Chapter 5.15
Government and Corporate Initiatives for Indian Women in IT

Monica Adya
Marquette University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Education of women severely lags behind that of men in many developing nations. Fewer girls go to school, tend to drop out earlier than boys, do not receive the same level of education as their male counterparts, and often choose careers that are female predominant (Kelly, 1987). Without exception, India is quite representative of these gender-biased phenomena in education. However, the recent explosion of offshore outsourcing market in India has created a new recognition regarding the role of women in technological careers. The Indian IT sector has seen a trend contrary to what most western nations are experiencing—predominance of women in IT, particularly in IT-enabled services (ITES).

India has acknowledged that extensive and intensive use of information and communications technologies (ICT) alone can help the nation develop its neglected human resources, emerge as a knowledge-based society, and participate competitively in the global trade and services. Consequently, the development of ICT has become a national issue with strong impetus from the union government in New Delhi (Choudhary, 1999). Explicit in this initiative is the recognition that to progress as an information society, women must be empowered as key players the IT sector. In parallel, two other trends have focused attention on women in the information society—a nationwide movement for women’s rights spearheaded by many non-government organizations (NGOs) and an increased awareness of corporate social responsibility. Consequently, over the last decade, there has been an increased emphasis on education and reskilling India’s female workforce. While many government efforts are targeted toward the overall upliftment of women, many grassroots level initiatives led by NGO’s and corporations emphasize technological training.

This article highlights how the intertwining of grassroots and policy level efforts can increase the
pace at which a nation’s female workforce can be
reskilled and prepared for a technological world.
The article also addresses concerns about such
rapid development and potentially challenging
outcomes while making recommendations for
improvement.

BACKGROUND

In many contexts, India is a representation of
paradoxes. Over 44% of India’s population is below
the poverty line, its per capita income is under
$100, and adult literacy rate is about 44.3%. Yet,
the Indian education system churns out young
minds that have excellent training in math, sci-
ence, and technology (MST). While only 25%
of India’s urban population and 1.5% of its rural
population has access to telephones, India boasts
of one of the fastest growing software industries
in the world.

The role of women in the Indian society re-
mains similarly paradoxical. India was one of
the first countries to give voting rights to women
subsequent to emancipation from British rule in
1947 (UNESCO, 2002). The country was led by
a woman prime minister for several decades, a
rarity on a global scale. Religious scriptures lay
particular emphasis on the power of the woman
to enable a progressive society. However, while
the Indian constitution grants many legal rights
to women, the socio-economic status of women
still seriously lags behind that of men.

There has been no dearth of government initia-
tives in India in the past to promote equalization
of gender roles. Yet some of the most meaningful
schemes have emerged only in recent years for
several reasons: the IT sector has experienced
rapid growth due to global sourcing, monetary
compensations for IT related positions have in-
creased dramatically, and many NGOs, women’s
organizations, and corporations have become
more radically involved in female participation
to leverage these trends. The next few sections
examine the role of these entities in the advance-
ment of women in the IT sector.

MAIN THRUST

The function of government in India’s workforce
development reflects a trend that has been observed
in many western nations where the government
has gradually withdrawn from the direct delivery
of many programs and has increasingly relied
on non-profit organizations to take on this role
(Zappala, 2000). NGO’s and corporations have
stepped in to implement and deliver government
policies for improvement of education and working
conditions.

Government: An Overall Emphasis
on Girls and Women

Governments in many developing countries,
including India, have been instrumental in pro-
viding funding for IT education and training to
courage everyone, not just women, to become
technically sophisticated. Women have, however,
seized these opportunities willingly because IT
work presents an opportunity for women to com-
pete with men cerebrally—rather than physically
(Sneddon, 2004). One such initiative in recent
years has been making education pervasive in all
households. While not an IT initiative, the most
common educational policies and goals are not
intended to help one group of users more than any
others (Klein, 1987). In year 2000, the government
initiated a $250 million national program with the
objective of enrolling all children between 6-14
years of age in the educational system by 2010
(UNESCO, 2004). Subsets of this program, Na-
tional Program for the Education of Girls at the El-
ementary Level (NPEGEL) and Kasturba Gandhi
Swantantra Vidyalay (KGSV) focus on bringing
girls into the education stream. This program is
aimed at developing model elementary schools in
21 states with an emphasis on providing benefits
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