002). Studies pertaining to low participation rate of women in the IT workforce was carried out by (Moore, 2000) as a result of which a connection between low job satisfaction and gender was established.

Another interesting study that investigated overall indicators of work-family conflict reported by IT professionals and analyzed the factors impacting work-family conflict including gender, marital status, job category, IT work experience, and family-friendly work environment is this (Sumner 2008). A comparative study that contrasts social, cultural and individual factors that impact the IT career experiences of women in South Asia and the US has been carried out by (Adya, 2008). An integrative framework that will ensure a women friendly work ecosystem has been proposed in (Nelson & Veltri, 2011). A study conducted by Equalitec (a project that addressed gender inequality in the Information and Technology, Electronics and Communications (ITEC)) brought out a bunch of policies which when implemented will enhance gender diversity at the workplace. (Equalitec, 2005).

The review indicates that though research has been done extensively on the career (and breaks) of women professionals in the IT industry, the research in the Indian context is still very nascent. This review has helped formulate the empirical study elaborated in this paper by aiding in the respondent sample determination and survey methodology determination.

THE INDIAN WOMAN PROFESSIONAL AND THE IT INDUSTRY:

The Indian Woman Professional has many dimensions some of them unknown to her counterparts in different parts of the world. In the Indian socio cultural milieu, a woman is expected to carry out her commitments towards the various social roles she dons. It is heartening to note that the last two decades were witness to revolutionary changes in the perceived lives of Indian women. With the advent of globalization and the subsequent IT boom, more and more career opportunities were created, encouraging more women to take up professional courses that promised secure careers. Studies show that as of 2010, 42% of college graduates in India were women. It follows that an IWP’s career assumed much more significance than in the earlier years.

The IT and the software services industry has many roles tailored for Indian women. Some of these are the job profiles of software developers, testing or quality engineers, project leads, business analysts, business or client relationship managers, IT infrastructure support personnel, senior leadership positions etc. Unfortunately, the attrition rate is also significantly higher amongst these women raising questions about their work-family balance. It is noteworthy that in the Indian context, a woman IT professional’s career is influenced by familial choices, the ability to cope up with multi-role responsibilities with attempts to negotiate them, self and professional identity, social support and from her employer’s end – organizational policies and practices. This explains the existence of feminisation or the glass ceiling in the IT sector, wherein bulk of the women get concentrated in entry level job roles with only 5% of them actually climbing the rungs of the corporate ladder. The structural and cultural foundation of the glass ceiling is further strengthened by the fact that there exists the gender biased stereotypical policies, for e.g. the notion that women have excellent soft skills and hence are good at routine, standard and
repetitive functions; such a notion has an indirect influence on the recruitment and promotion of women employees. Studies also show that women actually fail to negotiate perks and salary bonuses, are not very keen in upgrading their niche skills (possibly because of other compelling responsibilities), do not eagerly job hop once they are settled in a comfort zone and do not have informal professional networks as they are not able to put in efforts after office hours to build the same. Their career prospects are further limited by domestic responsibilities, distance from home to place of work and various other social reasons.

This study focuses on women in IT who have yielded to the glass ceiling [1] and have subsequently taken breaks in their careers. Apart from familial responsibilities, the study also brings out demands at work (specific to the software services industry) that eventually force women to quit. The study recommends measures that can be taken in order to ensure sustainable careers for these women.

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY:
The study on Career Breaks of Women in Information Technology (IT) was conducted by FLEXI Careers India under the aegis of Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing India; for use as an input for deliberations in the conference held in India. Respondents to the study included both men and women from across the major cities in India that have warmed up to the IT boom. In this section, the survey methodology and the major findings of the survey is discussed.

