Mobilizing Collective Networks to Enable Individual Success: The Case of Middle-class Indian Women Employed in Information Technology

Jyothsna Belliappa

This chapter examines how Indian women’s collective networks mobilize to accommodate their new identities as individualized workers in the transnational information technology industry while they retain their traditional place in the family. The information technology (IT) industry is considered a poster child for globalization in India. Its growth was facilitated by the economic reforms of 1991. Following these reforms, several multinational IT companies set up offshore development centres in India, while domestic companies developed an international network of clients and customers. The IT industry enabled India to enter international markets and Western companies to enter India. This led to the creation of a large number of jobs offering unprecedented salaries, exposure to international markets, and hi-tech work environments: a new sub-class was formed – the information technology workforce. The industry directly employs 1.6 million people while providing indirect employment to another 6 million in related industries (NASSCOM 2007). Women currently form about 30 to 35 per cent of the information technology workforce (see Nayare Ali, 2007 and Ramalingam, 2007). The IT industry aims to further increase their numbers.

The economic reforms were certainly influential, but the success of the IT industry in India is largely owed to the low costs of labour
and infrastructure, the presence of a large English-speaking workforce, and speed and efficiency with which it is able to provide goods and services across time zones. To sustain this business model, the industry needs to provide efficient workers who are flexible, mobile, and client centred (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). The values associated with the Indian IT industry – and the global labour market in general – are in direct contrast to the needs of family life (especially when children are young), which entail stability, routine, and commitment. This creates a contradictory situation for women, who are usually the primary caregivers in the family. Using data from qualitative research among women employed in transnational IT companies, this chapter examines the strategies women employ to deal with this contradiction. The interviews discussed here were conducted between 2006 and 2007 in Bangalore, the birthplace of India's IT industry. The interviews were part of a larger research project that investigated the experiences of middle-class Indian women in negotiating the consequences of globalization (Belliappa 2009).

The 16 women whose accounts inform this chapter belonged to the urban English-speaking middle class. They were between 28 and 37 years old and had either one or two children (the prevalent norm among middle-class families in India) at the time of the interviews. There is considerable diversity among the research participants in terms of social background. Altogether, they represent about seven different linguistic groups; 11 of them are from the south of India and 5 from the north; 14 identified as Hindu, either implicitly or explicitly; 2 identified as Christian and 1 as Muslim; and none of the Hindus belonged to the depressed castes. While I do not claim to have recruited a ‘representative sample’ for my qualitative research project, the smaller proportion of religious minorities and absence of depressed castes among my participants reflects their poor representation in the industry due to their lack of cultural capital and technical qualifications (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006, Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006). All interviews were conducted in English, although not all the interviewees spoke colloquial English. While no attempt has been made to ‘clean up’ quotes from interviewees before presenting them in this chapter, brief explanatory notes are given within brackets where required. It is hoped that this method of presentation will preserve the authenticity of the interviewees’ voices.

Before proceeding, a brief digression to examine what it means to be middle class in India is necessary, in order to situate the participants in their sociocultural context. The McKinsey Global Institute (2007) estimates that the middle class currently forms 5 per cent of