Survey:
The survey was conducted through means of a questionnaire that addressed the IT workforce and carried questions pertaining to career breaks of women in this industry, in particular. Most of the questions had multiple choices as answers making the questionnaire largely objective. The options were chosen after thorough analysis of the question within the domain. This was intended to facilitate quantitative analysis. Respondents were allowed to choose multiple options as their answers to certain questions in order to accommodate their holistic view on the issue in question. The questions attempted to cover both the employee and employer perspectives towards the topic of study. The pivotal questions that constituted the survey are listed below:

1) In your work experience, who takes a career break generally? (Options: Men, women)

2) What are the life events that impact a woman’s career? (Options: Higher studies, marriage, spouse relocation, pregnancy, child care, elder care, health issues, others)

3) What leads/forces women to take a break? (Options: Long working hours – Not possible after marriage & children, Lack of support systems at home, Poor day care & nursing facilities, Long commute time to work, Night shifts, Pressure / request from family, Lack of flexible working options, Unsafe work environment, Lack of growth opportunities)

4) What are the roles that are more prone to a break because of the nature of work?
(Options: software developers, testing or quality engineers, project leads, business analysts, business or client relationship managers, IT infrastructure support personnel, senior leadership positions)

5) How long is the break, typically? (Options: 3 to 6 months, 6 to 12 months, 1 year to 2 years, 3 to 5 years, 5 years & above)

6) What is the maximum break duration within which one can comeback without a need for re-skilling or up-skilling? (Options: 3 months to 6 months, 6 months to one year, 1 year to 2 years, 3 years to 5 years, No up-skilling or re-skilling required for a comeback)

7) What are the enablers required for a woman to have an uninterrupted career? (Options: Day care centre / Crèche, Flexi working options, Mentoring programs, Less strenuous work, Reduced working hours, Support / motivation from family & colleagues, Other (please specify))

8) What would be the preferred option for women to comeback after a break? (Options: Fulltime, Fulltime with flexible working hours, Part time, Work from home)

**Key findings:**
As the survey was conducted online, people working with (or had worked with) the major IT firms from across India (from both the metro cities and the tier 2 cities) took the survey. The respondent sample was spread across Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Gurgaon and Pune. Professionals from the Indian IT hubs, Bengaluru and Chennai were most active in the survey, accounting for 55% and 23% respectively of the total respondents. Of the 235 respondents, 14% were males and hence the survey was able to churn out a male perspective on the issue of career breaks of women in the IT industry. While 22% believed that both men and women tend to take career breaks at some point of time, a whopping 78% of the respondents believed that only women took career breaks. The survey responses were able to extract popular opinion on the major reasons as to which women actually took career breaks.

**Career breaks of an IWP – the major reasons:**
The major reasons why a typical IWP in IT takes a break in her career is discussed in this section. These reasons address both the employee and the employer perspectives on the issue. It was found that in the Indian socio-cultural context, the various stumbling blocks that an Indian Woman Professional encounters as she treads her career path can be categorized broadly as:

- Cultural
- Social
- Structural
- Personal
- Job role related / professional
Cultural factors:
The cultural factors that deter a woman's career journey root back to her upbringing and the cultural values instilled in her. Women belonging to conservative households are often not given the liberty to choose their careers. Even after they overcome barriers created by cultural conditioning and start a career in IT, many of them carry a notion that trying to sustain their careers is not really important when it comes to balancing family life and work life. As a result they attrite resulting in the phenomenon called pipeline leakage of women.

Social factors:
Social factors are those dictated by the responsibilities of the social roles that modern Indian women play. The various social roles that a woman dons in the course of her lifetime is that of a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother, a mother-in-law, a grandmother et.al in addition to being an employee. The various life events that characterize a woman’s life are responsible for the social factors that lead her to a career break. Some of these key life events are marriage, spouse relocation, pregnancy, child care, elder care, pursuing higher studies or under unfortunate circumstances chronic illnesses. In India, it is a common practice for the bride to leave her home after marriage to embrace her husband’s home as her own. It could be the case that an IWP’s husband is of the opinion that her career needs a break for her to fully fit into her new social roles namely that of a wife and a daughter-in-law. In addition, there could be spouse relocation which means, if marriage results in relocation for an IWP to her husband's place of stay and this particular place does not offer an environment where she can pursue her current job, she might choose to quit. Further on, becoming a mother changes the life of a woman forever. As soon as she realizes that there is a baby solely dependent on her for all of its needs, she finds it increasingly difficult to pay attention to her career. She might decide to take a career break at this juncture. Moreover being a daughter and a daughter-in-law in a typical Indian household would entitle the woman to care of her parents and parents-in-law. Her career tends to take a backseat as she devotes herself to the needs of her family. The detailed analysis report on the social factors is discussed shortly.

Figure 1: Survey responses on social factors that impact a woman’s career
Figure 1 presents popular responses on the life events that in turn result in women actually taking career breaks. While child care (94%) and spouse relocation (77%) were voted the most significant life events that impact an IWP's career, pregnancy (71%) and marriage (67%) were close behind. 38% of respondents believed that elder care necessitated a break in the IWP’s career journey. The segregated analyses bring out both the male and female perspectives on this. 90% of men and 95% of women believed that child care is the most common social factor that makes taking a break inevitable. Marriage (82% men and 65% women), spouse relocation (72% men and 78% women), pregnancy (74% men and 70% women), elder care (23% men and 41% women) followed suit in the social derailers list.
Structural factors:
It is interesting to note that a majority of the respondents believed that even if women overcame the cultural and social barriers (discussed so far), their careers came to a screeching halt upon hitting structural barriers. It was found that with effective structural support systems at home and at workplace, many career breaks can be negotiated. Lack of proper support systems at home is one prominent structural barricade. For e.g. if a family member care giver or a home based non family member care giver was available for child care, a vast majority of women professionals would choose to share their maternal duties with the care giver in turn avoiding an impending career break. Elder care could also be entrusted in the hands of a reliable care giver, helping the IWP sustain her career. Similarly poor day care and nursing facilities, which if available conveniently and affordably could assist an IWP in child care and elder care, was cited as yet another structural barricade. It was also found that the working pattern in the IT services industry results in a set of structural barriers that eventually forces an IWP employed in this sector to quit. These include the notorious menace of long working hours, the unavailability of flexible work options and need to work night shifts to bridge the onsite-offshore time gap[4] which makes it almost impossible for a woman to do justice to her career and her domestic responsibilities. The lack of growth opportunities within her organization, subject to her limitations prompts a woman professional to further distance herself from her career. With the time taken to commute to work increasing day by day due to the ubiquitous traffic snarl, the place of work becomes almost inaccessible to an IWP trying to juggle her responsibilities. This becomes another structural barricade that makes a woman rethink her career options. In the India of today where crimes against women are being reported at an alarming rate, unsafe work environments also poses a threat to a woman’s career journey. All these structural barriers when present in varying degrees result in tremendous familial pressure to quit, to which many women professionals finally succumb. Figure 2 presents the detailed analysis report.

Figure 2: Survey responses on structural factors that impact a woman’s career path
77% of the survey respondents feel that lack of flexible working options plays a crucial role in a woman’s decision to quit. Lack of support systems at home (74%) is the next in line in the list of structural barriers. Long working hours (74%), poor day care & nursing facilities (55%) and pressure from family (52%) also result in career breaks for an IWP. While 44% of respondents opined that long commute time to work discourages woman from clutching on to her job, 41% of
them feel that night shifts are not very favourable amongst women seeking to sustain their careers. 21% of people who took the survey attributed the decision to quit to lack of growth opportunities within the organization. Unsafe working environments make it even more difficult for a woman professional to sustain her career according to 19% of them. Segregated analyses on the structural factors show the following opinions on the structural barricades: lack of support systems at home (according to 84% men and 76% women), lack of flexible work options (according to 61% men and 76% women), long working hours (according to 77% men and 74% women), poor day care & nursing facilities, pressure from family (according to 44% men and 57% women), long commute time to work (according to 41% men and 45% women), night shifts (according to 51% men and 40% women), lack of growth opportunities (according to 8% men and 24% women) and unsafe working environments (according to 18% men and 19% women).

**Personal factors:**
Another category of barriers that results in women taking a career break are personal in nature. It might be the case that a highly meritorious woman professional decides to take a sabbatical to pursue higher studies. The possibility of the IWP quitting her career altogether to pursue other job options that make use of her differential capabilities cannot be ruled out. Under unfortunate circumstances, a chronic health condition might invade a woman professional and career might not be in the helm of priorities for her. There could be other personal reasons like an unfriendly work atmosphere, professional jealousy etc. and even many undisclosed reasons that discourage a woman professional from continuing her job. The analysis is as illustrated in Figure 3.

![Figure 3: Survey responses on personal factors impacting a woman's career](image)

23% of respondents believe that a desire to pursue higher studies results in a career break and 38% of them agree that health issues force women to drop their career pursuits. 11% feel that there could be other undisclosed personal reasons that force a woman to quit. As for the segregated analysis, 36% of men and 21% of women believe that higher studies pull an IWP away from her career track. A health issue, according to 46% men and 36% women is another personal derailer. 10% of men and 11% women attribute the decision to take a break to other undisclosed personal reasons.

**Job-role specific factors:**
The IT industry has women occupying diverse job profiles across sectors. It is important to note that the corporate role played by a woman dictates the work pressure on her which indirectly influences her decision to quit. Some of the typical job roles are that of software developers, testing or quality engineers, project leads, business analysts, business or client relationship managers, IT infrastructure support personnel and senior leadership positions. The responsibilities that are attached with each of these are varied and myriad. The limitations imposed on a woman (primarily because of her socio-cultural conditioning) restrict her from
carrying on her professional duties effectively. This in turn results in many women succumbing to work pressure and deciding to quit. The report follows.

Figure 4: Survey responses on job role specific factors that impact a woman's career
According to Figure 4, 11% of the respondents opine that women irrespective of their role take a break which includes client facing roles, project leads, developers, business analysts, testers and IT support. However, Client Relationship Managers (48%), Project Leads (48%) and Developers (46%) were voted the top 3 roles that are most prone to break. It could be because these job roles require direct involvement in delivery of projects in turn leading to long working hours. 43% of people who took the survey felt that women professionals give in to the pressure at senior management levels, whilst the roles of technical solution givers, testing or quality engineer and IT infrastructure support personnel and other profiles are also prone to break according to 39%, 31%, 31% and 11%, respectively, of respondents. The segregated analysis across the cross section of IT professionals revealed that IWPs working as business or client relationship managers (according to 56% men and 46% women), software developers (according to 54% men and 45% women), senior management positions (according to 49% men and 42% women), business analysts (according to 46% men and 37% women), project leads (according to 46% men and 48% women), IT infrastructure support personnel (according to 38% men and 30% women), testing or quality engineers (according to 31% men and 30% women) and other job profiles (according to 8% men and 11% women) are likely to take a career break.

What happens during the career break of an IWP?
The various reasons that eventually lead to a career break for an IWP have been discussed in detail. It might be of interest to know what happens to the career aspirations to the subjects of study during the aforementioned breaks. There is consensus on the fact that a vast majority of women sacrifice their career goals to attend to their domestic responsibilities. It follows that their career interests are not altogether dormant. However with technology advancing at a break neck speed most of these women harbor apprehensions regarding the relevance of their skill sets once they decide to restart their career. They feel that the niche IT skills which they once acquired through their exposure in the IT industry, would most probably be outdated after their career hiatus. This implies the need to provide for up-skilling or re-skilling opportunities once they
decide to resurrect their careers. The survey analysis on the duration of the career breaks that might not necessitate re-skilling[2] or up-skilling[2] is as follows:

![Bar chart showing survey responses on need for re-skilling](image)

**Figure 5: Survey responses on need for re-skilling**

According to figure 5, 39% of survey respondents are of the opinion that a 6 month to 1 year break in the career of an IT professional will not require her to undergo additional training once she gets back to work. 33% believe that a shorter break of less than 6 months might not require the IWP to up-skill or re-skill. 19% of people surveyed feel that even if an IWP’s career break extends to a year or two, she might not need re-skilling to fit back into her workplace. Only 5% feel that re-skilling or up-skilling might not be necessary at all for women professionals with career breaks.

**Can career break of an IWP be minimized in duration: Some Recommendations**

The empirical study also shed light on the duration of breaks that women professionals in IT typically take. It was found that career breaks of women are largely between 1-2 years (according to 42% of respondents) and 3-5 years (according to 26% of respondents). People unanimously felt that in the presence of a set of key enablers, the career break duration can be drastically reduced or even avoided altogether. The findings of the study recommend the presence of some or ideally all of these support systems in order to ensure a ‘minimum break’ career for an IWP. For e.g. with support from her family or with the availability of appropriate day care and nursing facilities, an IWP can choose to avail of them for child care and elder care. Flexible working options and mentoring schemes at the employer’s end is more welcome to the ‘multi-role’ women under study. Reduced working hours and a slightly lenient work schedule that implies less strenuous work can benefit an IWP immensely, as she is able to keep up her commitment to work without compromising much on the domestic front. The survey responses to these enablers are detailed in the bar graph below.
Figure 6: Survey responses on key career enablers
As shown in Figure 5, a whopping majority of people (93%) feel that flexi time work \cite{5} is the most preferred career enabler that would aid a woman professional in sustaining her career. Support from family and day care centers are on the heels with 78% and 65% of respondents, respectively, vouching for it. Reduced working hours (according to 43% of respondents), mentoring programs (according to 26% of respondents) and less strenuous work (according to 22% of respondents) also helps a woman balance her career and personal life while doing justice to both.

Preferred options of work for second career women:
The IT industry had once invested heavily on training the talent pool of second career women \cite{6} and the good news is that they are willing to switch over to the career mode given the right opportunities. Having understood the different dimensions of their domestic responsibilities during their career break, most of these women favour flexible work routines in their second innings. Part-time work options that guarantee work-life balance is also viewed as another attractive possibility. The employer benefits from a reduced pay while the employee benefits from the ample time she is left with for other pursuits. With internet connectivity becoming omnipresent, work from home options are also hugely favoured by second career women. This eliminates the need to commute to work and employers agree that smart workers are extremely productive when they avail of this option. A detailed analysis report is attached below:
Figure 6: Survey responses on preferred options of work for second career women
As per figure 6, 63% of respondents vote for full-time work options with flexibilities that will aid the balancing act of women professionals. 18% of [people surveyed feel work from home is also not a bad option. There are fewer takers for part-time work, with only 13% vouching for it. Only a miniscule 6% are ready to undertake full time work options after the career break.

CONCLUSION:
Indian women have made a giant leap in the career front with their aspirations and there is no denying this fact. They have been one of the chief beneficiaries of the IT boom and it follows that their career trajectories have many underlying intricacies waiting to be studied. The empirical study carried out in this paper examines the career breaks of such women professionals. The study revealed that their career trajectories are often not smooth and undisturbed. There are many factors – cultural, social, structural, personal and role specific, those force them to digress from their ambitious career journeys. Identifying the pitfalls can be of immense use to the employed women themselves as it might help them take proactive measures to sustain their careers. Potential employers ready to exploit the women talent pool, can also gather insights and make their work environments more women friendly. For a young Indian lady at the threshold of her career, knowledge of what awaits her can help her be better prepared to face the future and keep alive the sparks that ignited her career in the first place.

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Notes:

[1] Glass ceiling: Glass ceiling is the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements
[2] Up-skilling/re-skilling: Up-skilling/re-skilling refers to the additional training to be imparted to a personnel returning after a break for him/her to meet the requirements of his/her current job role.
[3] Pipeline leakage: Pipeline leakage is the continuing loss of female talent as they undergo career transitions
[4] Onsite-offshore time gap: Onsite-offshore time gap refers to a typical scenario in the IT services industry where there is a considerable difference in time between the client’s location (onsite) and the team’s location (offshore) owing to the geographical distance between them.
[5] Flexi time work: Flexi-time work is a variable work schedule in contrast to traditional work arrangements that require employees to work during a standard time.
[6] Second career women: Second career women are those women who are ready to re-embark on the career track as the reasons that previously led them to a break cease to exist.
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